



An Esplanade Co-Production

History, Whose Story

By The Necessary Stage (Singapore)

2 – 4 Jul 2025

Esplanade Theatre Studio

Pre-show Educator's Guide

Recommended Level: Secondary

Synopsis

Sir Stamford Raffles
Tan Kah Kee
Sultan Iskandar Shah
Naraina Pillai
Munshi Abdullah

Who are these historical figures, and what did they do to earn a place in our textbooks?

Join us for an uproarious whirlwind journey at The Necessary Stage's *History, Whose Story?*, as we discover these colourful characters who have played important roles in the rich history of Singapore. Rediscover our island home as we take a riotous odyssey through our past, navigating through war and racial riots, colonisation, adventure, loyalty and betrayal.

Written by Cultural Medallion recipient Haresh Sharma, and co-directed by Sharma and Associate Artist Deonn Yang, *History, Whose Story?* is an interactive youth theatre experience that promises to be a delightful introduction to the vibrant history of Singapore. Through an exploration of history, culture and language, the play will compel young people to think more deeply about our common heritage despite our differences.

Learning Objectives

By the end of the programme, students will:

- **gain exposure** to theatre as an art form through an interactive work
- **examine and reflect** on issues related to Singapore's historical and socio-cultural contexts
- **develop** a deeper sense of belonging as Singaporeans and greater understanding and empathy for all based on Singapore's shared values and heritage
- **be empowered and motivated** to play a positive role in Singapore's future and be part of an active citizenry towards an inclusive Singapore society.

About the Playwright and Co-Directors

HARESH SHARMA—PLAYWRIGHT & CO-DIRECTOR

Haresh is the Resident Playwright of The Necessary Stage (TNS) since 1990, having written over 100 plays staged in more than 20 cities. His play *Off Centre* was the first Singaporean work selected by the Ministry of Education for GCE N-and O-Levels. He received the S.E.A. Write Award (2014) and the Cultural Medallion (2015). With 13 publications, his works have been translated into Malay, Mandarin, Greek, and Italian. In 2021, he published *Reading the Room: A Playwright's Devising Journey*, detailing his creative process. Haresh has won Best Original Script thrice at The Straits Times Life Theatre Awards and showcased works at Esplanade's first playwright-centred season in 2017.

DEONN YANG—CO-DIRECTOR

Deonn is an actor, theatre-maker and teacher who has expanded her craft from acting to writing and directing for the stage. Her recent directing credits include *The Bird Who Was Afraid of Heights*, (Esplanade's *PLAYtime!* Series), *White, All White* (The Necessary Stage) and *Survivor Singapore* (Esplanade's *Feed Your Imagination* series). Currently, she is an Associate Artist at The Necessary Stage. With a keen interest in people and their stories, Deonn strives to bring authentic narratives to life while ensuring a good laugh along the way. Her diverse talents contribute to a rich and engaging theatrical experience.



About The Necessary Stage

Established in 1987, The Necessary Stage (TNS) is a non-profit theatre company with charity status. Our mission is to create challenging, indigenous and innovative theatre that touches the heart and mind. TNS has the honour of being the only arts company in Singapore helmed by two Cultural Medallion recipients: Artistic Director and Founder Alvin Tan and Resident Playwright Haresh Sharma. The company is also the organiser and curator of the annual Singapore Fringe Festival. TNS is supported by the National Arts Council (NAC) under the Major Company Scheme for the period from 1 April 2023 to 31 March 2026.

How to Use This Guide

The following activities are designed to prime students for the performance of ***History, Whose Story?*** and to help them engage more meaningfully with the themes and form of the show. You are welcome to select any combination of activities based on your students' needs and time available.

There will be moments in this show where students will be invited to respond. **We seek your support in ensuring the space remains a safe space for everyone to contribute their thoughts and ideas.**

We **strongly encourage you to go through the Theatre Etiquette guidelines** we have provided with your students before the show. Thank you for your help in keeping the theatre space one where we can be respectful of each other, so as to create an enjoyable experience.

Theatre Etiquette

To ensure a good experience for all, observe these guidelines:

Before the show

- 1) Arrive on time and be seated before the performance begins.
- 2) Switch off or silence all phones, smartwatches and other electronic devices.

During the show

- 1) Watch and listen actively. Feel free to respond, react and reflect.
- 2) Do not talk amongst yourselves or use your devices.
- 3) Refrain from eating or drinking in the theatre.

For interactive segments

- 1) If invited to engage with the performers, do so respectfully.
- 2) Show support for your peers! Listen attentively and feel free to cheer and applaud when appropriate.

After the show

- 1) Pick up your belongings and dispose of any litter responsibly.
- 2) Feel free to share your thoughts with your friends and/or teacher and complete the student performance guide. Your reflection and opinions matter!

