

IN RETROSPECT

Looking back

The undoubted success of an Alfian Sa'at festival in July prompts the question: Who could be next?

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SINGAPORE – “One playwright. Two directors. Four plays, 1,500+++ audience members.” So ran the press release which accurately summed up Alfian Sa'at: In The Spotlight, the festival by W!ld Rice that featured the works of Alfian in July.

In some ways, this festival can be seen as pivotal. Essentially, there was one new play (Cook A Pot Of Curry) and three revivals (Dreamp!ay: Asian Boys Vol 1, The Optic Trilogy and Cooling Off Day). This event, which

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Ong Keng Sen

ran from July 3 to 20, achieved 97 per cent attendance, and sold out 44 of 54 ticketed performances.

What contributed to its success? Undoubtedly concentration: All four plays took place in one campus (sometimes concurrently), and were written by one playwright. The diversity of the programming also helped: Complementing the performances were free forums, workshops and feedback sessions where actors engaged audiences in post-play discussions. The audiences were mixed, with many young students of LASALLE College Of The Arts turning up.

But perhaps the junior college lecturer I spoke to said it best: “Alfian is an icon. He is part of the canon.”

WHO'S NEXT?

Ivan Heng, Artistic Director of W!ld Rice, revealed that the festival was held in place of the regular festivals of Singaporean plays which featured in 2006, 2008 and 2009. In the last decade, W!ld Rice has done more than any other theatre company to introduce new Singapore works.

While banking on one dramatist, his new play and three revivals, was risky; the theatre company was shrewd to ride on Alfian's appeal. Of his generation, Alfian, at 36, is the most versatile exploiter of the topical. He has the knack of taking on the most current issues and connecting well with his audiences.

Other established companies like TheatreWorks and The Necessary Stage (TNS) have continued to produce new works, as have newer companies. They have seasons in which new pieces are staged every few months. However, W!ld Rice is the only company that invests in festivals.

Festivals work, because they offer a longer run, in this case, a daily dose of plays to choose from for a period of 18 days. Thus, Alfian Sa'at/W!ld Rice becomes the object of close scrutiny.

W!ld Rice also stated in a press release: “Inspired by the success of the festival, the leading theatre company is exploring the possibility of shining the spotlight on other leading Singaporean playwrights.”

This is very promising. But who's next?

Playwrights in Singapore who are not resident playwrights are generally disadvantaged: With exceptions, their



It helps that Alfian Sa'at is one of his generation's most versatile playwrights.



Ivan Heng in *Emily Of Emerald Hill*. PHOTO: WILD RICE

plays do not get revived except for the popular ones like *Emily Of Emerald Hill* or *Army Daze*.

There is no dearth of material: Many playwrights such as Tan Tarn How, Ovidia Yu, Chong and Desmond Sim, Michael Chiang, Eleanor Wong, Kuo Pao Kun and Stella Kon have had their works published.

NEW RETRO

A retrospective of canonical plays from the '60s to 2000 could work. As TheatreWorks' Ong Ken Sen once said: "You always need to know the foundation. You may reject it ... but it's (still) important to know what it is (before) you can reject it, move on and explore new things. The new theatre becomes stronger because you know the old theatre."

A less-ambitious alternative is to stage a festival based on the works of a single dramatist, like Wild Rice did with Alfian.

Now that many plays by the younger generation have been published, it is a lot easier to see the big picture. Any one of the aforementioned playwrights could easily have a festival devoted to them. But who will do it?

Again, it's important to note whether a playwright is a resident in a company — like Alfian is at Wild Rice — or if they have their own company, such as Haresh Sharma (TNS), Goh Boon Teck (Toy Factory) or Natalie Henedige (Cake), to name but three. It's easy for companies to stage festivals of their own plays.

But those who aren't resident playwrights cannot hope for such hosting. Take Desmond Sim, whose benefactor

was Ekachai Uekrongtham of Action Theatre. Ever since Ekachai focussed on film, Sim has not had a play, old or new, performed in the last few years.

Non-resident playwrights are the least privileged. Apart from her iconic *Emily Of Emerald Hill*, for example, Stella Kon had to struggle for recognition. Her other merits are not well known. For instance, she won prizes in playwriting competitions in 1977, 1982 and 1983. Earlier this year, the Peranakan Museum put up an exhibi-

tion that centred around Emily and Singapore theatre in English.

With the exception of one done by TheatreWorks and Actors Studio, I, too, have produced all my plays with support from the National University of Singapore Society, which is not a bona fide theatre company.

Playwrights need support now.

But what will these retrospectives do? First, it is worth repeating what Ong wrote, that "the new theatre becomes stronger because of the old the-

atre". Staging these plays should not be seen as a historic act but an intrinsic one, to determine their currency.

If they can stand the test of time, then the restagings would have contributed to the process of canon-construction, which is the second significant role of retrospectives. Thirdly, it may advance the idea of a National Theatre both as concept and a physical space.

For the full story, visit <http://tdy.sg/todayarts>.



DID YOU KNOW?

Robert Yeo teaches Creative Writing at SMU. He has written several plays, including *Changi*, *Are You There Singapore*, *Second Chance* and *One Year Back Home*, as well as a novel (*The Adventures Of Holden Heng*) and several books of poetry. In 1991, he was awarded the Public Service Medal for the promotion of drama.