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Take a pause before you dismiss that student production as “amateur” or “unprofessional”.

The theatre diploma and degree programmes offered by **Lasalle College of the Arts**, the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (Nafa) and the National University of Singapore (NUS) are producing a feast of musicals and plays that could hold their own on the Singapore main stage.

From a sparkling rendition of Stephen Sondheim’s legendary musical *Gypsy* – staged earlier this year at Lasalle – to Franz Kafka’s *Metamorphosis* with a Singapore twist coming up next month at Nafa, these institutions churn out an eclectic variety of shows that are all affordably priced.

Some are free and the rest are almost always under \$20 a pop.

Lasalle’s programme leader for the Bachelor of Arts (BA) (Honours) acting course, actress Edith Podesta, says: “We don’t compete with the local theatre industry, but we run alongside it and we offer something that the theatre industry offers, perhaps, only once or twice a year, which is the classics.”

Critics have observed the increasing quality of the theatre productions coming out from these institutions.

Matthew Lyon, co-founder of online theatre review journal *The Flying Inkpot*, recalls how their productions several years ago were “poorly focused star vehicles with by-the-numbers direction and uneven production design, which left a lot of the student actors with very little to do. Everything felt rather cheap, and completely divorced from professional theatre.”

Lyon, also a drama educator, feels that there has been a vast leap in professionalism, citing Lasalle’s recent productions of the dramatic work *Angels in America*, staged last month, and the musical *Thoroughly Modern Millie* in March 2011.

He says: “It’s not that all of Lasalle’s productions are amazing – they aren’t. It’s that there is, on the one hand, experimentation, and on the other hand, clearly defined artistic goals.”

“Navigating between these poles brings freshness and polish to the best work and a sense of noble striving even to the weakest.”

It helps that external directors, whether from Singapore or abroad, have been invited to direct and audition the students in a way that reflects how the theatre industry actually works.

Nafa’s students, for instance, have worked with staff from Britain’s Royal Shakespeare Company on various Shakespearean plays.

Schools also have a growing budget for these productions. Lasalle’s *Gypsy* cost \$60,000 to stage and a dramatic work at Nafa might have a budget of between \$15,000 and \$20,000. However, this is still considerably less than what professional theatre companies spend because they have to rent venues while schools have facilities on campus.

At NUS, students are also encouraged to take charge of the budget in order to experience how a production manager would work in the real world.

Public performances are a key component of theatre and acting programmes in tertiary institutions here, offering students a chance to demonstrate and hone newfound skills in front of a more demanding public audience, who are not just faculty members, fellow students or family and friends, but visitors outside of school.

Matt Grey, a senior lecturer at Nafa’s theatre department, says: “We look at the group, what we think their strengths are and what we think they need to be challenged by.”

“We like to put on plays that will make them look good and flourish, but on the other hand, those plays might not be the best vehicle for training. So sometimes we’re happy to give them a challenge that on the public face of it might look like they have struggled.”

While NUS’ theatre studies course is not a conservatory course tailored specifically to produce performers, it is mandatory for students to take a module in play production, where they stage a work for the public.

Dr Robin Loon, an assistant professor of theatre at the university, says: “Whatever things that you learn in terms of the critical aspects of theatre, it’s important that there is a practice-based component that works through the mechanisms that drive theatre practices in Singapore and the world: collaboration and working with each other, the rehearsal process, dealing with audienceship.”

The outcomes of such practical learning should be open to the public, he adds.

Schools are now taking these public performances



SCHOOL IS THE STAGE

Theatre students get to experience how the industry works through productions they put on while studying



a step further by introducing new components to them.

For instance, Lasalle’s musical theatre programme is introducing a children’s theatre project that it hopes will be a regular feature of its Level 2 curriculum. Its upcoming work, *A Day in Paris*, will be staged from Nov 7 to 9 and is appropriate for nine to 12 year olds.

The head of Lasalle’s musical theatre department, well-known Australian teacher-director Tony Knight, says: “There are so many children’s theatre productions going on in Singapore, so everything is about getting them ready to go to work or giving them the experience of what they may find outside

in the profession.” He counts among his former students well-known Australian actors such as Cate Blanchett and Sam Worthington. He was formerly head of acting at Australia’s National Institute of Dramatic Art, where he taught for more than 20 years before moving to Lasalle two years ago.

Both Lasalle’s acting and musical theatre programmes will also put the spotlight on new work.

Knight says: “I want this course to be looked upon as a place where professionals can come and work-shop new pieces. They can experiment and try things out, then go away and make the piece better.” There are some brand-new pieces in the pipeline.

The musical theatre programme is currently in the early phases of creating a new musical, *A Night At Neptune’s*, based on the popular restaurant-bar of 1960s and 1970s Singapore. There are plans to showcase the work in 2015, in conjunction with Singapore’s 50th birthday.

Playwright-director Chong Tze Chien, company director of home-grown theatre company *The Finger Players*, has also written a new script specifically for the final-year students of Lasalle’s acting course, titled *Starring Hitler Jekyll & Hyde*, which will wrestle with issues of immigration. It will be staged by the graduating cohort next April.

