

11TH LIFE! THEATRE AWARDS

PRESENTED BY F&N SEASONS



Three song-and-dance extravaganzas lead the nominations this year



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arts correspondent

Last year was the year of the musical. From stormy historical dramas to supernatural tales to men doing a striptease, these slick all-singing, all-dancing packages made a splash on the local stage.

Of the six that were staged last year, five were original Singaporean ones with scripts and scores by home-grown artists.

They come with a level of ambition and scale, with elaborate sets and feisty casts.

These include *December Rains*, a musical written by local xinyao composer Liang Wern Fook and directed by Toy Factory Productions' Goh Boon Teck.

A turbulent love story set in 1950s to 1980s Singapore, it starred local singer Kit Chan in a comeback musical role as the lead, an idealistic school-girl-turned-embittered mother.

Venturing to more supernatural territory was *The Theatre Practice's Liao Zhai Rocks!*, which married rock music with a retelling of a classic Chinese ghost story. It was written by Wu Xi and directed by him as well as Kuo Jian Hong.

Then there was *The Full Monty*, the swaggeringly confident debut production by the newly formed Pandemonium! Productions, started by husband-and-wife duo Adrian and Tracie Pang.

The heart-warming comedy about a gang of unemployed men who form a striptease act was a surprise hit and was easily one of the most enjoyable nights out at the theatre last year.

So it comes as no surprise that these are the three most-nominated productions in this year's Life! Theatre Awards, an annual event that honours the best theatre professionals in Singapore today.



F&N Seasons, a range of fruit teas and Asian drinks by food and beverage company Fraser & Neave, has returned as a sponsor this year for the second time. The awards ceremony, an invitation-only luncheon event, will be held at the

St Regis hotel on April 4. The awards are judged by a panel comprising theatre academic Dr K.K. Seet, online arts journal *The Flying Inkpot* co-editor Matthew Lyon, Lianhe Zaobao and *The Straits Times* arts reviewers Chew Boon Leong and Adeline Chia, as well as a new addition to the team, Dr Robin Loon, who is a theatre academic and a dramaturg.

Both *December Rains* and *Liao Zhai Rocks!* garnered seven nominations each, including the top awards of Production Of The Year and Best Director. *The Full Monty* received six nominations, including three acting nominations for Adrian Pang, Andy Hockley and Denise Tan.

To recognise the contributions and excellence of the musical theatre scene last year, the judges have introduced a new category to the awards this year: Best Original Score.

The nominees for that category are: *December Rains*, *Liao Zhai Rocks!*, the Wild Rice pantomime *Cinderel-Lah!*, the Dick Lee musical *Fried Rice Paradise* and the Buddhist extravaganza by Benny Wong and Goh Boon Teck, *Maha Moggallana*.

Dr Seet says that musicals have always been the most popular genre in local theatre. "Singapore theatre companies are becoming savvier in vanderine to this target market by siphoning off the audience who will unhesitatingly fork out for a musical import such as *Les Miserables* or *Phantom Of The Opera*."

He adds that these commercial productions may have been a response to the more financially competitive times, but "what is laudable in the current spate of musicals is the use of home-grown talents: Adrian Pang, Kit Chan, Taufik Batisah, Joanna Dong, George Chan and Denise Tan."

"You don't need a Laura Fygi or Fei Xiang to helm the production in order to bring in the crowds or to raise the standard."

December Rains director Goh, 39, says he has always been interested in Mandarin musicals since staging *I Have A Date With Spring* in 1995.

"I love using beautiful music to tell a story and I like the impact it has, which resonates in you for a



Sing it out: *December Rains* (above), *Liao Zhai Rocks!* (below left) and *The Full Monty* (below right) were three of the musicals that rocked the local theatre scene last year. PHOTOS: TOY FACTORY PRODUCTIONS, THE THEATRE PRACTICE, PANGDEMONIUM! PRODUCTIONS

Take a bow, musicals



very long time." His next production is 881 - The Musical, the stage version of Royston Tan's hit getai film of the same title. It will be on at the Esplanade Theatre next month.

Pandemonium!'s founder Adrian Pang was a bit less restrained in his reaction. He received news of the nomination in the middle of rehearsing for the recently concluded run of *Closer*. He joked: "My immediate reaction was to tear off all my clothes and go running down the street. No one would bat an eyelid because our office is on Joo Chiat Road and the locals are used to that kind of thing."

On a more serious note, he said: "The Full Monty was a real labour of love for us all, so to be given the nod for our debut production is very special indeed." Indeed, even if these commercial productions lead the pack, there are smaller, more intimate contenders in the nomination list this year, reflecting the diversity in the local theatre scene.

