

## Podcast with Kaylene Tan (*In the Silence of Your Heart*)

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Conducted by Gwen Pew

Recorded and edited by Daniel Teo

Gwen Pew (G)

Kaylene Tan (K)

G: Hello, my name is Gwen Pew, and welcome to Centre 42's first attempt at doing a podcast. This is one of the ways that we document the works of artists who are in residence in our space, and today we're here to speak with performance maker Kaylene Tan, who co-founded the performance group spell#7 together with her husband, Paul Rae, in 1997. spell#7 has always been interested in creating site-specific promenade theatre pieces, and from the early 2000s, Kaylene and Paul also began experimenting with audio tours, which has since become one of their signature styles. The couple is currently based in Melbourne, but Kaylene is back in town to work on a new play titled "*In the Silence of Your Heart*", which she will also be directing for the Esplanade's The Studios 2018. It will be performed from 5<sup>th</sup> to the 8<sup>th</sup> of April. The piece was developed with support from Centre 42's Basement Workshop, which means that over the last few months, Kaylene and her cast and creative team have been working in our space, and we're very glad to have her with us today. And with that, welcome Kaylene!

K: Hello.

G: So, *In the Silence of your Heart* is an audio-visual piece, about a man who has been paralysed for 13 years. It's a very long time. How did the piece come about?

K: The performance is – Well, the starting point for the performance was my grandfather, who was paralysed from a stroke for 13 years. I had – I was always interested in who he was before this happened. Because for the majority of my life that I had known him, he was always this man in bed, and he couldn't move and couldn't speak. So, I was always fascinated by what could be happening in his head. He was a politician. He was a writer. He was a teacher. He was known to be larger than life, and so, I was just really interested in what could be happening in his head for such a long time.

G: And how did you get into the headspace of the Man who you've only known as someone who was bedridden?

K: Well, I think it took awhile to find the right tone coz in the early drafts, [I] sort of did [a] more naturalistic tone, like a more naturalistic style of speech. Then I just played around with that a bit more and as certain themes started to develop, like how he goes into different memories, and how he goes from this real world to a more interior world. Sort of playing with language and how that flows from one style to another style. And – So, I'm not trying to replicate what he was thinking. More like just like a kind of imagination [laughs], taking some liberties. And, of course, it came from a very personal place, but I think over the course of the development of the piece, it's moved somewhere else.

G: And where do you think it is that it has moved to?

K: Well, I think what we have tried to do is to create a kind of sensory world of this man. So, if you are still, other senses are activated a bit more, like your hearing, your sense of smell. So,

this kind of thing. Trying to create that kind of world, a kind of sensory landscape. So, it has moved to that kind of place. But at the same time, the shifting worlds of the real and the kind of memory world as well.

G: So, based on my experience watching the test run yesterday, I think all of those different senses that you engage with are very apparent. You definitely have the sense of smell, you have the visual. You have your headphones, which you are wearing. Which is quite a lot of layers in terms of the sensory experience to be playing with. Can you tell me how you put all of these together and what your process was like?

K: Okay, it started off with the text. So in the beginning there was a much longer text with a lot more stuff in it. Because that was kind of to establish who he was and the world in which he was living in. And then, after a workshopping period in January, it was about how to – how we stripped that down. And how to work with other elements, like projections, or lights, to let these other elements speak as well. And of course, other elements – sound. And also having live performers onstage. The live performers are from the Man's world. It's – They are people that he sees, his caregivers. So it was also about creating that world. And their physical language.

G: So, the piece itself started from the script. What was the process like in terms of writing the script and working with Lim Kay Tong, who voices the Man in the play?

K: I think that the process was – I think I did fragments. I wrote in fragments. But I was also interested in the kind of structure where it happens over the course of a day. To sort of give it some shape or form. So, I think after I had the fragments, I was trying to get into a kind of flow of how it could fit into the day. And the kind of meanderings of the mind over the course of the day and – One of the big things about the domestic life is the meals in the house. How that structures the day a lot. It is also about ritual and the repetitions. These are the kind of things that mark out a day if you are home a lot [laughs].

G: Is that why you decided to have quite a lot of cooking going on onstage?

