

# life

## Emerging playwrights feeling the heat

New voices are being heard in the Singapore theatre scene, but industry players say the pressure to be prolific could take a toll on the quality of scripts



Toh Wen Li

Actor Rajkumar Thiagaras, 30, was moved to write the play *Ashes*, *Ashes* – about an Indian woman who sells her childhood home – because he felt there were not enough stories on stage that represented Singapore Indians.

“I thought that it wasn’t enough to be passive – if I wanted such content to come out, I must be part of the creation process,” says Rajkumar, who wrote the play during a class at university before letting it simmer for years.

Rajkumar – and fellow young writers Gina Chew, 24, Mark Benedict Cheong, 27, and Titus Yim, 18 – will soon have full-scale productions of their plays staged at The Wright Stuff Festival, a biennial programme by Toy Factory Productions which returns for its second edition from Thursday to Nov 3.

The festival, which received some 20 submissions this time round, offers selected emerging writers a six-month intensive scriptwriting programme.

They are among the many new voices on the Singapore theatre landscape.

Others include educator Zenda Tan, 23, whose play *Eat Duck* was staged by Checkpoint Theatre from August to last month, and actress Jo Tan, 36, whose first full-length professionally staged play, *Forked*, debuted at 2017’s M1 Singapore Fringe Festival and was presented by The Finger Players in August.

One of the rising stars in the theatre firmament is 28-year-old Thomas Lim, the playwright behind *Grandmother Tongue* (2016), about a young man’s struggle to connect with his Teochew-speaking grandmother, and *Supervision* (2018), which explores notions of surveillance through the friendship between a domestic worker and the retiree she has been hired to care for. Both plays received The Straits Times Life Theatre Awards.

Meanwhile, collectives such as the Main Tulis Group – founded by playwright Nabilah Said in 2016 – have also sprung up.

Unlike the scene a decade ago, there is no longer a dearth of new English-writing playwrights in Singapore. Writers also have more platforms to hone their craft.

Some industry players, however, worry that the pressure to constantly produce new work – fuelled in part by key performance indicators for National Arts Council funding and a packed arts calendar – might be taking a toll on the quality of scripts.

Playwright-director Chong Tze Chien of The Finger Players says: “We need to take stock and rethink how we want to produce quality works over quantity.”

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Actress and arts educator Noorli-



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**PLAYWRIGHT-DIRECTOR CHONG TZE CHIEN** of The Finger Players

nah Mohamed, artistic director for TheatreWorks’ N.O.W project, part of its Writers’ Lab programme, emphasises the importance of the development process, saying: “Production should not be the end goal.”

She hopes there will be more publications that document scripts, as well as more ways to feature new writing – for instance through different types of staged readings, followed by post-reading conversations.

Mounting a full-scale play, after



ST PHOTOS: DESMOND WEE, KEVIN LIM

all, is an expensive undertaking, and can range from five- to six-figure sums, depending on the production.

Chong adds: “We forget many of these international plays have gone through a lot of reiterations on their home turf before they mature. When (British director) Simon McBurney’s *Shun-kin* was first staged, it wasn’t successful. But the *Shun-kin* we saw a couple of years back (at the Esplanade) was probably the fifth or eighth staging.”

Some young playwrights say they do feel the pressure to produce.

Playwright Ellison Yuyang Tan, 30, bristles under “the expectation of having to be prolific to remain relevant, and the unrealistic expectation that a full-length play can be – or should be – churned out within a year or less.”

The co-artistic director of The Finger Players adds: “I hear people lament how plays these days don’t seem to hold the same magic as plays of the past.”

Young playwrights whose plays will be staged at The Wright Stuff Festival, by Toy Factory Productions, include (above from left) Gina Chew, Titus Yim, Rajkumar Thiagaras and Mark Benedict Cheong. Educator Zenda Tan (left) had her play *Eat Duck* staged by Checkpoint Theatre last month.

real follow-up.”

Some observers have described the crop of plays by the new generation of writers as being more domestic and inward-facing, and not as deeply engaged with current affairs.

Centre 42’s executive director and founding board member Casey Lim says: “Maybe we are too comfortable. When we are too comfortable, we keep thinking about ourselves.”

Nabilah, however, says: “Even if there is such a trend, I don’t think this is something you can blame on an entire generation.”

“We are living in a social media generation and it’s only natural that you write about this kind of world. But I do feel there is already a shift towards young people becoming more aware of issues in the world, like climate change.”

Toy Factory Productions chief artistic director Goh Boon Teck feels young writers are more risk-averse these days, adding that works used to be more diverse.

“We had William Teo staging shows in a warehouse, there were experimental, site-specific plays in Fort Canning, and Action Theatre created a lot of original musicals, like *Chang & Eng* (1997),” he said.

**FINE-TUNING WORKS THROUGH INCUBATION AND A FULL STAGING** continued on D2

# Fine-tuning works through incubation and a full staging

## FROM D1

Goh added: "In the past, everybody had their day job and this was just a part-time hobby. When this is not your bread and butter, you might be more creative. Now people are so concerned about survival. Our scene might be more professional, but it might not be more creative."

There have been more platforms for emerging writers to hone their craft in recent years, with several new mentorship programmes that have sprung up in recent years.

At the moment, avenues for emerging writers range from the long-running 24-Hour Playwriting Competition by TheatreWorks' Writers Lab, to other programmes and platforms by theatre companies such as The Necessary Stage, Toy Factory Productions, The Finger Players and Checkpoint Theatre.

One avenue for emerging playwrights to work on their scripts – sometimes for years – without the pressure of production is to work with Centre 42 in Waterloo Street. Founded in 2014, it gives writers a platform to "incubate" their works and test them on audiences during closed-door readings or public events such as Late Night Texting, which features performances of new text-based works by independent theatremakers. But Centre 42's Lim suggests the Late Night Texting series might be on its last legs, due to funding constraints.