Podesta says: “We find that students learn more if they go through the whole process, from the first reading and first draft all the way to presentation. “If you look at the Singapore industry, you do have companies doing well-made plays, but most of the time, they’re doing new work. So we want to replicate what’s around us.”

This Singaporean and regional focus has also emerged in productions by NUS and Nafa. Nafa’s Grey, also an award-winning actor, is directing an upcoming stage adaptation of Kafka’s *Metamorphosis* with a Singaporean flavour to the work.

Theatre practitioner Kaylene Tan, one of the founders of performance group *spell#7*, worked with NUS students to create an interactive, experiential take on Malaysian playwright Leow Puay Tin’s *Family*, which was staged in a shophouse along Niven Road earlier this year.

Established actress Nora Samosir, a theatre lecturer at NUS, says: “The programme wants to leverage on the fact that we are in Singapore. When we look at work to perform as part of our modules, we often look at Asian work in the contemporary mould. There are modules that look at traditional Asian and European theatre, but we want to highlight works that are done in the region.” Home-grown plays that have been performed by the various schools includes *Tan Tarn How’s The Lady Of Soul And Her Ultimate “S” Machine*, *Hareesh Sharma’s Those Who Can’t, Teach And Ovidia Yu’s Three Fat Virgins Unassembled*.

Working on productions such as these also grows students to be a part of the Singapore theatre ecosystem after they graduate.

Podesta and Knight note that many of their international students want to stay in Singapore after being immersed in the local theatre scene so intensely.

Foreign students make up a significant percentage of the intake in these courses. For example, about half the current students in Lasalle’s acting programme hail from overseas, predominantly from

Courses for performing arts

Lasalle College of the Arts

■ **Bachelor of Arts (Honours) in acting:** Students learn performance techniques and acting skills through a variety of genres and disciplines, from Shakespeare to experimental contemporary work. First- and second-year students learn the foundations of theatre, such as world drama, and explore Asian theatre forms. By their third year, they are expected to work well with industry professionals and function as a company.

Intake: Six to 14 students a year

■ **BA (Honours) in Musical Theatre:** This three-year programme aims to develop students as “triple threats” – performers who can sing, dance and act with equal skill. Students will be groomed in each skill set during the first and second years, as well as take classes in world theatre and musical theatre history. Students do an independent piece of performance research while also taking on major and minor roles in a variety of productions.

Intake: 10 to 12 students each year

■ **Diploma in performance:** This course lays the foundation both for further study at the degree level and also for a professional performing career. In these three years, students will be prepared to work in the theatre, film, TV and live events industries, both artistically and also from the business point of view.

Intake: About 15 students a year

Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts

■ **Diploma in theatre (English/Mandarin)**



Drama: Both courses emphasise acting as well as technical theatre and design. Students will also gain experience in stage management and theatre design, as well as hone their song and dance skills. Modules include movement, voice, South-east Asian theatre and teacher training for speech and drama.

Intake: Around 20 students for English Drama and about 25 for Mandarin Drama a year

■ **Bachelor of Arts (Honours) in theatre arts:** This degree programme lets students gain a bachelor’s degree in collaboration with the University of Essex in the United Kingdom. It develops a broader range of theatre-

making skills and is production-intensive. It can be added on to the diploma programme.

Intake: About 20 students a year

National University of Singapore

■ **BA in theatre studies:** This academic programme trains students in the critical understanding and practice of theatre. It is complemented by practical work for the stage in a mandatory play production module. A large emphasis is on the study of theories of performance and cultural practices, among others. There is a strong Asian bent to the course of study.

Intake: Between 12 and 25 students a year

As part of their training, students at Lasalle College of the Arts explore Asian art forms such as the wayang kulit (left). ST PHOTO: NG SOR LUAN



Final-year students in Lasalle's BA (Honours) acting course will put on an adaptation of Friedrich Durrenmatt's *The Visit* (left), while Nafa theatre department's English Drama students and alumni take on Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis* (far left). PHOTOS: DIOS VINCOY JR FOR THE STRAITS TIMES, NG SOR LUAN

In production: upcoming student works

A Day In Paris

What: This cosy children's theatre production by the Level 2 students of Lasalle's musical theatre course was devised by the students themselves, under the direction of visiting Australian director Brendan O'Connell. It promises a theatrical tour of the romantic city. For children aged nine to 12 years old.

Where: Flexible Performance Space, Lasalle College of the Arts, 1 McNally Street

When: Nov 7 and 8, 4pm, Nov 9, 11am and 3pm

Admission: Free, but registration is required. Go to www.eventbrite.sg

Info: E-mail surenj.salgadoe@lasalle.edu.sg or go to www.lasalle.edu.sg/Events/EventDetail.aspx/A-Day-in-Paris

Metamorphosis: A Nafa 75th Anniversary Celebration

What: Actor-director Matt Grey, also a theatre faculty member at Nafa, directs this take on Franz Kafka's iconic novel, *Metamorphosis*, with a Singaporean twist. The absurdist text tracks the life of the travelling salesman Gregor Samsa, who wakes up one morning to find himself transformed into an ugly insect. Featuring the Nafa theatre department's English Drama students and alumni.