K: Yeah. And also one of the things that I remember from going to stay with my grandparents in Malaysia, was the – There was always cooking. We were always cooking. We're a family who loves to eat, who loves to cook. I mean that is one of the things that I brought back from a personal place to the show.

G: And going back to the script itself then. At what point then did Lim Kay Tong come into the picture? Did he work with you on the script or did you bring him in afterwards, and where there any tweaks that happened?

K: Okay. When I started thinking about this show, thinking who could play my grandfather, it was only Lim Kay Tong really. [G laughs] Yeah, I mean, I love his voice. And over the years it's really aged to become something very interesting. And he really knows how to manipulate his voice. So, with that in mind, I approached him. But he said he only does VO's [voiceovers] or TV or film. So – See, initially it was going to be a performance. It wasn't going to be an audio thing. So I thought, "Okay, how can I get him to work with me?" [Laughs] So I just got to make it into one big VO job for him. So I proposed it to him and, surprisingly, he said yes. So, that was really – I was really happy about that. So, I mean having him saying yes, then it was, okay, what do people see? [Laughs] So, that's when I thought about placing the audience in his – in the Man's perspective. And [him] seeing the people around him. So Lim

Kay Tong was my ideal voice in the head. I didn't – We didn't workshop together or anything and – So in fact, we did a cold read the first time he came in. He just did a cold read at the Esplanade and I thought, "Okay, this is right. I'm going to – It is possible." [Laughs] And then, I think that was probably sometime in 2017. And then, early in January this year, we did a couple of rehearsals together. And then, he did get involved physically, in some of the improvisations, about creating the house space as well. But that was about the extent of the collaboration, really. And most of it was in the recording studio, and just from sessions where we just sat down and went through the script. So, in January we did a rough – like a first draft recording. And from there, it was about listening through and what sounds read and what not – And how can I make it more suited to his style of delivery. Yeah, so it was about fine tuning that and really sort of trying to shape it.

G: And at what point did Jalyn and Hui Er come in?

K: In January. Yeah, during the workshop period in January. I was interested in having an older woman and a young girl. And I chose them because their energies are so different. Physically they are very different as well. Jalyn is incredibly grounded. She has a really strong presence onstage and she is very physical. And Hui Er, she's light [Laughs]. She's light on her feet and she is kind of like the opposite of Jalyn. But they work together really well. They've developed a really nice sort of affection for each other as well, onstage and off. So that's been really nice. They are really open to experimenting physically as well. I mean, in the start, in January, when the text was kind of a bit overbearing [Laughs], they kind of struggled with finding how to fit into the world. So, in this period, in March, when I came back to work with them, we focused just on creating their world. So, we developed their relationship through various improvisations. But also, the more stylised movements that we came up with was actually derived from – kind of – It's a stroke intervention. It's like when you see these signs of a stroke – F. A. S. T. So, face, arms – What's 's'? Speed, is it? No, no. And, time. Speech! [G: Speech. Yeah.] So, if their face is a bit droopy, and – That's one sign. Their arms, if they can't raise their arms, that's another sign. And another thing was about getting them to speak. If they can't speak and answer a simple question, then that's another sign. And time is about getting them to the hospital. As soon as possible. So with that, I got them to work with those four things, and turn that into something physical. So from there, then we developed that into a kind of – like mash them up and develop the kind of physical vocabulary that they have adapted over the course of the performance. So, you see them doing like very small things like touching their face. But it's something that comes back in the dance. Or like the hand actions and stuff like that.

G: Yeah, so what does a typical day in the rehearsal room look like?

K: Typical day. Well, I don't think there's a typical day. [Both laugh] With Hui Er and Jalyn, it's mainly physical. Working through the physical stuff. And because of all these domestic activities that happen, like cooking, we had sessions devoted to cooking. Jalyn was quite nervous about cooking. [Both laugh] We did stuff like watching a kettle boil, how long it takes to boil a kettle, how do you make noodles and how you peel eggs, those kinds of stuff. We had those kinds of sessions; how do you wash plates. What was interesting was that Jalyn washes them in a certain way because she's older, so there's a kind of mindset about saving water, how she washes it. Hui Er will "shooooo" just keep pouring water, making sure everything is squeaky clean. There's those kinds of things which we then developed into a choreography, an everyday choreography. How do you make those things be more than what they are, without turning it into dance? So all the actions that you see, the number of

times they pour the water, and how they pour the water out the kettle, all these are all planned actually.

