

## ITI 2022 Research Report by Cheng Nien Yuan

### Overall summary

2022 was a productive year for ITI, with travel borders opening up and the return of a master teacher covering the traditional form of Kutiyattam, as well as the return of Clowning, marking teacher Guillermo Angelelli's first time back in Singapore since 2019.

The first term (Jan–Mar) saw the beginning of Andy Ng Wai-shek's tenure at ITI as Acting teacher for the Year 1s: a cohort of six new students from Singapore, India, and Hong Kong. Andy focused on developing a physical foundation for this group over the first three weeks, before eventually moving on to acting techniques proper. Acting and Movement teacher Koh Wan Ching (with the help of Voice teacher Simon Stollery) took a dramaturgical angle to acting and/as text analysis with the Year 2s, while the Year 3s focused on their Final Year Individual Projects as well as devising their first Final Year Performance with Jean Tay, the Singaporean playwright. This term also saw the inclusion of two Intercultural Exchange sessions (at the beginning and end of term), a continuation of the revival held the previous year.

The second term (Mar–May) was occupied mainly by Kutiyattam for the Year 1s and 2s (see below), as well as FYP1, which had developed into a devised play *Asylum* written by Jean Tay and directed by Oliver Chong. *Asylum* opened at the end of term in the School of the Arts Studio Theatre. Li Xie also returned to coach the Year 2s as per their request, deepening their knowledge of Biomechanics that began the year before. On the last day of term, Andy led a 24-hour exercise that was a tradition first started by the late Wayang Wong Master Besur. This was Andy's second time leading this exercise this semester; before 2022 this exercise took a two-year hiatus due to the COVID-19 pandemic. For a full 24 hours, students (who volunteered for this exercise) had to move as if time had slowed down dramatically.



[photo of the 24-hour exercise, June 2, 2022]

The third term (Jul–Sep) was dominated by both Beijing Opera and Clowning, at least for the Year 1s and 2s (more below). The Year 3s turned their concentration to rehearsing their FYIPs, which had been simmering away for the first half of the year. The FYIPs had a successful showing at the end of the term.

The final term of 2022 (Sep–Nov) saw the culmination of the Year 1 and 2s' Post Modular Labs for both Kutiyattam and Beijing Opera, as well as an acclaimed run of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* at the Esplanade, directed by Aarne Neeme.

COVID-19 continued to be somewhat disruptive this year as it reared its head periodically amongst the students and even some faculty, causing lessons to be missed. At one point, Beijing Opera (for the female group) even went online for a couple of classes. However, overall the relaxation of mask rules and distancing certainly was welcome, and the students and teachers remained vigilant about the risk of transmission by, for instance, continuing to wear masks unless it was necessary to remove them.

The rest of this report will provide highlights of Kutiyattam, Clowning (and Movement), and Beijing Opera, which this researcher focused on in the documentation process in 2022.

## **Kutiyattam**

Kutiyattam in 2022 was the first traditional form experienced by the Year 1s, and the first traditional form experienced by the Year 2s as in-person classes, not online. The students were instructed by Kapila Venu, who was the main master teacher, and Ranjith Ramachandran, who led the physical training in the last hour or so of classes. When Kapila had to travel overseas for a performance, Ranjith took over for those weeks. This is the first time Kapila is leading the Kutiyattam training at ITI, taking the stead of her father Gopalan Nair Venu (Venu G) after many batches as his assistant teacher. Like her father, Kapila is now one of the most acclaimed Kutiyattam actors in India.



[Kapila with the students teaching them the mudras, March 29, 2022]

Kutiyattam is, like all the traditional art forms ITI students are exposed to, physically demanding. But it stretches the physical limits of students in particularly precise ways, more so than the others. The eye exercises and mudras (hand gestures), for example, could be just as tiring for the students as the challenging squat holds and seemingly endless leg work they go through during training, if not more so. Many students struggled to keep awake when practising manipulating their eyes and eyelids, a phenomenon Kapila assured was normal for the trainee.

Kapila adopted Venu G's training methodology for ITI, called *Navarasa Sadhana*. The Navarasas are the traditional classifications of emotions in Indian theatre training. Kapila and Venu G's training system places special emphasis on the breath and emotion, with Venu G having elaborated on this technique based on his experiences with other traditional and contemporary cultures of training around the world. Students work on nine basic emotions to begin with, sensitizing their five senses to this emotion and manipulating their breath. It is very individual-based -- the actors are given tools to explore these emotions, but as each individual's breath is different, each body is different, and they have to take their own pathway towards embodying them.



*[Ranjith demonstrating part of the war sequence choreography, April 20, 2022]*

One exercise that Venu G started at ITI and Kapila continued in her tenure is an improvisation exercise for individual actors which explores, as per the Natyasastra, different states of being such as “poverty” or “disease”. On most Saturday mornings, the ITI students come together in supplementary classes to do this. As the actors explore these states, the others bear witness as a form of learning, but they are not spectators. It is important, Kapila states, that these improvisation sessions are not performances for others. These sessions facilitate exploration and deepening of experience, not spectacle. For this to happen, these sessions can only occur in a safe, supportive space.

