

CAMPUSES GET CREATIVE

Universities here have packed arts calendars to spotlight student talents and let them work with international artists



Lisabel Ting
 The line-up of artists is impressive. There are international names such as Japanese choreographer Akiko Kitamura and Taiwan's Horse Dance Theatre, as well as prominent local professionals such as multimedia artist Brian Gothong Tan and The T'ang Quartet.

Spanning dance, film, theatre and classical music, next month's NUS Arts Festival would give any festival by a professional arts institution a run for its money. Only its name belies the fact that it is organised by the National University of Singapore (NUS) and that most of the events take place at its Kent Ridge campus in Clementi.

The arts is thriving in universities here, with the three major tertiary institutions - NUS, the Singapore Management University (SMU) and Nanyang Technological University (NTU) - branding packed arts calendars.

These year-round arts programmes are accompanied by serious spending, largely from university coffers.

For example, the 2½-week long NUS Arts Festival, which opens on March 14, cost the university a six-figure sum, a budget comparable to that of festivals mounted by professional theatre companies here, such as the M1 Singapore Fringe Festival.

The universities say they are investing in the arts to give students an outlet for their talent and engage them intellectually and creatively. However, each institution takes a markedly different approach to arts programming.

NUS, for one, pulls out all the stops for its annual arts festival. This year's is the ninth edition and it offers a wide range of events from collaborations between professionals and students to free film screenings and shows by the university's performing arts groups.

Ticket prices are relatively affordable compared to shows at downtown arts venues - a top-tier ticket

for acts such as opening show *Overdrive* is \$20. The show is choreographed by Kitamura, Israel's Idan Cohen and Horse Dance Theatre and features the NUS Dancers and the home-grown T.H.E. Second Company.

Ms Christine Khor, director of the university's Centre For The Arts, says the festival aims to engage students intellectually as well as expose them to high standards of artistry.

"We give our students a process where they can learn from their artistic directors and international practitioners," she says.

The high standard of programming means that out of 23 student groups under the centre's purview, only 11 are putting up shows this year. She adds: "The productions have to be very good because we do have world-class venues and we don't want them wasted."

The University Cultural Centre's hall can seat over 1,700 people, while its theatre seats up to 450. The hall has high-tech features such as 65 fly linesets - comparable to the 47 at the Drama Centre and 103 at the Esplanade - which allow for multiple props to be lowered onto the stage.

Home to the Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music, the country's only conservatory offering degree-level classical music programmes, the university also boasts a 600-seater concert hall shaped like a rectangular shoebox, with an adjustable roof to change the acoustics of the venue.

Aside from the annual festival, the university also hosts the ExxonMobil Campus Concerts series, sponsored by the oil and gas company, which puts up about 20 free shows a year.

There is also the NUS Museum, a 10,000 sq ft facility at Kent Ridge which houses the university's collection of more than 7,000 artefacts and artworks.

While the NUS has consolidated the bulk of its arts events in one festival, the SMU has headed in the other direction, spending about a quarter of a million dollars on year-round arts programmes. Since 2011, the university has decided to forgo a single festival for performances spread throughout the academic semesters.

Mr Jimmy Ye, head of arts and student life events at SMU, says its programming is focused on putting students in the spotlight and having students work closely with arts practitioners who can advise them artistically.

SMU's arts festival started as a one-day affair in 2005 and grew into a three-week season in 2010. However, its rapid growth also ran up against the university's compact size and downtown location at Stamford Road.

Mr Ye says: "When we built it up to a three-week event, we had a severe venue crunch. We didn't have

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NUS Chinese Dance group presenting *Mirror.Moon* at last year's NUS Arts Fest. PHOTO: NUS CENTRE FOR THE ARTS

the money to hire external venues and we didn't have enough internal venues. All the groups were fighting for Friday, Saturday or Sunday slots."

He says the SMU organisers "decided to think out of the box" and canned the idea of a single, consolidated arts festival. Now, it has concerts from its 26 performing arts groups spread out over the two semesters.

He adds that the programmes place "the students at the forefront of all the performances".

SMU's performing arts groups still work with external artists. In 2009, actor Sebastian Tan, best known as Broadway Beng for helming the long-running eponymous revue, directed a musical for the university. Singapore Chinese Orchestra's resident conductor Quek Ling Kiong also lends his baton to

SMU's Chinese orchestra group. The NTU's arts programming is also very student-driven. Its performing arts shows are focused more on pop culture, with accessibility being the buzzword to engage its students.

Its annual ongoing Nanyang Arts Festival, which opened on Feb 6 and runs till March 13 at the Jurong campus, is largely organised by the university's Cultural Activities Club and is now in its 23rd year.

Club president Joel Lim, 22, says of the festival: "It is not run from the top down, but instead, from the bottom up. One advantage of this is that ideas can be shared among ourselves more easily, without having to go all the way up."

The club helps to manage concerts for NTU's 22 performing arts groups. For the festival, it organised programmes such as film appreciation and print-making workshops. The club receives between \$20,000 and \$30,000 a year from the university to run all its programmes.

On the emphasis on accessibility - the festival also includes busking performances and terrarium-making workshops - Mr Tan Dian Feng, 22, vice-president of events management at the club says: "Not everyone has a liking for the arts and we need something to spark off that interest."

In the area of the visual arts, the university has a major off-site initiative, the Centre for Contemporary Art (CCA) at the Gillman Barracks gallery cluster off Alexandra Road. The centre, developed with support from the Economic Development Board, opened in October last year. It is an art and research hub which also holds exhibitions and offers residencies to international artists.

The centre's director, Professor Ute Meta Bauer, says: "Education is at the core of NTU-CCA's programme. Through our programme of exhibitions, public events, residencies and research, we would like to engage NTU students with the complexities of cultural production in a global world."

Aside from the centre, the university also has a School of Art, Design and Media, offering degree-level visual arts courses. It houses two 200 sq m galleries that hold curated exhibitions of works by local and foreign artists.

Professor Vibeke Sorensen, chair of the school, says: "The gallery's exhibitions intend to provide opportunities for primary access to works of art, to stimulate discussions among artists, scholars and students. It also aims to stimulate curiosity for art, design and media in students, faculty, academic and professional colleagues as well as the public."

Needless to say, arts-loving undergraduates have never had it so good. Being in SMU has given accountancy student Seah Yi Ru, 20, president of the university's Chinese orchestra, the chance to be exposed to the arts as both a performer and an audience member.

She says: "Being in the orchestra has taught me that I need to be disciplined to practise and it also helps us build teamwork as we have to support each other in terms of music and organisation."

She watches the concerts of other performing arts groups regularly and is glad for the exposure. "There's a large variety of art forms, including theatre, photography and dance, and for every art form, there are a number of groups doing it so the scene is very diverse," she adds.

"I think the people here are very creative because we're always encouraged to come up with new ideas and to stand out from the rest."

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Clockwise from above: Singers at the Nanyang Arts Showcase of NTU on Feb 13 this year; *Anveshana III - The Search for Malanda*, an Indian dance presented at the NUS Arts Festival 2011; wo(men) by Faith Ng presented by Checkpoint Theatre and NUS Stage at the NUS Arts Festival 2010; and *Beyond* (top left), staged last year by Indancity, a contemporary dance group at SMU. PHOTOS: SINGAPORE MANAGEMENT UNIVERSITY, NUS CENTRE FOR THE ARTS, CAC PUBLICATION COMMITTEE

