

## ASIALINK RESIDENCY PROGRAM

**Providing opportunities for Australian artists, performers, writers and arts managers to live and work in the Asian region**

**Speakers:** **Swee Ling Lim:** Manager for Performing Arts and Arts Management, Asialink  
**Sophie O'Brien:** Independent curator and exhibition manager  
**Gabrielle Lord:** Acclaimed novelist and essayist  
**Paschal Daantos Berry:** Writer for performance, dramaturge and arts worker

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By Tracy Ellis

**Asialink** is a national arts organisation that promotes cultural exchange between Australia and Asia through the arts, education and public programs. It is based at Melbourne University and was established in 1989 as an initiative of the Myer Foundation at a time when there was a lot of debate in Australia about immigration, particularly Asian immigration.

Asialink offers grants for artists to travel to locations across Asia to live, work and practice their art, and they are one of the few arts funding bodies that extend their grants program to include arts workers.

Asialink has funded 405 residencies over 14 years. Program manager of the Performing Arts and Arts Management program, Ms Swee Lim describes Asialink residencies as offering artists and arts workers "an extended, full immersion experience, living and working in another country."

The outcomes of the residency program are diverse and, because residencies are funded on the basis of professional development, they don't have to be project driven. They exist primarily to promote knowledge, networks and cultural understanding between Asian and Australian arts communities and to promote new creative work and opportunities.

Residencies are not offered for academic study or research but are about the practice of art. The program is open to Australian citizens and residents with three years professional experience. Within that broad criteria, a variety of artists and arts workers, from the emerging to the very senior or established, have participated. Grant and residency recipients are also eligible to re-apply after four years.

Asialink has an extensive list of sponsors, which enables them to give out \$500,000 in grants each year. Applicants are judged by three separate committees, in Visual Arts, Literature and Performing arts, with ten members in each committee representing a mix of artists, funding bodies and other stakeholders.

Lim urges participants to consider all the issues involved with living and working in a foreign country before applying, taking into consideration the impact of isolation as well as healthcare, language and cultural differences, all of which, she stresses, cannot be underestimated.

**Sophie O'Brien** is an Australian arts worker, currently with the Australia Council as an exhibition manager for the Australian participants in the Venice Biennale. She took up an Asialink residency in Tokyo earlier in 2006 and was partnered with a local arts organisation called Arts Initiative Tokyo. Her goal was to research other arts projects there and also to share her experiences with Japanese arts workers about the projects she had been involved with in Australia.

Sophie took Japanese language classes for three months before going, which she says didn't help her conversation much, but gave her an important entrée into the Japanese culture, helping her to understand some basic Japanese etiquette and such things as not posing questions in an accusatory manner. She also gleaned a lot of information from talking to previous Asialink grant recipients who had spent time in Japan.

While in Tokyo, Sophie saw as many galleries and museums as she could. There are about 1000 commercial gallery spaces in Tokyo and she managed to take in around 100. While there, she also invited Australian artists and arts workers to each send her a postcard and she presented the collection as part of her talks.

Sophie found Japan to be a wealthy country with a developed contemporary arts scene and describes Japanese culture as "extremely visually literate with a strong traditional culture as well". Several interesting ideas were raised as a result of her stay, including talk of developing a Tokyo Biennale – something that would obviously benefit Australian and other contemporary artists around the world and be a great achievement for Asialink.

**Gabrielle Lord** is a popular and successful Australian novelist working primarily in the crime genre. She took up an Asialink residency in Indonesia and says that when she put in her application she was single, but by the time her residency came around she was no longer single and somewhat glad to be going to Indonesia with a male partner, as she found the trip culturally challenging, particularly as a woman.

Her initial interest in Indonesia was fuelled by the press after the Bali bombings, which highlighted what she perceived as her own "unconscious blank about this huge series of islands to our north". She realised that she didn't think of Indonesia as "our neighbour" and all she knew about it was that it had the biggest Muslim population in the world.

She wanted to use the trip to research the background for one of her future crime novels and says that she was very well briefed by Asialink before going, which helped her tremendously to prepare for and adapt to the cultural differences. "Things just don't work there the way we expect them to work here", she says.

On the day she arrived, a newspaper headline read, "Bashir Tells Foreigners: Kill All Westerners". But by contrast, her experience was that people were warm, open and friendly, albeit with a suspicion about western values. "Drugs, nudity etc. ... they fear their influence could destroy their culture," says Lord, "and in many ways those fears are fair. Addiction and promiscuity don't make for happy human beings."

"In a way," she adds, "we are more informed about their culture than they about us." Information about Indonesia is available in Australia, in libraries and such, if someone cares to seek it out or needs it.

Lord found that the colour, culture and language of Indonesia strongly reflects its folklore tradition and the influence of Islam is everywhere, from the 83,000 mosques to the five-times-daily prayer sessions. She read the tendency towards head-scarfing amongst women as most often politically driven – as if in protest of western values.

As part of her residency, she was engaged to lecture in several universities, which she described as being more like high schools, but it gave her the opportunity to share something of Australian life and that of the lives of Australian Muslims. Lord said her audiences were often surprised to learn that John Howard actually funded 83 Islamic schools in Australia.

She found the poverty in Indonesia confronting, especially the systematic begging businesses, and although the Indonesian people she met were very quick to respond to friendship, there was a realisation that friendships could not be sustained because it was not realistic to think that many Indonesians would ever be able to afford to travel to Australia.

In Indonesian contemporary literature, Lord discovered that there are some very young and popular female novelists who are enjoying success with quite provocative novels. In conversation with a young female Indonesian writer she asked her, "What do Indonesian women want?" The young writer replied, "Feminism, sex, social services". "And what about Islamic women?" asked Lord. "The same," was her reply.

**Paschal Daantos Berry** is a writer and a dramaturg for dance and a self-described "hybrid artist". He took up an Asialink residency in the Philippines with a desire to find a true democratic artists' collective to work with.

Shortly after arriving, he stumbled upon a theatre company called Shadow Play and any planned itinerary he had been holding onto went out the window. Berry confesses he chose the worst time to travel in the Philippines, being high summer, but the company he hooked up with was interesting, courageous and enlightening, working under extreme circumstances and undertaking many political actions. "A lot of stuff I shouldn't mention, but I will," says Berry.

Shadow Play operated fairly covertly, meeting each week at each others' houses in Manila, and a lot of their work involved street children and children rescued from child prostitution. While he was there, Paschal also worked at the Children's Museum every Saturday with children often from abusive backgrounds, providing activities such as puppet-making and story-telling. It was there, says Paschal, that he "started to chip at the surface of what art for therapy is."

In such a repressed environment, the arts can represent "an incredible light." says Paschal, and as an arts worker, he "needed to get re-injected with that passion again."

All three of the Asialink recipients at tonight's seminar spoke of their residencies in a way that testified to a "full immersion experience". As Gabrielle Lord said, although the residency experience was "very, very rich, but not always easy", staying at home and studying a culture at the library, compared to having the opportunity to travel there to live and work was like the difference between "swimming on the surface of the sea and scuba diving."

Asialink calls for applications in July each year, through advertisements in *The Australian* newspaper, on the *Arts Hub* website and in *Reeltime* magazine. The deadline for applications is September 1. For more information, visit <[www.asialink.unimelb.edu.au](http://www.asialink.unimelb.edu.au)>

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