For the final showcase, the students had the privilege of being accompanied by Kalamandalam Rajeev, one of the most sought-after Kutiyattam drummers in India. As Kutiyattam is normally more or less a solo art form, the ensemble nature of the showcase made accompaniment a challenge, but the students had many opportunities to display their own character and rhythm throughout the performance.



*[Rehearsing for the final showcase, May 20, 2022]*

Kapila has taught for over two decades, over many different contexts. But for her, as she reveals in an in-depth interview this researcher conducted, ITI stands out due to the “discipline and rigor” of the students. There is no other school in the world that she has taught at where the faculty meet every week to discuss the students’ progress. “I think what is unique about ITI is that the individuals who run this place, and the individuals who come into this place have a very clear sense of purpose,” she states. “Every year at ITI we always find that there is no slack. The intensity is never drained. The passion is never drained.”

### **Clowning and Movement**

As mentioned, 2022 was the first time in three years that ITI had Guillermo Roberto Angelelli to teach Clowning and a form of movement training called the ‘Wind Dance’ that he himself went through and developed while working with Iben Nagel Rassmussen of the legendary Odin Teatret. The Years 1 and 2 went through this training; Year 3 students did not manage to have Guillermo as part of their curriculum due to COVID-19 restrictions that prevented travel, but they had the opportunity to attend his masterclasses and/or drop in for classes this year.

The anticipation towards Guillermo’s return was rather significant. The graduated cohort(s) from ITI often regaled tales of his teaching style to the younger batches, and to this researcher. He was well known for being incredibly strict, hard to please, and brutal in his feedback. He controlled his classes primarily through fear, this researcher was told by some students, but also garnered plenty of respect and devotion (especially after term ended).

Guillermo's apparent new teaching style in 2022 thus came as a surprise to both students and teachers alike, even Sasi. From the first class, Guillermo's laughter came easily, and encouragingly. Indeed, his distinctive, infectious laughter became a marker of success -- when the actor would know they got something 'right', if they were truly open and spontaneous. Guillermo was very generous with that feedback. Even when students fumbled, Guillermo was quick with a joke or three to put them at ease. That is not to say that there were no moments of strictness or harsh feedback, especially if the students made the same error multiple times (such as forgetting specific instructions not to turn their back at any point to their audience during an exercise). But, like the successful Clown, Guillermo is highly in tune with the energies of his 'audience' and the situation. Guillermo also shifted his style depending on what he thought the individual student needed, and also depending on the class (during Wind Dance training, for instance, he joked around much less, creating a different atmosphere). When asked about his overall softened demeanour, he made another joke: that it was because he was getting older and more mellow.



*[Students obtaining their clowns (and clown noses) for the first time. Jul 28, 2022]*

The Clowning term was running concurrently with the Beijing Opera term (students took Clowning in the mornings and Beijing Opera in the afternoons). And the students' experience in Beijing Opera was a refrain that came up again and again in Clowning classes. The openness, vulnerability and spontaneity that was required of Clowning exercises and warmups often meant that Beijing Opera would come up as a subject. Some of the students were undergoing a significant amount of mental stress from Beijing Opera which they would repeatedly confess to on impulse during Clowning.

Guillermo indirectly alluded to this when this researcher conducted an in-depth interview with him and asked about the place of Clowning within ITI's curriculum and context. "Often I think that for tradition, being able to continue, it should keep alive. And to keep alive, some of the forms should change. Many of the traditional forms have been taught through a kind of rigidity, and sometimes this rigidity is what doesn't allow the tradition to keep alive." Practitioners of tradition, he says, are often made to suffer through the practice without being told the reason why they should do so. Guillermo's pedagogical philosophy differs in this respect: he wants to make clear to students the why, and not just the how.



*[After obtaining their clown, students had to be ready in full costume and in their clown persona by the beginning of their 8 AM class. They began to do their start-stop exercise warm-up in their persona. Aug 22, 2022]*

While many traditional forms espouse learning from copying a model or ideal, what actors do in Clowning is just the opposite. "There is no model to follow, because each of the clowns will be as unique as each of the actors that you have there in the room. [...] The point is finding through this exposition, through this vulnerability, through this projection, [...] the materials that allow you to build this bridge between you and the audience, to reach this communication, to accept your mistakes". Clowning works on "this corner of us that allows us to be not perfect, and by not being perfect, more human."

Finally, this is what Guillermo had to say about teaching at ITI: "I am so happy to work in this school because I have seen the results of other schools here in Singapore and I think here the students really know what they are doing when they are on stage. And this is for me so, so important. [...] Here I find there is something very solid in the formation of the students.

Maybe it is also because of the fact of sharing their life for real, for three years, they should share their meals, free time, houses, bedrooms, toilets with their colleagues, and this exchanges something very unique, I think.”