

PRODUCTION OF THE YEAR



PHOTO: ALBERT KSLIM FOR WALL RICE. ESPLANADE - THEATRES ON THE BAY, CRIPPAH CHAN DEAN ACADEMY, KIA OHL, SONIC, OCEANOPOD FOX ST.11

Wild Rice's *Monkey Goes West* (far right), *Nine Years* and *Pangdemonium* are the nominees for Production of the Year.



BEST DIRECTOR



The nominees for Best Director are (from top) Sebastian Tan for *Monkey Goes West*, Edith Podeta for *Dark Room* and Corrie Tan for *Art and Tracie Pang* for *Fat Pig*.

# Crowd-pleasers and intimate encounters

Comedies, smaller shows and new experiments take the spotlight at the Life! Theatre Awards



**S**ingapore's longest-running theatre awards turns 15 this year, a major birthday for what remains the only annual award to honour excellence in the country's theatre industry. From the audaciously experimental and irreverently provocative to good-of-fashioned drama, Life! Theatre Awards has welcomed and celebrated them all.

With this milestone comes a new identity: telecommunications company M1 comes on board as the award's title sponsor this year, which will now be known as the M1-The Straits Times Life! Theatre Awards.

Actress Pam Oei will host an invitation-only ceremony, themed *Solid Gold*, at the Esplanade Recital Studio on April 20, where the winners will be announced. This is held in collaboration with Esplanade - Theatres on the Bay and is also part of The Studio's fifty season, featuring 80 Singapore plays, which runs from April 2 to May 10.

Over the past 15 years, the awards have celebrated some of the most stunning and spine-tingling productions to grace the Singapore stage and charted the meteoric rise of many artists from newcomers to established players.

Each annual slate of nominees proved a challenge for Singapore's diverse theatre industry and last year was no different - it was a year for sharp-tongued, crowd-pleasing comedy and intimate, unexpected encounters.

Wild Rice's rollicking comedy with a heart of gold, *Monkey Goes West*, leads the pack with six nominations including Production of the Year - for its unusual take on the Chinese classic *Journey To The West*, coupled with a uniquely Singaporean twist. It was a banner year for the company, with

another four nominations for the intense *The House of Bernard Alba*, for a total of 10 nominations.

The company's founder, Ivan Heng, was thrilled by *Monkey Goes West*'s nominations. He says of the work: "When you really think about *Monkey Goes West*, it had Xi You Ji (*Journey To The West*), flamenco, Chinese opera, wushu, shadow puppetry and the goddess of mercy Guanyin played by Siti Khaliqah Zainal, a Malay actress - I think what it offered was an experience you'll never see anywhere else in the world. This is what we've been trying to do with our entire body of work, to celebrate what it means to be Singaporean and to explain to ourselves and our audiences what it means to be Singaporean, with the ability to so freely adapt and borrow and bring it all together."

Another cinematic production with almost as many nominations as *Art* - razor-sharp Chinese adaptation of the French comedy about three friends clashing over an artwork, *Nine Years* Theatre bagged five nominations for the production.

*Pangdemonium*, last year's big winner for the heart-rendering musical *Next To Normal* (2013), scooped up a total of eight nominations across all three of its main season shows: *Next To Normal*, *The House of Bernard Alba* and *Little Voice* and the provocative drama *Frozen*.

"The company has proved that it has an eye for new talent, nothing up for grabs," says Best Director, says the nominations and that the awards seem to have had a positive impact on these budding artists. In previous years, younger actors such as Seong Hui Xuan, Eden Ang and Nathan Hartono have received nominations for their roles in

*Pangdemonium*.

Fang says: "It gives them the confidence to know they've made it right over our entire body of work, to celebrate what it means to be Singaporean and to explain to ourselves and our audiences what it means to be Singaporean, with the ability to so freely adapt and borrow and bring it all together."

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drama of the real-life experiences of eight male inmates incarcerated in Changi Prison, from their day in court to the day of their release.

Feted visual artist and film-maker Ho Tin Nyan's forays into theatre and performance have also been rewarded.

The Necessary Stage also broke new ground with its play about the whims of social media, *Poor Thing*, where audience members were allowed to comment on the action - a road-edge incident gone wrong - in real time on Facebook.