G: Actually, I think those smaller actions are some of the parts that I found very beautiful in the performance. Just noticing things that you generally don't notice, because usually you maybe put the kettle on and go do something else and then come back. A work like this really forces you to watch how the steam comes out and form little clouds that come and go and drift in and out. The experience of watching the work as well. Obviously with spell#7 you do a lot of work where audience members are allowed to roam around the space or even go on tours. From works like *Desire Paths* in 2004, which took people around the Little India neighbourhood to something like - and then there was one where they were exploring Neil Road and the surroundings. This is a very different kind of feeling firstly because it is in a Black Box setting and secondly because audience members will be seated in the same space, quite low to the ground, throughout the whole performance. Can you maybe tell us a bit about how that whole idea came about and what was it like going back into a Black Box space?

K: We started doing site-specific performances. One of the reason was because we couldn't afford to rent theatres. So, we thought, "okay, we'll do walking tours or something, then we don't have to pay for rental." We were just trying to adapt to a situation. [G laughs] Or we approach places like CHIJMES or Zouk and say "oh we want to do something in your space." And they will be, "oh, okay!". So, it's [a] win win, back in those days. It's always about putting them in an experience, immersing them in some sort of experience or changing perspectives of what the place means, adding new layers to a place. Also, working with the history of those places and how do you amplify those things and tell those kinds of stories. Working with the environment, I think one big challenge with this is that working in a Black Box, you have to create the environment, right? It was challenging. We do Black Box shows too, we do theatre shows as well. So it was a different kind of creative process. Once I decided to set it in the kitchen, then it was about how do you bring the kitchen to life?

G: And how did you bring the kitchen to life? [Laughs]

K: Through the mundane, through the everyday. I spent quite a lot of time in kitchens. [G laughs] Just cooking or just hanging out in people's kitchens as well. I think it's a really nice kind of space where things happen. It's a place of creation, it's a place of ritual, it's a place of transformation; where things become from the raw to the cooked. [Laughs], and stuff like that. It's also a very social place. It's the place of transmission, of learning. I just like the space.

G: That contrast quite a lot to the Man's world, when he is just trapped in this body that he can't move in. What was it like in playing with that contrast, where you have something that's very visual, very mundane going on that we can see, but also hear his imagination, his memories and juxtaposing two the elements?

K: What are the challenges of that? [G: Mmm.] I think the challenge for the audience is negotiating that. How much do you want to watch the woman on stage? How much do you want to listen? Is what you are listening to reflective of what's on stage? I think that is - this are kind of parallel but also the same thing. [Laughs] I don't know what it was like as an audience. Putting people low on the floor, I guess it was a kind of a voyeurism, in a way. But they're also witnesses to what's happening around. It's that kind of negotiation for the

audience. And, I mean I'm not precious about them - you know, they have to catch everything. You could be listening to something but you are seated in front of the kettle and you're watching the kettle boil. And so, you're watching the kettle boil instead of listening to that, that's fine. But you could be doing both as well. I mean nowadays, if you think about how we listen in our daily life, we often have a soundtrack when we're doing work or when we're travelling. We're quite multi-sensory beings, in that way. So, yeah, so this is about trying to see where I could go with that. And, and I don't know whether it works or not, but I think its fine, I think. [Both laugh]

G: What about challenges for you as the director of a piece that deals with so many different elements?

K: For me, as a director, as we approach to a more technical phase now, with the bump-in happening next week. It's, how do I make sure I've got my eyes on all these different things. So, one way that I thought to think about the flow of the piece, and how the different elements work - the live performers, the sound, the soundscape, the visual media, the lights - how do all these things work together. I created a score, breaking down the elements, in a score or chart, and to see how they relate to each other, and how they develop over the course of the performance. So, I think that has helped with structuring the flow of the piece and the experience.

G: During the planning phase, do you tend to look at it as individual elements or already as a cohesive whole?