This includes Best Production nominee *A Cage Goes In Search Of A Bird*, which ran for a weekend in June last year at Lasalle College of the Arts. The fragmented, existentialist play about a group of office drones is also in the running for Best Ensemble for a Group Of People, comprising Nelson Chia, Oliver Chong, Koh Wan Ching and Timothy Nga.

The black box show *Model Citizens* by The Neces-

sary Stage scored five nominations this year: Production Of The Year, Best Director, Best Script and two Best Actress nominations.

The Haresh Sharma play, directed by Alvin Tan, revolves around three women, a Chinese-speaking MP's wife, a Peranakan woman whose son commits suicide and an Indonesian maid. Both Karen Tan and Siti Khalijah are nominated for Best Actress.

Then there is Teater Ekamatra's *Charged*, an army play about race relations, which received four nominations: Best Original Script for Chong Tze Chien, Best Supporting Actor for Yazid Jalil and two Best Supporting Actress nominations for Serene Chen and Aidli Alin Mosbit.

Besides the familiar theatre stalwarts, the list also introduces some fresh, young faces to the theatre scene. Young actor Yazid, 22, who played the cocksure, aggressive Malay soldier in *Charged*, is nominated for Best Supporting Actor.

First-time playwright Faith Ng, 23, who is an English literature and theatre studies student at the National University of Singapore, is nominated for her play *women*, a sensitive family drama about three generations of women.

Then there is relative newcomer Adrian Tan, 26, who designed the innovative lighting for *A Cage Goes In Search Of A Bird*, creating a whimsical universe of swinging lamps and low-hanging bulbs.

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And finally, there are the veterans in other industries who are venturing into theatre for the first time. Songwriting duo Xiaohan and Eric Ng are stalwarts in the Mandopop scene, but worked on their first musical, *Liao Zhai Rocks!*, together.

Lyricist Xiaohan, 37, who has written songs for singers such as Sandy Lam, Tanya Chua and Jaycee Chan, penned 22 songs for the Mandarin musical.

She says writing it was a gruelling experience, having to balance the radio-friendly Western rock score by Ng and the literary Chinese language of the script. "I was supposed to be the person who glued the two together," she says. "I spent my holiday in Europe holed up in a tiny room near a heater, writing ghost story songs."

Her trick? To insert songs where characters were speaking and emoting, rather than narrating. Ng, 35, said he was "honoured" to be nominated, and enjoyed writing for the "alternating musical". "I was given a lot of space to experiment, and it's always good to try new things."

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CONTEST

Three lucky readers will each win two bottles of wine if they answer the following question correctly.

Question: Name the new category that is introduced in this year's Life! Theatre Awards.

Send your entry to stpromo@sph.com.sg by Monday. Please include your name, NRIC and contact number in your e-mail.

NEW CATEGORY: BEST ORIGINAL SCORE

To recognise the quality and variety of the musical theatre offerings last year, the judges introduced a new category called Best Original Score. The nominees are:



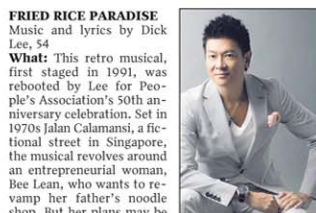
DECEMBER RAINS
Music and lyrics by Liang Wern Fook (standing), 46, and Jimmy Ye, in his 40s

What: First staged in 1996 to full houses, this is considered the first home-grown Mandarin musical. Creative team Liang and Ye revamped this musical, which is about a troubled love triangle that spans 1950s to 1980s Singapore. They added three new songs to the 12 in the score, rearranged the music and beefed up the lyrics. Critics enjoyed its sensuous and soaring music, especially its earworm of a theme song, *Please Let Him Know*.



CINDEREL-LAH!

Music and lyrics by Selena Tan (foreground), 39, and Elaine Chan, 40
What: This fairy tale with a Singaporean twist was a family-friendly romp that was full of infectious good cheer and heartfelt tunes. A reworked version of Wild Rice's 2002 pantomime, the production featured 13 revamped and rearranged songs.



FRIED RICE PARADISE
Music and lyrics by Dick Lee, 54
What: This retro musical, first staged in 1991, was rebooted by Lee for People's Association's 50th anniversary celebration. Set in 1970s Jalan Calamansi, a fictional street in Singapore, the musical revolves around an entrepreneurial woman, Bee Lean, who wants to re-vamp her father's noodle shop. But her plans may be foiled by a sleazy nightclub owner.

Lee creates an easy-on-the-ear score which spans a variety of genres, from boogie tunes to romantic ballads, not to mention the famously catchy title track.



