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SPEECH BY MR S DHANABALAN, MINISTER FOR CULTURE AND
FOREIGN AFFAIRS, AT THE OPENING OF THE EXHIBITION ON LAND TRANSPORT
OF SINGAPORE FROM EARLY TIMES TO THE PRESENT AT THE VICTORIA
EXHIBITION HALL ON TUESDAY, 28 JULY '81 AT 5.30 PM

I am pleased to be here today to open this exhibition on land transport in Singapore from early times to the present.

Because of various reasons, such as the climate and the habits and interests of the early migrants, and the rapid development that we have seen in the last 15 years, we have less of the past preserved in Singapore than in many other countries. But there is a good body of material in the form of photos and other records which have been preserved, more than most Singaporeans are aware of. It is the function of the Archives and Oral History Department to collect, preserve and maintain these records in a systematic manner so that students and other researchers will be able to use these materials in their work. But for the past to be made living and of interest to present day Singaporeans, it is not sufficient for researchers to use these materials to produce highly academic and esoteric papers and articles on our past. We have to present the past in a way which will interest the general public and kindle interest in our young.

I hope that history scholars and academics in Singapore will make use of the materials available in our archives to do this. Too often, academics and scholars like to write what they hope will be abstruse studies which will impress their own coterie. With rare exceptions, academics and scholars all over the world are guilty of this and an academic who popularises his subject is often looked down upon by his peers. The situation in Singapore seems no different. I would therefore like to call upon our historians to be more bold in making our past of interest to our people.

Our people are becoming interested in what happened in the past in Singapore. This interest is not widespread yet, but it is growing. Judging from newspaper articles and the interest in antiques relating to early Singapore (I would like to believe that this interest in antiques is not just another Singaporean interest in investments), it is clear that there is a growing keenness to want to know more about the background and history of the people, places, and way of life in the early days of modern Singapore. This is only natural, with the improvements in our standard of living that we have had. As more and more people escape the hard grind of ensuring the next meal, interest and support for art and culture and things to do with our past must grow.

With the increased following for the arts, whether popular or classical, there is a clear need to augment the existing facilities available for the presentation of cultural and other events. I am therefore glad to announce that the government has purchased the Kallang Theatre from its present owners, Chong Gay Theatre Ltd.

The need for a medium-sized enclosed performing theatre which does not expose its audience to the vagaries of inclement weather has been felt for some time. The only theatre stage big enough for full-scale dance and musical performances is the semi-open 17-year old National Theatre. Among existing enclosed performing halls are the Singapore Conference Hall, the Victoria Theatre and the Victoria Concert Hall, each of which seats less than 1,000.

The Ministry of Culture considered the conversion of the National Theatre into an enclosed theatre but gave up the idea. Enclosing it incurs a very high cost and could take up to three years during which it would be closed to the public. Many annual ceremonies and large cultural shows normally held there will have to move to drastically smaller facilities or even to be cancelled.

The Kallang Theatre Complex, situated at Kallang Park, therefore presented an opportunity to acquire a medium-size performing hall immediately. It offers a much shorter conversion period. Owned by Chong Gay Theatres Ltd and built on state land leased from

the Urban Renewal first sale in March 1969, this five-storey building includes a three-deck car park, provision for coffee-house and a 1996-seat cinema which opened in April 1978.

The cinema, originally designed as a theatre, has a stage only slightly smaller than that of the National Theatre. The other features, presently disused or never completed, are a fly-tower suitable for dramatic and operatic productions, orchestral pit and space for artistes and changing rooms. Conversion of the cinema into a theatre for the performing arts will restore it to serve its original planned function.

Renovation works will begin soon to convert the cinema into a multi-purpose theatre to seat close to 2,000. They include the building of artiste and dressing-rooms, strengthening the stage floor, restoring the orchestral pit and insulation of the back stage and auditorium from electrical plant noise.

The stage will be fully equipped with a new counter-weight system for curtains and scenery, new lighting and sound reinforcement systems and mechanical hoist.

Accoustics of the auditorium will be improved to acceptable theatrical standards. Auditorium lighting will be augmented and brought up to the accepted performing hall level.

The theatre will be managed by the National Theatre Trust. The emphasis will be on good quality imported musical, operatic and orchestra performances. Good accoustics, air-conditioning and the advantage of an enclosed hall will weigh in Kallang Theatre's favour even though, compared to the National Theatre, its seating capacity is only two-thirds of that of the latter. Full-scale dances, especially of the classical ballet type, can be presented on a stage that is only slightly smaller than the National Theatre's. SEC will make substantial use of the theatre for "live" TV transmissions or recordings of popular music or variety-type presentations. Kallang Theatre will also be a popular venue for ceremonial functions requiring a large auditorium.

After alterations and completion of the features of a theatre, the Kallang Theatre will enable us to meet our needs until the 1990's. If interest and support for cultural activities grows, we can consider the construction of a proper cultural complex in the 1990's.

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