



Kicking off the bumper year for musicals are (clockwise from top left) February's school comedy *Detention Katong*, March's nursery rhyme fantasy *Itsy*, April's Swinging Sixties homage *Tropicana*, followed by feathers-and-sequins satire *La Cage Aux Folles*. PHOTOS: DREAM ACADEMY, THE FINGER PLAYERS, TROPICANA THE MUSICAL, WILD RICE

THE S'PORE MUSICAL BOOM

Seen a local musical lately? You should. The scene is thriving, with hot new talents and international dreams. BY HELMI YUSOF

GLEN Goei recalls the challenges of directing the local musical *Kampong Amber* in 1994: "My goodness, it was so hard to find the cast. We needed people who could act and sing, and be able to come for rehearsals at specified times. And it was almost impossible. No one was doing it full-time."

"In the end, I had to co-produce it with the Singapore Armed Forces Music & Drama Company, because it was the only place I could find full-time performers with those skills."

Fast-forward 23 years later where Goei is involved in not one but two musicals by Wild Rice: he's directing April's *La Cage Aux Folles*, a hilarious caper about liberals versus conservatives, and performing in November's *Mama White Snake*, a pantomime inspired by the Chinese legend.

When Wild Rice held an audition this week for one female role, 45 actresses showed up. "And they were all good!" says Goei. "They were trained, talented and doing this full-time."

In just two decades, the industry has undergone a sea change. Art schools and colleges like Lasalle College of the Arts, Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts and School of the Arts have produced a stream of young talents.

Lasalle, for instance, launched its Musical Theatre course in 2004, the first in Asia. It has graduated 76 students to date, among them Elena Wang who's starred in West End and Broadway musicals, as well as Mina Kaye, Seong Hui Xuan and Benjamin Chow, all three of whom have nabbed awards at the ST Life! Theatre Awards for stage musical performances.

Meanwhile, other talents such as Julian Wong and Nathan Hartono have returned home from prestigious foreign institutions such as Berklee College of Music to lend their talents here.

There are now numerous young "triple threats" – folks who can act, sing and dance – such as Siti Khalijah Zainal, Audrey Luo, Ebi Shankara, Frances Lee, Joshua Lim, Erwin Shah Ismail, Darius Tan, Linden Furnell, Julia Abueva, Dwayne Tan and Kimberly Chan who regularly star in stage musicals.

While the surplus of talent is good for the industry, it also means that younger graduates of music and acting courses have to jostle hard for roles and opportunities.

One recent acting graduate, who didn't want to be named, says: "I must have gone for about 11 auditions in the past year, but didn't get a single role – not even in the chorus. That's really tough on your self-esteem. You watch these movies like *La La Land* about people waiting on tables before their big break. But I think that happens for only a few of us."

Meanwhile, local theatre companies recognise the ready pool of talents and have ramped up the number of musical productions. This year, there are at least nine musicals by Singapore companies big and small – from established ones like Dream Academy and Pangdemonium to younger firms like Glowtape Productions, and even independent producers like Tan Kheng Hua.

Striking the right chord

Dream Academy kicks off the year's string of original musicals with *Detention Katong*, a spirited school musical about good girls going bad – but in a good way.

Dream Academy's founder Selena Tan directs and writes the book and lyrics with a team of composers headed by Elaine Chan. Her lead actress is Valerie Choo, also a Lasalle alumna.

Tan herself is a musical pioneer. In the 1990s, she starred in musicals such as *Twist of Fate* and *Chang & Eng*, singing the ballad *Mai Phen Rai* which many musical lovers still happily hum today.

She says: "In the old days, we were all part-timers. When we sang and danced, it was self-taught and instinctive. In comparison, the eight girls I've cast in *Detention Katong* are mostly trained in theatre and music schools. They bring to the stage a variety of skills that amaze me."

Though she is accustomed to producing sketch-based shows like the *Dim Sum Dollies*, *Meenah & Cheenah* and *Happily Ever Laughter*, Tan wanted to challenge herself to create a more traditional musical that brings the audience through the "highs and lows of a single plot that comes to a satisfying conclusion."

She's not alone in rising to the challenge of the complex form. Seasoned playwrights such as Hareesh Sharma and Chong Tze Chien, both acclaimed for serious dramas, are making their forays into the genre.

Sharma, a Cultural Medallion recipient, is writing the book for *Tropicana The Musical* scheduled for an April debut. Set in the swinging 1960s when Singapore was in many ways more permissive than it is today, *Tropicana* imagines life in the city's real-life cabaret hotspot which opened in 1968 and closed in 1989.

Sharma, who is the resident playwright of The Necessary Stage (TNS), says: "This is perhaps the biggest drama production I've been involved in. And while I admit to my sheer lack of experience in this genre, I'm bringing to it the TNS style of devising scripts, researching and improvising scenes with the artists, talking for hours about the marriage of song and dialogue ... We even had a particularly meaningful afternoon where we met pioneers

of the music scene such as Wilson David, Larry Lai and Vernon Cornelius, as well as ex-*Tropicana* staff."

Meanwhile, Chong Tze Chien, the company director of The Finger Players, is working with composer Darren Ng to write the story and lyrics of an original family musical titled *Itsy*.

Inspired by nursery rhymes, *Itsy* tells the story of a boy (Oliver Chong) tormented by the evil *Itsy* Betsy Spider (Sebastian Tan) and his army of spiders. His grandfather (Lim Kay Siu) comes to the rescue and, along the way, befriends other children's book characters such as Humpty Dumpty and Jack and Jill.

