

Going beyond just black and white

It is tempting to say Max Tan sees the world in black and white – the fashion designer has made his name on abstract, monochromatic womenswear.

Using colour in theatre productions puts him – and his eponymous label founded in 2010 – out of his comfort zone. But the 35-year-old welcomes the challenge.

He started designing for theatre in 2015, on the invitation of veteran theatre-maker Goh Boon Teck to dress a production called *Upstage* by Toy Factory Productions.

The show, performed at the Esplanade, delved into the history of Mandarin theatre in Singapore and was presented with black-and-white multimedia projections.

“It was quite stylistic in a way – a modern take on history,” says Tan, who was in his element designing black-and-white costumes that were “transformative” and “formless”.

“I think Boon Teck thought I would be a good fit for the show.”

That kick-started a journey into theatre for the diploma graduate of Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (Nafa), who was a stylist and costume designer with Mediacorp before starting his fashion label.

To date, he has worked with local theatre companies including Drama Box, *The Necessary Stage*, *Finger Players*, *Ground Zero* and *Toy Factory*, which gave him his first gig.

But not all the shows he designs for are as good a fit as *Upstage*. He finds “naturalistic” plays the hardest – shows that feature the mundane and take place in everyday settings such as *Housing Board flats*.

For *Underclass* by *The Necessary Stage* last year, it was a challenge dressing characters who were politicians and “your normal heartland aunties”.

“Sometimes, I can’t bring in my DNA at all,” says Tan, who describes his label as “pretty

editorial, with kind of a show factor”.

Such shows require more in-depth research into the character to flesh out finer details. “You need to understand the psyche of this character – where does she go for breakfast? Does she have a stain because she’s rushing off?”

“With fashion, it’s always about designing for a specific muse or customer or to project a certain kind of brand language. But with theatre, we go into characterisation.”

Other considerations include thinking about fabrics that will work during movement. He opted for pleated fabrics for a movement piece in Drama Box’s ongoing show *Tanah Air*.

Then, there are the productions that demand colour. Tan, who designed the costumes for the National Day Parade in 2017, had his work cut out for him designing 30 colourful costumes for an upcoming Bicentennial show.

The performance next month, titled *Infinite Island*, will involve Toy Factory and the Singapore Chinese Orchestra.

Next year, he will design costumes for two productions commissioned by the Singapore International Festival of Arts.

If the work seems endless, Tan juggles the productions on top of his label and school – he recently re-enrolled in Nafa to get his degree in fashion design. He sees theatre as an additional creative outlet on top of an already creative pursuit.

“I enjoy not having to think about the commercial aspect, so when an interesting project comes along, I want to take it on,” he says.

“I think a lot of people have the misconception that fashion designers can do only a certain kind of style. I think it’s made worse when I have my own label and the style is distinct.

“But I’m glad and grateful I’m given the chance to show different sides of what I can do, for theatre.”



PHOTOS:
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PHOTOGRAPHY



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DESIGNER MAX TAN (top), on designing for *The Necessary Stage*’s *Underclass*, starring Goh Guat Kian (above)

Tips on designing for theatre

1

The first rule of designing for theatre: Read the script. Talk to the director. Also, work closely with the set designer and lighting designer – they know best how to flatter your actor, says vice-dean of fashion studies at Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts Anthony Tan.

2

Good costume design pulls focus, says designer Leonard Choo. “If in a scene, you’re supposed to pull focus to someone, the clothing should do that. For example, if the lead is in black and there’s a woman in a yellow floral dress in the back – that is just bad costume design.”

3

Research your character. “You must love theatre in the first place. There must be passion and knowledge. A lot of things you do are not about you – it’s about the character, the whole play. You have to study them,” says designer Frederick Lee.