

life

The young take centre stage

Theatre-makers aged 13 to 25 take ownership of works at two theatre festivals this month



Lee Jian Xuan

From secondary school students to university undergraduates, young theatre-makers will rule the stage in two upcoming festivals this month.

The ninth edition of Celebrate Drama!, organised by the Singapore Drama Educators Association, runs on Friday and Saturday at The Arts House, while the second edition of the M1 Peer Pleasure Youth Theatre Festival, presented by arts company ArtsWok Collaborative in collaboration with the Esplanade, runs at the end of the month.

The two events follow the inaugural Twenty-Something Theatre Festival, created and produced by actress Tan Kheng Hua, which wrapped up last month.

The festival, which shone the spotlight on works by emerging theatre practitioners in their 20s and was spread across two weekends, drew an audience of about 5,000 in total, says Tan, 53.

She tells The Straits Times: "It was exactly what I thought it'd be - they took independent ownership of the works. I hope they felt free and supported. It's important to hear from new voices and see what they can do. It brings a shine and excitement to our industry. It is necessary for us to evolve and be energised."

The growth of such initiatives, along with the proliferation of youth groups, is a sure sign that youth-centric theatre is gaining an audience beyond the confines of drama clubs and school competitions, say drama educators and practitioners.

The head of the theatre faculty at the School of the Arts, Mr Sean Tobin, 44, who was formerly artistic director of the now-defunct M1 Youth Connection, a youth theatre festival organised by The Necessary Stage, says: "A lot has changed in the scene compared with the past. You see more theatre companies now, schools with serious theatre programmes and organisations dedicated to professional development."

Such theatre festivals serve as a much-needed "platform for young people to practise theatre without competition", says Ms Elvira Holmberg, 50, who is the president of the Singapore Drama Educators Association.

Ms Marianne Sim, 36, a Celebrate Drama! festival programmer, says: "When you're competing with someone, there's a pressure to find the 'right' answer. So this is a place where that isn't an issue. We want to give young people a chance to find their own voices."

Many extol the virtues of theatre as an art form that promotes healthy expression, enriches the imagination and inculcates skills such as empathy, listening and dialogue in young people.

Celebrate Drama!'s organisers chose the hot button topic of



Among the original works to be featured in the M1 Peer Pleasure Youth Theatre Festival is *Dancing In The Dark*, an abstract play written by Wisely Chow, 19, and directed by Aswani Aswath, 25. ST PHOTO: MARK CHEONG

diversity as its theme this year.

One of the festival's plays, *Stigma*, will examine the struggles of young people with mental illness in Singapore.

Ms Holmberg says: "It's a chance for them to use theatre to consider our differences and to see how that can be a problem and a good thing. What does it mean to celebrate racial harmony and to talk about our differences?"

Ms Ngiam Su-Lin, 42, director of ArtsWok Collaborative who is also a festival presenter for Peer Pleasure, says: "Theatre nurtures and cultivates the voices of young people. It's like a safe space to rehearse for life. In it, they can posit different scenarios and play around with responses."

In the wake of its successful

debut last year, the festival has expanded. It has telco M1 as a title sponsor and widened its age range to reach out to those between 13 and 25, from between 13 and 18 last year.

Ms Ngiam adds: "This year, we have more devised works, which is important because it's young people surfacing issues important to them, going through that process and communicating them through art."

The festival features six plays, each exploring the theme of home. Each play has also been assigned a mentor who will guide the young people through the process of staging the work.

Some are original works, such as *Dancing In The Dark*, an abstract play written by Wisely Chow, 19, an

English theatre student at the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts, and directed by the company's resident playwright, Aswani Aswath, 25. They are mentored by Buds Theatre's artistic director, Claire Devine.

Aswath says: "Claire gave us freedom and room to explore - she sits in and gives us input. We went through a one-year training programme at Buds, so we are applying what we learnt during our time there."

On top of staging plays, both festivals have brought in industry professionals and theatre practitioners to hold workshops and talks for theatregoers.

Peer Pleasure will host a dialogue and workshop on devising drama as well as an invitation-only

mentorship programme for aspiring producers and stage managers to learn from professionals at the Esplanade.

Similarly, Celebrate Drama! has enlisted big-name practitioners such as playwright Faith Ng, Teater Ekamatra's artistic director Fared Jainal and designer Nasyiah Tan to hold workshops on writing plays, devising drama and making costumes.

Ms Holmberg says: "We want to give everyone a chance to learn these skills. It's like a career fair. There will be different companies and institutions around, so the young people can walk around and see what they can do after they graduate."

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