Activity 1: Fact or Fiction

This activity aims to help students differentiate between widely accepted facts and constructed narratives. It aims to build critical literacy and introduce the concept that history is shaped by perspective and power.

Ask students to list some widely accepted facts about Singapore's history. Alternatively, teachers can prepare some facts and constructed narratives beforehand to share with students. Examples may include:

- Stamford Raffles founded Singapore in 1819.
- Singapore was a sleepy fishing village before the British arrived.
- Sang Nila Utama saw a lion on the island which is why he named it Singapura.
- Colonial rule brought progress and modernity to Singapore.

In pairs, discuss which are facts / myths / opinions / incomplete truths.

Guiding questions:

- Why do we treat some stories as truth?
- Why do you think certain stories become popular or repeated over time, while others are left out?
- What shapes the way we learn about history in school and the media?

Activity 2: What's in a Name?

This activity aims to encourage a discussion on naming as a form of power, legacy and visibility.

Start by showing students a few familiar examples of places in Singapore named after historical figures. Examples may include:

- Raffles Place
- Yusof Ishak Secondary School
- Tan Tock Seng Hospital
- Veerasamy Road

As a class, discuss the significance of these names in Singapore's history.

Guiding Questions:

- Who were these people, and why do you think places were named after them?
- What power comes with having a name on a place?
- Who else might deserve recognition in our public spaces?

Additional Activity

Break students into small groups and give each group a fictional neighbourhood map. Ask them to name (or rename) the roads, buildings, or train stations in this neighbourhood based on:

- A lesser-known historical figure they admire
- A value or idea they think Singapore should stand for
- A meaningful story from their family or community

Activity 3: My Family History

This activity creates space for students to make connections between their family histories and the themes of the play. It aims to reinforce the idea that history is not only collective or national but is also deeply personal.

1. Think

Students individually reflect on / recall a family or community story that left an impression on them.

2. Interview (optional)

Ask students to speak with a family member (maybe a parent or grandparent) about their lived experiences.

Some examples of prompts:

- What is a story about our family that you think should be remembered?
- What is something you lived through that you want others to know about?

3. Share

In small groups, students share their responses to each other and then have a bigger discussion with the rest of the class.

Guiding questions for class discussion:

- What was striking / noteworthy about your classmates' stories?
- In your opinion, what makes a story worth passing on?

Additional resources for educators:

- 1) <https://hsseonline.nie.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/suhaimimark.pdf>

Suhaimi Afandi and Mark Baildon argue that Singapore's history education, with its emphasis on rote memorisation and standardised narratives, limits students' understanding of history as a discipline, advocating instead for pedagogical approaches that develop interpretative skills to engage with multiple perspectives and construct evidence-based historical accounts.

- 2) <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2405844024018000>

The article compares how lower secondary history education in Australia and Singapore fosters historical consciousness, highlighting that Australia emphasises inquiry-based learning and diverse narratives to encourage critical thinking, while Singapore adopts a more structured, nation-building approach focused on instilling a cohesive national identity through key historical events.

- 3) <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/oct/18/change-future-teach-history-children>

Yuval Noah Harari argues that to shape a better future, we must teach history to children not just as a means to instil national pride or collective memory, but as a tool to liberate them from inherited fears and biases.

- 4) <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/answer-sheet/wp/2013/09/25/the-right-way-to-teach-history/>

Marion Brady contends that history education should transcend rote memorisation of facts and instead engage students in critical thinking and emotional connection to prepare them to navigate societal changes.

- 5) <https://www.todayonline.com/commentary/reimagining-singapores-history-through-storytelling>

Tan Tai Yong advocates for transforming Singapore's historical narrative from a monolithic account to a more inclusive and engaging tapestry of personal stories, particularly those of everyday individuals and marginalised communities, to foster a deeper connection with the nation's past.

- 6) <https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/despite-rich-history-raffles-arrival-1819-was-turning-point-singapore-pm-lee>

This article covers SM Lee Hsien Loong's speech at the launch of Singapore's Bicentennial, where he acknowledges that while Singapore had a rich history prior to 1819, the arrival of Sir Stamford Raffles that year was a pivotal moment that set the nation on a path toward becoming a modern, multicultural, and outward-looking society.

- 7) <https://uclpimedia.com/online/why-studying-history-in-singapore-has-made-me-question-englands-national-curriculum-by-georgia-okeeffe>

Georgia O'Keeffe reflects on how studying history in Singapore exposed the British education system's neglect of its colonial past, emphasising the need for a more inclusive and critical approach to teaching the British Empire's impact.

Interested to learn more about the arts? Check out www.esplanade.com/schools for more resources and content!