"The whole, however, there were fewer nominees from the 2014 season, with the Production of the Year category at an all-time low of three."

This was largely due to the fact that there were fewer new productions than usual last year. It seemed that many theatre companies and practitioners had their eyes on 2015, with a slew of commissions for the SICA celebrations as well as the upcoming new works might be "able to jolt the scene out of what appears to be a bit of a nap".

Ultimately, the awards will always be a celebration of the arts and Singapore's artists, even as the quality of theatre productions varies from year to year.

Mr Lyon says: "It's easy to watch the Oscars and feel that actors and actresses are all glamorous and rich, but in the Life! Theatre Awards, it's not about doing wonderful, creative work with little financial return and little recognition."

# Highs and lows over 15 years

The Life! Theatre Awards weathered early criticisms about its credibility before going on to capture the sweep of Singapore theatre over the last 15 years.

Director of the Finger Players, acknowledges that while awards of any nature will always carry the burden of subjectivity, theatre practitioners here have moved "from being sceptical and cynical of it to accepting it and finally embracing it as part and parcel of our theatre ecology."

Chong adds: "Whether you agree with the awards or not... it has achieved what it set out to do, which is to celebrate the year and the theatre practitioners. It goes beyond the winners - it's always a great occasion to meet friends, colleagues and peers at the awards ceremony, and everyone will go there and clap for everyone, and celebrate everyone, and that's an amazing feeling."

Each year's awards ceremony has had different themes and dress codes, from 2013's Hipster Check to 2007's Curse of the Golden Flower (And Other Dysfunctional Family), which saw former judge, theatre academic K.K. Seah, sweeping in with 20 of his students carrying the train of his red Chinese silk overcoat. Dressing up has become part of the tradition, with practitioners such as costume designer Frederick Lee and director Benjamin Chia known to come in far-out fashion, adding to the fun and bonhomie.

This year, the awards are judged by a six-member panel comprising LaSalle College of the Arts provost Venka Purushothaman; online arts critic Francis Lee; and arts reviewers from the Straits Times: Helen Yee, Tang Hwa Kwee and Corrie Tan.

Mr Purushothaman, who was on the very first panel of judges in 2001, recalls how in its public materials and sell a few more play tickets, or if a practitioner finds herself among the nominees and feels her work has touched someone, then at least part of the judging process were able to give back just a little to the industry."

Follow Corrie Tan on Twitter @CorrieTan for all photos and photos of the M1-The Straits Times Life! Theatre Awards. Go to www.straitstimes.com/theatre-awards-2015

There was "a particular kind of trepidation that it would endorse notions of standards or preferences or might be deemed too subjective in its rendering", he adds. The awards came with "a lot of teething issues" such as how to give complimentary tickets to a large body of judges, which would cost a substantial sum; practitioners also wondered how the judging panel would look at complex, abstract work, compared with plays that were text-based and representational.

But over time, the awards proved itself by recognising an eclectic array of works both large and small, abstract and naturalistic and, in the process, striving for a more inclusive view of Singapore.

Mr Purushothaman says: "I'm glad the enterprise continued and, slowly, people started to build their confidence in it. Today, artists are proud to say, 'I'm a Life! Theatre Awards winner.'"

He notes that having these credentials, and to have a production supported and acclaimed in its home country, is a step towards global recognition and has "phenomenally supported capacity building" for the theatre sector.

Crucial to the awards' credibility has been the streamlining of the judging panel to a smaller group of informed and dedicated theatre watchers, comprising academics or reviewers from the major newspapers, says Life's arts editor Clarissa Ooi, a former theatre reviewer who was on the panel of judges before their votes were tallied by auditors.

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# And the nominees are...