Where: Studio Theatre, Nafa Campus 3, 151 Bencoolen Street

When: Nov 8, 8pm, Nov 9, 3 and 8pm

Admission: \$10 and \$15 from Nafa (call 6512-4176 or e-mail whyu@nafa.edu.sg)

Friedrich Durrenmatt's *The Visit*

What: The final-year students in Lasalle's BA (Honours) acting course star in a brand new adaptation of this 20th-century classic by the Swiss dramatist Durrenmatt. The 1956 tragic-comedy puts mankind's collective guilt in the spotlight when a hugely rich woman, Claire, returns to her hometown in the hopes that the townsfolk will kill the lover who spurned her – in exchange for her money. Cake Theatrical Productions' Natalie Henneidge guest-directs this production with some colourful, gender-bending twists and turns.

Where: Singapore Airlines Theatre, Lasalle College of the Arts

When: Nov 8 and 9, 8pm

Admission: Free, but registration is required. Go to www.eventbrite.sg

University Of Laughs

What: This delightful 1907 play by Japanese playwright Mitani Koki wrestles with the concept of censorship. Set in 1940s Japan, a young playwright, Tsubaki, goes head to head with a government censor Sakisaka. Sakisaka's job is to filter out anything sensitive from the media in pre-war Japan, but he bears a grudge against comedy as well – which happens to be the genre of Tsubaki's play. This production is performed in Mandarin by the students of Nafa's BA (Honours) in theatre arts.

Where: Studio Theatre, Nafa Campus 3

When: Nov 15, 7.30pm, Nov 16, 3 and 7.30pm

Admission: Free. To register, call 6512-4176 or e-mail whyu@nafa.edu.sg

Henrik Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler*

What: Another 20th-century classic, this time tackled by the second-year acting students at Lasalle. Norwegian playwright Ibsen has created a memorable protagonist in Hedda Gabler, a passionate and strong-willed woman trapped in a loveless marriage and an existential crisis. This turbulent play about public and private lives is directed by Australian director-designer Stefanos Rassios, who has been collaborating with Lasalle for the past six years.

Where: Flexible Performance Space, Lasalle College of the Arts

When: Nov 27 to 29, 8pm

Admission: Free, but registration is required. Go to www.eventbrite.sg. Ticket sales begin on Nov 4



Lasalle's students took on Stephen Sondheim's legendary musical *Gypsy* (far left) earlier this year, while students from NUS' theatre studies programme were involved in Dr K.K. Seet's production, *The Velvetten Rabbit* (left) last year. PHOTOS: LASALLE COLLEGE OF THE ARTS, TRISTON YEO

countries such as Australia and the Philippines.

For the musical theatre course, about 45 per cent of the students are Singaporean and the rest come from abroad. Nafa's Mandarin drama diploma programme also sees a significant enrolment of students from China.

Lasalle acting student Andrew Sutherland, 22, who is taking one of the lead roles in an upcoming production of Friedrich Durrenmatt's *The Visit* at Lasalle, is one of these students. The Australian says: "I don't necessarily want to go back. I think there are great opportunities here for work. I've made a lot of great connections while I've been here, both with my peers and with professionals."

He would join several of his schoolmates who have made the same decision, such as Australian actor Linden Furnell, who was recently seen in Pangemonium's blockbuster musical *Next To Normal* and Wild Rice's *La Cage Aux Folles*.

Singaporean students are also claiming the spotlight: Lasalle musical-theatre graduate Seong Hui Xuan clinched Best Supporting Actress at the Lifel Theatre Awards this year for her role in the musical *Company*, directed by Hossan Leong.

Nafa graduate Ebi Shankara has had key roles in Michael Chiang's new work *High Class* and restagings of the popular play *Army Daze*.

In that vein, these arts schools have become fertile ground for Singapore directors on the lookout for fresh faces.

Wild Rice directors Ivan Heng and Glen Goi, for example, attend graduation shows at these schools to see if anyone catches their eye. Adrian and Tracie Pang, artistic directors of Pangemonium Productions, do the same.

There have been murmurings among Singapore theatre professionals about certain theatre school graduates who have been behaving like prima donnas – perhaps turning up late for rehearsals or taking their education for granted.

In response, educators from Nafa, Lasalle and NUS emphasise that their students are taught a lot about how the industry works to equip them with practical skills to enter the theatre scene.

Knight says: "We look at how they bring the lessons of the class into performance. Their professionalism is also highly looked at – because you're exposed here, you have so many professional people coming in – such as the way they take direction, their punctuality and being courteous."

"We don't want divas and we're not looking for stars. We're looking for professional artists: people who are dedicated to the craft and the art, as well as the fun."

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"Whatever things that you learn in terms of the critical aspects of theatre, it's important that there is a practice-based component."

Dr Robin Loon, an assistant professor of theatre at the National University of Singapore, on why those in its theatre studies course have to take a mandatory module in play production