

People get in on the act



Photo: ST

The Necessary Stage's company manager Melissa Lim on the M1 Singapore Fringe Festival which next year will feature, among other works, *An Enemy Of The People* (above), *Take Me Or Leave Me*, *The Mountain and Joget*, *Abang, Joget*.

by **CORRIE TAN**

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SINGAPORE - The M1 Singapore Fringe Festival turns 10 next year. And for that milestone, the small but gutsy festival will celebrate Art And The People.

The theme marks a return to its roots of sorts, given the festival's reputation for punching above its weight with its edgy programming and offbeat artists in recent years.

Organised by home-grown theatre company The Necessary Stage, a company known for its socially conscious work and strong community engagement, the festival will feature audience members alongside its artists from Jan 8 to 19.

Works in the line-up encourage interaction and play. For instance, audience members can both "adopt" and discover tiny plastic figurines scattered across the island and use them as a means to get to know someone new, in a work named *Foundin* by local artist Tan Wei Keong.

Or they can participate in a forum theatre production by The Necessary Stage's Theatre For Seniors, intervening on behalf of characters on stage. Japanese artist Takuya Murakawa will also be inviting an audience member to play an invalid on stage in the piece *Zeitgeber*.

The Necessary Stage aims to create challenging, indigenous and innovative work, and this emphasis on Singapore work is keenly felt in the festival's strong local line-up next year.

Curated by the group's artistic director Alvin Tan, its resident playwright Haresh Sharma and company manager Melissa Lim, the festival features 15 works from six countries next year.

Ms Lim, 37, says: "The Fringe is an extension of our philosophy. It's a platform for cutting-edge, thought-provoking work by emerging and established artists alike. It serves as a means for us to pose salient questions about our world today, as seen from the choices of the themes each year.

"You may or may not like what you see at the Fringe, but you can't deny it made you think or react - or even be part of creating the work."

The festival started out in 2005 as a space to embrace non-mainstream artwork across various genres with a streak of socio-political critique - as well as a place to highlight smaller home-grown and international arts groups that audiences might otherwise miss.

To date, it has presented 241 works - more than half of which have been new work and festival commissions. More than 847,000 audience members have attended in total.

In its decade of existence, the festival has presented its fair share of boundary- pushing work. Memorable pieces include The Complaints Choir, in 2008, where Finnish artists Oliver Kochta-Kalleinen and Tellervo Kalleinen worked with members of the public to perform a cheeky song comprising lyrics woven from 150 Singaporeans' favourite complaints.

While its public performances were cancelled, after the Media Development Authority said its foreign members could not perform, it lives on in a video uploaded on YouTube.

In 2010, The Substation artistic director Noor Effendy Ibrahim staged a creepy and well-received theatre triple-bill, Bilik Ahmad Berdaki, brimming with murder, incest, sadomasochism and cannibalism.

For last year's edition, Singapore artist Loo Zihan re-enacted Brother Cane, the controversial 1993 performance by Josef Ng that protested the arrests of 12 men during a 1992 anti-gay operation.

Ms Lim says of these local works: "One of the reasons we began focusing on local commissions is because we recognise the importance of our stories and the gestation time artists really need to workshop and develop a creation."

A total of nine local works are being presented this year, including a restaging of The Necessary Stage's well-received Best Of (2012), a one-woman show starring actress Siti Khalijah.

This year's theme of Art And The People is also a reflection of the growth of the community arts scene in Singapore.

Ms Lim adds: "It's also because art cannot exist within a vacuum. Art is created and inspired by people, for people to grapple with, interpret and inspire."

Here are some of the local works that will be staged and exhibited next year.

An enemy, a joget and role-playing audiences

The Fringe will open with a Mandarin adaptation of Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen's An Enemy Of The People (1882). Director Nelson Chia, of Chinese-language theatre group Nine Years Theatre, had always wanted to put on an Ibsen play. The legendary playwright is often referred to as the "father of realism" in theatre and takes on the strong themes and grey areas of social conscience in his work.

Chia, 41, says: "I re-read An Enemy Of The People and I realised I had half-forgotten the story. But when I read it again, I realised the things in it are still relevant today, and in Singapore. Everything just fell into place."

The work, written in 1882, revolves around Dr Thomas Stockmann (played by Rei Poh in Nine Years' production), who realises that the water from a new public bath under his care has been severely contaminated by industrial waste.

He is torn between what he feels is a responsibility to make sure people do not fall ill from using the bath and the fact that the repairing of the bath will be a devastating financial burden for the coastal town he is living in.

The work looks at one man's struggle to hold on to what he believes in despite everyone else's opinions to the contrary, in a country discovering the inner workings of democracy.