K: There're some parts that I think I see as wholes. All these things can work together. But sometimes I just see one thing. [Laughs] So, it's not like I have a grand vision, no.

G: What was it like switching hats, between being a playwright and a director?

K: Well the thing is if you're a playwright, sometimes, you can just write the words and let the director figure out what to do. Whereas, being both, you're responsible for the words. As the director, what do you do with these words? Why did she write it this way? Why did I write it this way? I have to follow it through, so I think that's a challenge.

G: Do you find yourself tweaking the words as you go or do you literally like "it's recorded right?"?

K: I'm a writer that's not very precious about my words, so I can cut and throw away quite easily. [Laughs] I think that was a challenge, I suppose.

G: Did you ever find it maybe limiting in the sense that, you already have a script as a soundtrack to the work and the performers are always engaging with it. Were there times where you were like, "I wish I could go back and redo this bit or cut this bit out so that the performers can maybe do something here?"?

K: Not really, because I knew we couldn't record it again. Because Kay Tong was leaving the country so we had the dateline of "okay, we had to get it done by the 17<sup>th</sup> of March", or whatever. No more changes after that. The only change is what you can do with the edits, like splicing things or changing order of things. You can actually play with quite a lot that. There's the technical aspect of sound design as well, how you can manipulate all that. But I was, "okay, we're not going to change anymore, we can cut but we cannot add."

- G: So, did you have to put in those perimeters? [Laughs] Comes with working to a dateline. [K: Ya.] How do you feel about the piece now that it's one week before bump-in, and you have had a couple of test runs?
- K: I only had one [laughs]
- G: Oh, one. [Both laughs]
- K: I think at this stage it's about running it and getting the flow of things. We have most of the elements in, except for the visual media and the lights. I think that will help to signpost a lot of things in the performance. But I think what's important right now is for the actors to get a sense of the flow of the day, and what it is like to have perform - like to have audiences in the space. Because there are moments where they do get very close to audiences. You know, what that is like. We are finetuning the sound world as well. How do people listen? Their listening experience? How do we ease them into a world where it is led by sound? There's those kinds of things. It's easy to over design sound but right now it's about how do you be spare and true to the world.
- G: So apart from the sound, the other very visual thing was the projections which come on at certain parts of the performance. Why did you want to include that element?
- K: With the projections, it was to fill the space and to change the space. I wanted it to be reflective of the body, the landscape and how they intersect. So, the images are of things like the sea but that goes into hair. Very, I guess, quite visceral images that might not be completely visible if you are in the space, but you can see stuff on people. So, I guess it's a kind of writing on the body, as well. These things are on the body. How landscapes, our landscapes of the body and how we relate to real landscapes.
- G: Is that why you decided to wash the projection over the audience as well?
- K: Ya and also it will look nice, I hope. It's a respite from this domestic world, to change the house into the sea. But it's also a sea that is in the Man's mind. Ya. And things like the rain, working that kind of wetness. [Laughs] The water and the wetness, the house. How do we make the audience to feel that damp, that wetness?
- G: The Man, certainly, isn't very comfortable. He is just kind of stuck there, and he can't do anything about it, he can't even bring a bucket to where it's dripping. How do you see *In the Silence of Your Heart* fitting into your overall body of work?
- K: Having not made theatre in a while, I think it's a kind of luxury to be able to experiment and having had time away from rehearsing or making theatre, coming back to it, it makes it a bit more special. I think all the previous work that I had, all the previous things, they've informed this. But I think what is different about this one is the amount of time I've spent writing it. It took about nine months, as long as it takes to make a baby. [G: Made with love.] [Laughs] And it has gone through many, many drafts. So I think that, hopefully, the quality of writing is of interest. [Laughs]
- G: So you're no stranger to staging works as part of The Studios. You've - actually *Duets* was performed at the very first edition of the festival back in 2005. And your last full-length work *Family Duet*, was also staged under The Studios in 2013. What do you find appealing about this platform?

