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Venice Biennale

Singapore artists made networking trip
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Power duet

Yale-Juilliard combo to perform Bach's last work



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Angelina Jolie steps out

First public appearance since breast surgery revelation

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THE STRAITS TIMES
TUESDAY, JUNE 4 2013

Life!

MEET THE NEW WAVE

This year's Life! Theatre Awards nominations feature a slew of new faces, from young 20somethings to young-at-heart actors from The Necessary Stage's seniors programme. **CORRIE TAN** reports.

C4&5



Happy nominees (from left) Seong Hui Xuan, 25; Sharda Harrison, 25; Erwin Shah Ismail, 26; and Rebecca Spykerman, 28.

And the nominees are...

Production of the Year

- Company by Dream World Productions
- La Cage Aux Folles by Wild Rice
- Lear Dreaming by TheatreWorks
- Pretty Things by Patricia Toh/The Substation
- Roots (below) by The Finger Players

Best director

- Kuo Jian Hong for Lao Jiu: The Musical (The Theatre Practice)
- Liu Xiaoyi for I: Kuo Pao Kun Devised (The Theatre Practice)
- Ong Keng Sen for Lear Dreaming (TheatreWorks)
- Samantha Scott-Blackhall for Freud's Last Session (Blank Space Theatre)
- Patricia Toh (right) for Pretty Things (Patricia Toh/The Substation)



Corrie Tan

This is a year of newcomers and dark horses. Side by side on the list of Life! Theatre Awards nominations this year are established hands whose names have become a mainstay of the awards season as well as practitioners who are coming into their own with confident and compelling performances and productions.

These up and coming artists range from young actors in their 20s to the alumni of The Necessary Stage's Theatre For Seniors, who are mostly in their 60s and 70s. In particular, seven graduates of the latter, a three-year training programme, were shocked to discover that they had clinched a Best Ensemble nomination for the heartwarming neighbourhood drama *October*.

Cast member Padma Krisnanan, 63, tells LIFE! about her initial reaction with a laugh: "I was more shocked than happy. I thought, is this some kind of trick they are playing on us?"

Happily, it is no trick. While each member of the group had various levels of acting experience prior to joining The Necessary Stage's programme, many really found their footing in the world of professional theatre only during their training course.

Business owner Michael Tan, 64, joined Theatre For Seniors impulsively, in preparation for his retirement. He has since gone on to act in critically acclaimed productions such as *Nine Years Theatre's 12 Angry Men*, which was staged at the Huayi - Chinese Festival of Arts earlier this year.

The Best Supporting Actor and Actress categories are also populated with fresh faces, such as Seong Hui Xuan, 25, Sharda Harrison, 25, Erwin Shah Ismail, 26, and Rebecca Spykerman, 28.



Best costume design

- Daniel Boey for Company (Dream World Productions)
- Frederick Lee for La Cage Aux Folles (top, Wild Rice)
- Kih Wan Ching for Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? (above, Nine Years Theatre)



Best set design

- Ian Bailie for Swimming With Sharks (Pangdemonium! Productions)
- Eucien Chia for Company (Dream World Productions)
- Eucien Chia for Spring Awakening (above, Pangdemonium! Productions)
- Wong Chee Wai for Freud's Last Session (right, Blank Space Theatre)



13th LIFE! THEATRE AWARDS 2013

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Each of them was quick to point out that he or she could not have navigated the stage without the help and support of more established counterparts in the scene. They are all relatively recent graduates of the Lasalle College of the Arts.

Seong got a nomination for her delightful take on the ditzy stewardess April in Dream World Productions' star-studded production of Stephen Sondheim's *Company* - but when she first auditioned for the role, she thought she would not make the cut.

"I really messed up my audition," Seong recalls sheepishly. She had conscientiously prepared for an all-American version of April and director Hossain Leong had thrown her a curve ball by asking her to do the audition in English.

Harrison, who was nominated for her role in the genre-crossing production *Crossings*, got a talking-to from her co-star, Singapore actor Najib Soiman, the day before the work premiered at the Esplanade Theatre Studio.

She says: "My ego crumbled, I was scared, because it was my first big show. What if I mess up? It was Najib who said, get your act together and do it. Learning from these people who are not afraid to tell me to go harder and deeper - I thank them."