MAHA MOGGALLANA

Music and lyrics by Goh Boon Teck (above), 38, and Benny Wong (left), 42
What: A classic Buddhist tale about a devout son who goes into hell to save his mother is given the musical treatment for a Vesak Day production commissioned by the Golden Pagoda Buddhist Temple. The lush music was by songwriter and producer Wong, who has scored for TV shows such as *Your Hand In Mine*. For the musical, he wrote, arranged and produced an 18-song soundtrack filled with New Age, Tibetan-influenced world music.

THE NOMINEES

PRODUCTION OF THE YEAR

- *December Rains*
- *Model Citizens*
- *A Cage Goes In Search Of A Bird*
- *The Full Monty*
- *Liao Zhai Rocks!*

BEST DIRECTOR

- Alvin Tan (*Model Citizens*)
- Christina Sergeant (*Metamorphoses*)
- Tracie Pang (*The Full Monty*)
- Kuo Jian Hong and Wu Xi (*Liao Zhai Rocks!*)
- Goh Boon Teck (*December Rains*)

BEST ORIGINAL SCRIPT

- *Charged* by Chong Tze Chien
- *Model Citizens* by Haresh Sharma
- *Liao Zhai Rocks!* by Wu Xi
- *White Soliloquy* by Goh Boon Teck
- *women* by Faith Ng

BEST ACTOR

- Adrian Pang (*The Full Monty*)
- Oliver Chong (*Invisibility/Breathing*)
- Subin Subaiah (*Rafta, Rafta*)
- Nelson Chia (*White Soliloquy*)
- Jonathan Lim (*Chestnuts 3D: Fried Monty Aka Nightmare On Glee Street*)

BEST ACTRESS

- Margaret Chan (*Emily Of Emerald Hill*)
- Daisy Irani (*Rafta, Rafta*)
- Neo Swee Lin (*women*)
- Karen Tan (*Model Citizens*)
- Siti Khalijah (*Model Citizens*)

BEST SUPPORTING ACTOR

- Yazid Jalil (*Charged*)
- Andy Hockley (*The Full Monty*)
- Jeffrey Low (*December Rains*)
- Xu Bin (*Liao Zhai Rocks!*)

BEST SUPPORTING ACTRESS

- Denise Tan (*The Full Monty*)
- Lok Meng Chue (*women*)
- Aidli Alin Mosbit (*Charged*)
- Serene Chen (*Charged*)
- Judee Tan (*Chestnuts 3D*)

BEST ENSEMBLE

- Jo Kukathas, Lim Kay Siu, Najib Soiman, Neo Swee Lin, Jean Ng, Noorlinah Mohamed, Nora Samosir, Peter Sau, Siti Khalijah and Karen Tan (*The Performance* by Cake Theatrical Productions)
- Nelson Chia, Oliver Chong, Koh Wan Ching and Timothy Nga (*A Cage Goes In Search Of A Bird* by A Group Of People)
- Najib Soiman, Neo Swee Lin, Rodney Oliveira, Siti Khalijah and Ian Tan (*Those Who Can't, Teach by The Necessary Stage*)
- Tay Kong Hui, Goh Seek Ai, Doreen Toh and Tan Beng Tian (*The Coffin Is Too Big For The Hole* by Drama Box)

HOLE BY DRAMA BOX

- Rei Poh, Patricia Toh, Zachary Ho, Edith Podesta, Renee Chua and Serene Pang (*Home Boxes* by Paper Monkey Theatre)

BEST SET DESIGN

- Wong Chee Wai (*women*)
- Eucien Chia (*December Rains*)
- Ken-hin Teo (*Boeing Boeing*)
- Philip Engleheart (*The Full Monty*)
- Lim Wei Ling (*suitCASES*)

BEST COSTUME DESIGN

- Moe Kassim (*Liao Zhai Rocks!*)
- Lai Chan (*December Rains*)
- Tube Gallery (*Maha Moggallana*)
- Frederick Lee (*Boeing Boeing*)

BEST LIGHTING DESIGN

- Andy Lim (*The Magnanimous Cuckold*)
- Adrian Tan (*A Cage Goes In Search Of A Bird*)
- Dorothy Png (*December Rains*)
- Lim Woan Wen (*suitCASES*)
- Lim Yu-Beng (*Liao Zhai Rocks!*)

BEST SOUND DESIGN

- Darren Ng (*suitCASES*)
- Philip Tan (*Invisibility/Breathing*)
- Darren Ng (*Blackbird*)
- Jeffrey Yue (*The Coffin Is Too Big For The Hole*)