K: The great thing about The Studios is allowing the more experimental stuff to be placed in a place like the Esplanade. Over the years the programmers have changed, but they've always taken a chance [laughs], on spell#7. The first *Duet*, it was mainly a conversational piece between Paul and myself. It's about talking and very minimal. It was nice to do that. And we've just had our first child, so it's about talking through [laughs] what it means. And then we also did *Epic Poem of Malaya*, which was an epic four-hour performance read. So again, when we proposed it, they were like "Erm, okay. Well, let's try that". [Laughs] and then, later on, when we decided "Okay, let's do like a sequel to that first *Duet*", cause we were leaving. No, I think we didn't know we were leaving then but we just wanted to do a sequel to *Duet*. The sequel was kind of like, "Okay, now that we have two kids, why don't we just try to make experimental theatre with our children?". What a disaster. [Both laughs] Well no, it wasn't completely disastrous but the fact that they said "Okay, let's try that." Those kinds of opportunities are quite valuable. Just being given the space to actually try this. With this one, when I propose to the headphone theatre, and then all these cooking and water and all these kinds of stuff, they're like: "Okay, let's try and make this happen". So, that kind of support is invaluable. Much harder if when you are trying to do stuff outside and you don't have support. Technically, the support has been very good.

G: The theme this year for The Studio[s], it focuses a lot on living and dying. All five plays that'll be staged. What does that mean for you, personally?

K: Personally, living and dying, in relation to the show?

G: In relation to *In the Silence of Your Heart*.

K: You see, when we were brought together, these five women, theatre maker type of people, it wasn't like they had a theme. I think it is something that emerged. It was supposed to be a season of monologues. Somehow, everyone wanted to talk about death and loss and I think that's how the theme emerged. But in terms of how it relates to *In the Silence of Your Heart*, it is the state of the Man, it is between living and dying, he is in that liminal space where he's alive but his body is decaying, is rotting. That's where the show is located, in between.

G: And for you personally?

K: Living and dying. I'm not sure what it means. I guess, just being back in Singapore for the last couple of months. That was the Drama Box forum theatre experience, *Exit*, and, last night, I saw a preview of Faith's piece, which was about palliative care. I think it's something that, that our generation [is] trying to come to grips with. With ageing parents and not being very young anymore. [Laughs] That kind of presence of death is all around really. I don't have anything deep or meaningful to say.

G: Did the piece also make you reflect on anything in particular or have any personal impact on you?

K: In my show?

G: Your show, for you.

K: [Laughs] My show, for me. Sometimes hearing Kay Tong speak, I do see my grandfather. [Laughs] It's very personal in that way. With the death of the daughter, that is something that happened in the family as well. So, there're those kinds of things that are very personal, and putting it out there, just seeing how it works.

- G: Is it a very cathartic thing for you or does it still affect you quite a lot on a personal scale?
- K: I don't know if it's cathartic but I don't know - actually I don't know how my mother will react. That's my one big worry. [Laughs] Ya, cause of course it's her history, it's her family. And of course, waiting to see how my children will react as well. We'll see. I guess, in many ways, it's about inheritance, what you inherit from your family's histories, how we tell stories, from one generation to the next.
- G: And do you think putting that in a form of theatre is the best way for you to express or work with these ideas of inheritance or family?
- K: Well, I did work on a family history book with my cousins last year. It was a very interesting experience because it's all about how we choose to tell, how we curate our pasts. So we went ahead and made this quite nice coffee table book about the family with really nice photographs and little snippets about our ancestors and stuff like that. But it felt very clean and so I think this show is a way to muddle things up a bit, to make it a bit more complex. So theatre is a great way to throw things out and play with them a bit, and not be too precious about even stuff like family because everyone has a different idea of it, a different experience of family, including the members themselves.
- G: Lastly, any final thoughts you would like to share, either about the work, or the process, anything at all?
- K: Ya, well okay. It's been a journey, emotional at times and challenging, making the work, making it happen. Being - not having a vision. [Laughs] Maybe it's also about how I came to, work towards an approach to the piece. I think that is an interesting way of working. Thinking about layering, how do you layer elements and how do they work with and against each other? I think that is quite a useful way of working, for me. Of course, having the time to develop a piece over time, that has been very good.
- G: With that, thank you very much for talking with us today and we look forward to catching the show at the Esplanade next week.
- K: Thank you. See you there!