Chia says: "The spa is like the gold mine and lifeline of the town. I told the actors, it's almost like someone found a scandal in our Integrated Resorts project. It's big and if it goes down, it means many billions of dollars in losses for the country. And not only that, it's also bad press for the country. It's that serious."

He translated the script into Chinese and will be tweaking parts in the play, including narrators who will read out Ibsen's original stage directions. Chia has helmed critically acclaimed adaptations of other modern classics such as Twelve Angry Men (1954, staged 2013) and Who's Afraid Of Virginia Woolf? (1962, staged 2012).

An Enemy Of The People provides audiences with an intellectual challenge when it comes to dissecting a social issue.

But the physical theatre piece titled Joget, Abang, Joget (Dance, Darling, Dance) is confronting in a different sort of way. Created by Noor Effendy Ibrahim, 40, artistic director of the arts space The Substation, it promises to unearth a visceral reaction from audiences.

Self-flagellation, nudity and writhing bodies in physical pain are some of the things audiences can expect in this boundary-pushing piece. The abstract production, which draws on the juxtaposition of tenderness and violence in human relationships, will leave it to the audience to interpret and read between the lines.

Along with Effendy, the cast include Yazid Jalil, Elizabeth de Roza and Mish'aal Syed Nasar, all of whom will be left vulnerable on stage and pushed to their physical limits.

Effendy says: "I'm more interested in that very visceral, gut relationship that the audiences will have with the actors from the start, and that journey will hopefully touch on latent memories within the audiences, things they remember which they've suppressed or things they never knew that will surface."

Two of the other Singapore shows at the Fringe will challenge their audiences in different ways, involving audience interaction.

In The Mountain, a 45-minute performance by the newly formed collective The Art Of Strangers, the number of audience members to a show is capped at 15. These spectators will be invited to do simple role-playing together with 15 performers who range in age from 11 to 62.

The piece is based on a short story by Indian writer Amitav Ghosh, about a group of foreigners who arrive at a village and decide to climb a nearby mountain that the locals declare to be off-limits. Woven into this story are reflections on climate change and global warming.

But director Felipe Cervera, 29, who was born in Mexico and moved to Singapore early last year, says the piece goes beyond its storytelling arc. "We are all, at some points, strangers and locals. It's not a fixed category," he says. "If we invite audience members to play with us, it's more fun and a reflection on climate change is highlighted. The whole issue of who is the stranger and who is the local is changed when we are all in this together."

The group has tried out the piece on test audiences to get a feel for how spectators might react and to fine-tune their interactions with audience members. Cervera says: "When you do this kind of work, you have to be careful not to embarrass your spectator. You have to make sure to give him good treatment and he is taken care of. We are very mindful of this."

Another highly participative event is The Necessary Stage's Theatre For Seniors forum theatre double-bill, titled Take Me Or Leave Me!

The free performances grew out of a forum theatre workshop that the theatre company had organised for the budding actors in its senior wing.

In forum theatre, audiences can move from a passive position into an active one, as they get the chance to come on stage and replace the actors in providing possible solutions to conflicts and problems encountered on stage.

These issues are usually topical and there is a facilitator on hand to stimulate and guide audience participation and discussion of the piece.

The first show in Take Me Or Leave Me! is a study of an elderly married couple whose relationship is torn apart when the husband starts an affair with a woman from China. The second looks at the abandonment of the elderly and why some families leave their aged family members at the void deck while they are out of the house or at work.

Amateur actor Thomas Lim, 60, who plays the philandering husband, has encountered a few friends and relatives whose relationships have been curtailed by affairs. He says: "Even if the audiences cannot come up with a solution, hopefully they will bring it home when they walk out of the theatre and it will make them think about other things they can do instead of saying, 'okay, let's break up and go!'"

For details and a full list of shows and programmes, go to www.singaporefringe.com

Bond over figurines, photos, Facebook newspaper

The human connection, one that is becoming increasingly elusive in an age of technology and isolation, is something that the Singapore visual arts offerings all wrestle with at next year's M1 Singapore Fringe Festival.

FOUNDIN BY TAN WEI KEONG

Digital artist Tan Wei Keong, 29, was walking through the streets of Tokyo earlier this year when he was struck by their hectic, cosmopolitan air.

"There were so many people moving around the city, crossing the streets. They see, but they don't actually see the people around them," he says.

"There are so many skyscrapers in Tokyo, so many ads, lights and sounds to distract you.

"I wondered if there were people focusing, if they noticed each other, the presence of other human beings around them - and the small things in life."

So he thought about what would happen if he placed a tiny figurine on the sidewalk. Would anyone notice it? Or would it be lost in the thick of the human flurry?

The result was Foundin, an art installation involving several hundred plastic figurines that Tan painted by hand.