**Production of the Year**  
 ■ *Art* by Nine Years Theatre, commissioned by Esplanade - Theatres on the Bay  
 ■ *Monkey Goes West* by Wild Rice  
 ■ *The Rise & Fall Of Little Voice* by Pangdemonium

**Best Director**  
 ■ Edith Podeta for *Dark Room* x5 (Edith Podeta; presented by Esplanade - Theatres on the Bay)  
 ■ Nelson Chia for *Art* (Nine Years Theatre)  
 ■ Sebastian Tan for *Monkey Goes West* (Wild Rice)  
 ■ Tracie Pang for *Fat Pig* (Pangdemonium)

**Best Original Script**  
 ■ *Dark Room* x5 by Edith Podeta (Edith Podeta; presented by Esplanade - Theatres on the Bay)  
 ■ *Final by Lin Xianyi* (The Theatre Practice)  
 ■ *Poor Thing* by Hareesh Sharma (The Necessary Stage)  
 ■ *9incomMoment* by Con Shu An (Checkpoint Theatre; in collaboration with Esplanade - Theatres on the Bay)

**Best Actor**  
 ■ Adnan Pang in *Frozen* (Pangdemonium)  
 ■ Oliver Chong in *Art* (Nine Years Theatre; commissioned by Esplanade - Theatres on the Bay)  
 ■ Peter Sun in *Art* (Nine Years Theatre; commissioned by Esplanade - Theatres on the Bay)  
 ■ Saque Dhan in *Monkey Goes West* (Wild Rice)

**Best Actress**  
 ■ Frances Lee in *Fat Pig* (Pangdemonium)  
 ■ Lydia Look in *The Way We Go* (Checkpoint Theatre)  
 ■ Mina Kaye in *The Rise & Fall Of Little Voice* (Pangdemonium)

**Best Ensemble**  
 ■ *Dark Room* x5 (Edith Podeta; presented by Esplanade - Theatres on the Bay)  
 ■ *Poor Thing* (The Necessary Stage)  
 ■ *Senang* (Drama Box)

**Best Supporting Actor**  
 ■ Erwin Shuh Ismail in *The Ant & The Grasshopper* (I Theatre)  
 ■ Kenneth Panicker in *The Merchant Of Venice* (Singapore Repertory Theatre)  
 ■ Zachary Ibrahim in *Fat Pig* (Pangdemonium)

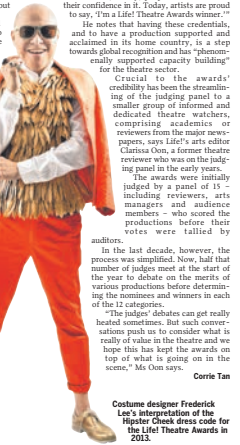
**Best Supporting Actress**  
 ■ Elizabeth Laran in *Fat Pig* (Pangdemonium)  
 ■ Jo Kalathas in *The House Of Bernard Alba* (Wild Rice)  
 ■ Siti Khaliqah Zainal in *Monkey Goes West* (Wild Rice)

**Best Set Design**  
 ■ Euxen Chia for *The Rise & Fall Of Little Voice* (Pangdemonium)  
 ■ Ho Tin Nyan, Andy Lim and Jed Lim for *Ten Thousand Tigers* (Ho Tin Nyan; co-commissioned by Esplanade - Theatres on the Bay, Asian Culture Complex - Asian Arts Theatre Korea, Carriageworks Australia and Wiener Festwochen Austria)  
 ■ Wong Chee Wai for *The House Of Bernard Alba* (Wild Rice)

**Best Sound Design or Original Score**  
 ■ Hani Haykal for *Ghanjali* (The Necessary Stage)  
 ■ Darren Ng for *Art* (Nine Years Theatre; commissioned by Esplanade - Theatres on the Bay)  
 ■ Elaine Chan and Tang Wenfa for *Monkey Goes West* (Wild Rice)  
 ■ Jeffrey Yee, Yumihoro Moriyama and Ravi Harkal for *Ten Thousand Tigers* (Ho Tin Nyan et al)

**Best Lighting Design**  
 ■ Andy Lim for *Ten Thousand Tigers* (Ho Tin Nyan et al)  
 ■ James Tan for *Red* (Blank Space Theatre; in collaboration with Esplanade - Theatres on the Bay)  
 ■ Lim Yu-heng for *The House Of Bernard Alba* (Wild Rice)

**Best Costume Design**  
 ■ Ivan Heng for *The House Of Bernard Alba* (Wild Rice)  
 ■ Tube Gallery by Ehsai & Saeit for *Monkey Goes West* (Wild Rice)  
 ■ Tang Hong for *Hotpants* (produced by Annie Peki)



Costume designer Frederick Lee poses with his award-winning *Hipster Check* dress code for the Life! Theatre Awards in 2012.