Chong explains: "It took us three years to create this. But it gave us a chance to work with people outside of our usual circle of collaborators ... As a creative, it's fun for me to work on a different genre, although the parameters of what makes good theatre are still very much the same. *Itsy* has given me a chance to challenge the common idea that musicals are fluffy shows meant for the masses, when in fact some of them deal with very weighty issues."

Though populated by children's book characters, *Itsy* contains dark themes such as fear and sickness. "We think it is a timely production considering the political climate of the world right now," adds Chong.

High costs, high rewards

Itsy is one of The Finger Players' biggest and most expensive productions to date. A modest drama production typically costs between S\$80,000 to S\$100,000. But musicals are much more complex and expensive, possibly costing between 10 and 15 times that amount.

Tracie Pang of Pangdemonium has built a reputation for being adept at directing both dramas and musicals. Pangdemonium's year-end musicals have become one of the must-see events of the theatre calendar. This year, it is staging the 2015 Tony Award winner for Best Musical, *Fun Home*.

She notes: "With musicals, you face the challenge of making sure the songs are integral to the storytelling. Otherwise, it can interrupt a story that's in full swing ... Rehearsal periods are also longer because you must first learn the songs before you can start on any choreography or blocking. And musicals typically have a larger cast than a play."

"There is also the cost of hiring musicians, renting instruments and getting sound equipment. The tech period also takes longer. As the live band also rehearses separately from the cast, we have to cost in the hiring of venues for their rehearsals. The list goes on and on."

But when a musical is done right, the

pay-offs can be huge. Besides Pangdemonium's musicals, Dream Academy's revues and Wild Rice's annual pantomimes are extremely popular and big money-spinners for the companies. Some musicals from the 1980s and 1990s, such as *Beauty World* and *Fried Rice Paradise*, have entered the canon and are revived frequently.

These also include Singapore Repertory Theatre's *Forbidden City*, a 2002 musical centred on 19th century Empress Dowager Cixi, which has developed something of a cult following among musical fans. The company's artistic director Gaurav Kripalani reveals: "We have had the most requests to restage this. And based on the amazing take-up rate for tickets since we launched sales last week, there are lots of people who want to watch it or watch it again."

The 30,000 tickets to the show which returns on Aug 8 are selling fast. Pop singer Kit Chan, who originated the role of the Empress and is reprising it, is part of the draw. The inclusion of new songs and West End star Earl Carpenter (*Les Miserables*) and Broadway sensation Steffanie Leigh (*Mary Poppins*) doesn't hurt.

Meanwhile, *Forbidden City* has blazed the trail for *The Great Wall: One Woman's Journey*, another homegrown musical centred on a Chinese legend set to open in July. Written by Jean Tay in collaboration with British composer and lyricist David Shrubsole and Australian director Darren Yap, *The Great Wall* centres on Meng Jiang Nu who, as legend has it, brought the Great Wall down with her tears for her dead husband.

Tay is well-known for serious dramas such as *Everything But The Brain* and *Bram*, but says that it was musicals that paved the way for her becoming a playwright: "I used to listen to the soundtrack of *Les Miserables* to sleep. My love of Broadway and West End musicals eventually led me to a wider appreciation of theatre."

She adds: "The best part of writing a musical is the extremely collaborative nature of creating the story. You work hand-in-hand with the composer and director to weave the narrative and music into a seamless whole."

The Great Wall is produced by Grace Low of Glowtape Productions, a company that was incorporated just last month. Its cast includes Na-Young Jeon, who played Fantine in London's *Les Miserables*, and Nathan Hartono, the reigning teen idol and runner-up of Chinese talent show *Sing China*.

Low says: "I deliberately chose an international team of talents as a way of expanding the appeal of the musical to different markets. I hope it can be a success in Singapore, so that it can travel out of Singapore and into the region."
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Gotta sing, gotta dance

DETENTION KATONG
Explanade Theatre, Feb 17 to March 5
 Dream Academy's original musical about good girls gone bad – but in a good way.

ITSY
Victoria Theatre, March 24 to April 2
 The Finger Players explores the dark side of nursery rhymes, with live performers and puppetry.

LAO JIU: THE MUSICAL
Drama Centre Theatre, April 6 to 23
 The Theatre Practice reprises its popular musical about an aspiring puppeteer.

TROPICANA THE MUSICAL
Capitol Theatre, April 13 to 30
 A glitzy star-studded homage to the sexy '60s directed by Beatrice Chia-Richmond.

LA CAGE AUX FOLLES
Victoria Theatre, April 19 to May 13
 Wild Rice's fabulous localised version of the French comedy classic, relocated to Tanjong Pagar.

THE GREAT WALL: ONE WOMAN'S JOURNEY
Drama Centre Theatre, July 14 to 30
 Glowtape Productions' musical about the legendary Meng Jiang Nu and the Great Wall of China.

FORBIDDEN CITY – PORTRAIT OF AN EMPRESS
Explanade Theatre, Aug 8 to 20
 Singapore Repertory Theatre revives the musical about Empress Dowager Cixi with Kit Chan.

FUN HOME
Drama Centre Theatre, Sept 29 to Oct 15
 Pangdemonium Productions stages the Broadway hit about a family man hiding his sexuality.

MAMA WHITE SNAKE
Drama Centre Theatre, Nov 24 to Dec 16
 The legend of Madam White Snake is hilariously transposed to Singapore by Wild Rice.