The figurines will be hidden in various spaces across Singapore for the duration of the festival, including those of Fringe partners and venues, such as Ion Orchard, the Esplanade arts centre and M1 stores, and also several public libraries and cafes.

Members of the public can go to www.foundin.org to "adopt" a figurine and leave a message for its finder.

Every message begins with "I am waiting...", and Tan says the messages have so far ranged from the practical ("I am waiting for Singapore to adopt a minimum wage") to the poetic ("I am waiting for the clouds to float past, with sunbeams shining where they break. Then words and thoughts will fly.").

As of last week, more than 900 figurines have been adopted, and Tan is working on producing at least 100 more.

Each figurine measures about 2cm tall and comes with a QR code.

Scan the code with a smartphone for a link to the adopter's message and contact information (if provided). In that sense, the adopter and finder might be able to strike up a conversation in real life - through a little plastic figurine.

Tan says: "I want to... kind of reward the finder for noticing the little things in life, the rush of realisation that, oh, there's more to life than just rushing to the next destination."

He is hoping to pursue the project beyond the festival and to possibly place more figurines in public areas, from hawker centres to bus stops.

UNSEEN BY ALECIA NEO

Artist Alecia Neo, 27, recalls speaking to a blind person in Singapore about things that sighted people might take for granted. "He said a lot of people complain that the announcements are too loud in MRT trains. But when the train is extremely noisy, they can't hear anything. People don't get that these announcements are louder to accommodate people who have disabilities. 'Normal' people do not know that these problems exist."

Her art installation, titled Unseen, attempts to bridge that gap between the sighted and unsighted worlds. She hopes that this exhibition will help to engage the public in a deeper dialogue about disabilities such as these.

The exhibition at Ion Art will consist of a series of photographs taken by blind and/or visually handicapped participants with a 35mm disposable camera, alongside video recordings of their process of making a photo book with these images and their thoughts on the process of making photographs. There will also be a Braille book of the collection of images.

Unseen grew out of Neo's art residency at the Bamboo Curtain Studio in Taiwan last year, where she spent a month creating photography workshops for selected members of the Visually-Impaired Service and Development division of the Eden Social Welfare Foundation in Taipei.

During the workshops, participants examined their own stories of coping with sightlessness and used photography as a method of "seeing".

She says: "A perfect photograph wasn't the point of the programme. It was more about thinking creatively and developing ideas conceptually. We focused a lot on self-identity and how they wished to share their world with others through their aspirations and struggles, so the work produced was intimate and personal."

Neo hopes to continue to pursue this project and to work with participants in Singapore.

Visitors to Unseen will be able to borrow a headset containing audio descriptions of the work in the gallery. While these headsets are designed for visitors who have visual handicaps, members of the public can try them on to get a sense of what it is like to be on the other side, even if it feels like the works are being over-explained.

Neo says: "I think my primary focus is really about bringing their world into our world, and the important thing is for viewers - whether they are visually handicapped or not - to understand their stories. It's really about projecting the participants' experiences onto other people."

THE FACE DAILY BY ONG KIAN PENG

Much of people's daily intake of news now comes from online sources and social media, whether through news portals, Twitter or Facebook. So why not have a newspaper created solely from Facebook posts?

Media artist Ong Kian Peng, 32, will be producing The Face Daily based on the number of likes, shares and comments that various links and articles get on Facebook. He spent about a month programming a software that combs through Facebook posts to produce the newspaper.

Each "newspaper" will consist of roughly 20 pages. About 500 copies will be printed daily during the Fringe's run. Volunteers will distribute them free to festivalgoers.

In a sense, virtual news will, quite literally, enter the realm of physical news.

Ong had been pondering how the modern reader consumes news and information as well as the problem of misinformation.

He says: "I started thinking about this problem a few years back, when I sort of fell into this situation. I happily took some news that I saw on Facebook to be real. It occurred to me that a lot of people actually do that."

He cites the many netizens who often assume that anything they read on the Internet is fact or assume that speculation is truth.

By putting The Face Daily's editorial process in the spotlight at The Substation Gallery, members of the public can sneak a peek at how various news items are selected and the sheer randomness and unreliability of this selection process - cover pages, for instance, might be chosen at random.

The editorial process is mostly automated, but visitors will get to speak to Ong, who will be frequenting the gallery, about the work.

He will send a soft copy of the paper to the printers at 6 every morning, and copies should be ready for distribution a few hours later.

He is hoping to also have a page of "readers' opinions", similar to a newspaper's forum pages, where he will compile comments and viewpoints from various unnamed Facebook users.

He says: "One of the problems we face with news these days is that newspapers somehow become old the moment they're printed.

We're just moving so fast. People want faster and newer news all the time; it becomes like infotainment in a way."

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