Young playwrights are generally upbeat about the opportunities that await them.

Thomas Lim, a former drama educator who was last year appointed artistic director for youth and education at Wild Rice, has written the book for the upcoming musical Peter Pan In Serangoon

Gardens. He also has many more plays under his belt besides the two – Grandmother Tongue and Supervision – which were professionally staged.

"I think the best thing for any playwright is when you have an opportunity for a staging," says Lim, who studied applied drama and psychology at Singapore Polytechnic.

"I learn the most when something comes to life. I sit in the audience and listen to the audience when they laugh, when they lean forward, when they are restless. Staged readings are fantastic. And getting a full staging is one of the most important milestones for a playwright."

Actress Jo Tan, who fine-tuned Forked – a one-woman show about a Singaporean student's identity crisis in a foreign land – during The Finger Players' Watch This Space development programme, says her decision to channel more energy into writing was partly due to a botched dermatological procedure for acne scars, which kept her from work and social activities for months.

She is now writing SingTheatre's sequel to A Singaporean In Paris, slated for next year. She has also written a new play called King, an exploration of what it means to be female in Singapore, and a work-in-development performance about beauty that will be staged by Checkpoint Theatre in December.

"I like telling stories that I feel need to be told by a whole cast of diverse voices: stories that can be added to, deepened and evolved by the directorial, design and rehearsal process, with the myriad of fantastic artists in Singapore that I'm always grateful for opportunities to work with"

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Playwright Thomas Lim, 28, who has Grandmother Tongue and Supervision under his belt, says he learns a lot from his plays when he sits in the audience during a staging and listens to the audience's responses.

## By fledgling playwrights

### ASHES, ASHES

**What:** This play by actor Rajkumar Thiagaras, 30, tells the story of an Indian woman who has to sell her childhood home.

It is being staged as part of Toy Factory Productions' The Wright Stuff Festival, which runs from Thursday to Nov 3 and also features Mark Benedict Cheong's Random Access Memory, Titus Yim's The Puppet King and Gina Chew's Permanence – restaged after premiering at the biennial festival in 2017.

**Where:** Nafa Studio Theatre, Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts Campus 3, 151 Bencoolen Street  
**When:** Oct 17 to 20, 3 and 8pm.  
**Admission:** \$28 at eventbrite.sg  
**Info:** For more information, go to [tinyurl.com/twsf2019](http://tinyurl.com/twsf2019)

### RUMAH DAYAK

**What:** A night-time safehouse for troubled youths and delinquents of the Malay community forms the backdrop to this play by Nessa Anwar, 29. "I wanted to see mat and minah (Malay youths) on stage," says Anwar, adding that much of the dialogue is in street jargon.

It is produced by the Rupa Co Lab collective. Performed in Malay and English with surtitles.  
**Where:** Malay Heritage Centre, 85 Sultan Gate  
**When:** Nov 21 to 24; 8pm (Nov 21 to 23) and 3pm (Nov 23 and 24)  
**ADMISSION:** \$27 (early-bird offer ends on Oct 26), \$32 (regular price) at [rumahdayak.docket.sg](http://rumahdayak.docket.sg)  
**Info:** [rupacolab@gmail.com](mailto:rupacolab@gmail.com)

### A SHADOW OR A FRIEND

**What:** This semi-verbatim play about trauma and truth in the age of technology and the search for humanity through it all is written by actor-playwright Jo Tan, 36.

Her first full-length play Forked debuted at 2017's M1 Singapore Fringe Festival and was presented by The Finger Players



(From left) Grace Lee Khoo and Chanel Ariel Chan in playwright Gina Chew's Permanence. ST PHOTO: DESMOND WEE

this year. Tan, who is recovering from a botched dermatological procedure for her acne scars, drew on her personal experiences while working on A Shadow Or A Friend.

Her play is part of Checkpoint Theatre's Works In Development series, which features Myle Yan Tay's How The Millenials Killed The X, Where X Has Yet To Be Defined on Dec 6.

**Where:** Play Den @ The Arts House, 1 Old Parliament Lane  
**When:** Dec 7, 8pm

**Admission:** Pay as you wish  
**Info:** [contact@checkpoint-theatre.org](mailto:contact@checkpoint-theatre.org)

### FINAL CALL

**What:** This absurdist play by civil servant Timothy Yam, 31, is set in an airport and features a man who is searching desperately for his boarding gate. It is being staged as one of three readings of new plays by the TheatreWorks Writers' Lab. The other two are Malavika by

Hemang Yadav (Nov 30, 4pm) and Potholes by Wong Yunjie (Dec 1, 4pm)

**Where:** Home of TheatreWorks, 72-13 Mohamed Sultan Road  
**When:** Dec 1, 11am  
**Admission:** By donation  
**Info:** E-mail [writerslab@theatreworks.org.sg](mailto:writerslab@theatreworks.org.sg)

### THE HAWKER

**What:** The Second Breakfast Company's The Hawker is about nine people at a hawker centre on its last day before it closes for good. It is written by 27-year-old senior media analyst Aslam Shah and premiered at the Asian Youth Theatre Festival last year.

**Where:** Aliwal Arts Centre, Multi-purpose Hall, 28 Aliwal Street  
**When:** Nov 13 to 17, 8pm, also 3pm on Nov 16 and 17  
**Admission:** From \$25.06 at [bit.ly/2Oqluo1](http://bit.ly/2Oqluo1)  
**Info:** For more information, go to [thehawker.eventbrite.sg](http://thehawker.eventbrite.sg)