All four young actors are looking forward to attending the awards ceremony for the first time. The invitation-only cocktail event will be held on July 1 at the W Singapore - Sentosa Cove, which is the awards' official venue partner this year.

This year marks the 13th edition of the awards, an annual event that honours the best theatre professionals in Singapore today. This year, there is also a new category that allows readers to vote for their favourite production (see sidebar).

Another group of young artists who made ripples were the ensemble behind I: Kuo Pao Kun Devised, part of The Theatre Practice's line-up that commemorated the 10th year of Kuo's passing. The site-specific work at Stamford Arts Centre was an examination of Kuo's work that managed to be both bold and tender, with 30-year-old director Liu Xiaoyi at the helm.

The Business Times arts correspondent Helmi Yusof, one of the seven-member awards judging panel, notes: "2012 was a very good year for newcomers. I found myself sitting up a lot and going: 'Who is that actor? I must remember his or her name.'"

The rest of the judging panel comprises theatre academic Edith Podessa, online arts journal The Flying Inkpot co-editors Kenneth Kwok and Matthew Lyon, as well as arts reviewers from Lianhe Zaobao and The Straits Times, Chew

Spotlight on the best

Fresh faces young and old, including a group of newcomers in their 60s and 70s, are among the nominees for this year's Life! Theatre Awards



Boon Leong and Corrie Tan. Former Life! arts correspondent Adeline Chia - now an editor at the online culture magazine Artinfo - is also on the judging panel, having watched most of last year's local theatre productions.

There was the general sense that many of last year's strongest productions were refreshed stagings of familiar work, such as *Company*, *Freud's Last Session* (Blank Space Theatre), *Lao Jiu: The Musical* (The Theatre Practice), *Romeo & Juliet* (Wild Rice) and *Spring Awakening* (Pangdemonium! Productions), to name a few.

Company emerged tops in the nominations race with six nods, and the large-scale *Lao Jiu: The Musical* and *La Cage Aux Folles* follow close behind with four nominations each.

There were significantly fewer original scripts, although there was a strong showing of docudramas compiled, verbatim, from interviews and reports, such as *Goh Lay Kuan & Kuo Pao Kun* (TheatreWorks), *National Broadway Company* (The Esplanade) and *Rant & Rave* (The Esplanade).

These works of testimony theatre resonated well with the panel, but Lyon also finds the lack of new scripts perturbing. He says: "There's no good way to spin it. Yes, it's nice that we have docudramas, and if the list were more balanced, I would be as excited about interview and verbatim theatre as anything else on that list. But when it's overwhelmingly one type of show - we need to do something about that."

Helmi points out that "the dearth of local scripts is a perennial problem".



Leah Dreaming is in the running for Production of the Year.

He adds: "It's costly for theatre companies to invest in developing new scripts, as opposed to taking something that already has critical buzz... Even audiences prefer something they've heard of, instead of taking a chance on new plays."

Nevertheless, there were still some gleaming diamonds in the rough when it came to entirely original creations. One of them was Patricia Toh's *Pretty Things*, an exploration of lost innocence, which was staged as part of *The Substation's* *Open Call*. Another gem was Oliver Chong's touching family history tale, *Roots*. Both muscled their way into the coveted Production of the Year shortlist.

As Lyon puts it: "(They) speak to the bits of you that cry out in the night."

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PHOTO: DONG VINCOY JR FOR THE STRAITS TIMES



The best ensemble nominees include (above) *Il: Kuo Pao Kun Devised* and *October* (left) whose cast comprised (sitting from far left) Eleanor Song, 66, Choo Ai Keow, 73, Gladys Tan, 59, (standing from far left) Padma Krishnan, 63, young actor Joshua Lim, 28, Irene Ong, 60, Daisy Yeow, 62, and Michael Tan, 64.

Best ensemble

- *Il: Kuo Pao Kun Devised* (The Theatre Practice)
- *Lao Jiu: The Musical* (The Theatre Practice)
- National Broadway Company (The Esplanade)
- *October* (The Necessary Stage)
- *Pretty Things* (Patricia Toh/The Substation)

Best supporting actress

- Sharda Harrison (right) in *Crossings* (The Necessary Stage and Trafik)
- Pelrina Kow in *Company* (Dream World Productions)
- Neo Swee Lin in *Romeo & Juliet* (Wild Rice)
- Seong Hui Xuan (far right) in *Company* (Dream World Productions)
- Rebecca Spykerman (below) in *Spring Awakening* (Pangdemonium! Productions)

Best supporting actor

- Daniel Jenkins in *Twelfth Night* (Singapore Repertory Theatre)
- Jeffrey Low in *Who's Afraid Of Virginia Woolf?* (Nine Years Theatre)
- Adrian Pang in *Twelfth Night* (Singapore Repertory Theatre)
- Erwin Shah Ismail (far right) in *Romeo & Juliet* (Wild Rice)
- Sebastian Tan in *Hansel & Gretel* (Wild Rice)

Best actress

- Liew Shi Suen in *Who's Afraid Of Virginia Woolf?* (Nine Years Theatre)
- Jo Kukahas in *Occupation* (Checkpoint Theatre)
- Karen Tan in *Goh Lay Kuan & Kuo Pao Kun* (TheatreWorks)

Best actor

- Nelson Chia in *A Language Of Their Own* (Robin Loon and Casey Lim)
- Oliver Chong in *Roots* (The Finger Players)
- Matt Grey in *Freud's Last Session* (Blank Space Theatre)
- Ivan Heng in *La Cage Aux Folles* (Wild Rice)
- Lim Kay Tong in *Goh Lay Kuan & Kuo Pao Kun* (TheatreWorks)
- Adrian Pang in *Swimming With Sharks* (Pangdemonium! Productions)

Best script

- *Goh Lay Kuan & Kuo Pao Kun* (TheatreWorks) by Ong Keng Sen
- National Broadway Company (The Esplanade) by Ong Keng Sen
- *Rant & Rave* (The Esplanade) by Chong Tze Chien
- *Roots* (The Finger Players) by Oliver Chong



Best sound design

- Darren Ng for *The Book Of Living And Dying* (above), *The Finger Players* and *Teatri Sbagliati*)
- Darren Ng for *Freud's Last Session* (Blank Space Theatre)
- Jeffrey Yue, Dharma, Ray Aziz, George Chua and Rizman Putra for *The Song Of The Brokenhearted Tiger* (left, 3 Tigers)

Best lighting design

- Andy Lim for *Pretty Things* (Patricia Toh/The Substation)
- Andy Lim for *The Song Of The Brokenhearted Tiger* (3 Tigers)
- Lim Woan Wen for *The Book Of Living And Dying* (The Finger Players and Teatri Sbagliati)
- Dorothy Png for *Lao Jiu: The Musical* (The Theatre Practice)
- Dorothy Png for *A Language Of Their Own* (Robin Loon and Casey Lim)



ST PHOTOS: DESMOND FOO

Vote and win!

As part of the Life! Theatre Awards' new format, readers will get to pick their favourite theatre production of 2012.

The inaugural Readers' Choice Award opened for voting online last week and has since garnered more than 700 votes.

Those who vote can win a night's stay at the W Singapore

hotel in Sentosa Cove. They will get to stay at the W's Fabulous Room (above), which boasts panoramic views of the South China Sea.

Another 10 winners will get a pair of tickets each to a live debate among well-known members of the theatre community and the Life! Theatre Awards ceremony on July 1.

The six productions that Life! has shortlisted for the inaugural Readers' Choice Award, which will be presented at the awards, are:

- *Company* by Dream World Productions
- *La Cage Aux Folles* by Wild Rice
- *Lao Jiu: The Musical* by The Theatre Practice
- National Broadway Company by The Esplanade
- *Roots* by The Finger Players
- *Spring Awakening* by Pangdemonium! Productions

The results of the voting will be announced at the awards ceremony.

This reader engagement drive is part of The Straits Times' Star programme, an initiative to reward its readers. Readers have been treated to tickets to the recent Social Star Awards, special access to the Shell F1 Ferrari pit and sneak movie previews, among other events and activities.

To vote for your favourite production, go to: <http://bit.ly/19hU3mP>



WATCH THE VIDEO

www.straitstimes.com

See video trailers of the productions and vote for your favourite one.



Download a QR code reader app on your smartphone and scan this code for more information.

PHOTOS: ESPLANADE, OLIVIA KWOK, PANGDEMONIUM! PRODUCTIONS, THE FINGER PLAYERS, THE SUBSTATION, THE THEATRE PRACTICE, THEATREWORKS, WILD RICE. W SINGAPORE - SENTOSA COVE