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Dinner theatre, musicals and pantomime among theatre shows closing out 2023



Four tentpole productions, ranging from dinner theatre to musicals, lead the pack with something for everyone. PHOTOS: SINGAPORE REPERTORY THEATRE, PANDGEMONIUM, HESTER TAN, WILD RICE

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SINGAPORE – Theatregoers are in for a treat with a range of offerings crowding the last quarter of the year.

Four tent-pole productions, ranging from dinner theatre to musicals, lead the pack with something for everyone.

The Singapore Repertory Theatre (SRT) brings large-scale dinner theatre back after 25 years with Por Por's Big Fat Surprise Wedding, starting on Nov 8 with lunch and dinner performances.

Sing'theatre revisits the grit of 1920s Germany with the iconic musical Cabaret from Oct 5, while Pangdemonium stages one of Stephen Sondheim's most accessible musicals, Into The Woods, starting on Oct 27.

The pantomime Snow White & The Seven Dwarfs returns to the Wild Rice stage on Nov 16 after the Covid-19 pandemic caused a three-year delay.

The Straits Times looks at the stories of family, love, acceptance and growing up which theatre companies have in store for the holiday season.

Theatre and food for an immersive experience



In Por Por's Big Fat Surprise Wedding, Koh Chieng Mun plays a 70-year-old matriarch who gathers her family for a wedding dinner where her groom is unknown to them. PHOTO: SINGAPORE REPERTORY THEATRE

Seventy-year-old matriarch Por Por (Koh Chieng Mun) is getting married, but her groom is unknown to her family, only to be revealed at the wedding dinner.

Hilarious antics ensue as her son (Edward Choy) and his hapless wife (Jo Tan) attempt to save the family from potential disgrace.

Tan, who is also the playwright, says: “Por Por’s Big Fat Surprise Wedding aims to tell the more personal story of a 70-year-old lady rediscovering some excitement in her life and her family’s hang-ups about it. It’s just a skeleton team of seven characters making up the entire bridal party, who are scrambling around trying to run a massive banquet and manoeuvring around the secrets and elephants in the room.”

SRT managing director Charlotte Nors says: “In a time when we are getting people back to the theatres after the pandemic, we felt the timing was perfect for this theatre experience.”

The company set the bar for dinner theatre in Singapore with Ah Kong’s Birthday Party in 1998, which was so successful, it ran for six months.

The show put audiences in the middle of the Cheng family’s celebration for Ah Kong’s 71st birthday, where snippets of family gossip and moments of karaoke over a Chinese meal made them feel like part of a real Chinese family.

Tan says: “We’ve definitely thought of several ideas to make the guests feel part of the story.”

Dick Lee, who co-created the original dinner theatre production, returns to direct this new iteration.

The 67-year-old says: “Ah Kong’s Birthday Party was a very successful and unique theatrical experience, which was the very first immersive production in Singapore that also included food. The combination of theatre and cuisine makes for a great night out, which I’m happy to revive with this brand-new show.”

Tan adds: “The sheer logistics of dinner theatre just mean it’s pretty rarely done, especially on the scale that SRT wants to do it. I didn’t know when an opportunity like this would come again, so when I was invited to pitch an idea, I went all in.”

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This production features a much leaner cast compared with the 19 actors in Ah Kong’s Birthday Party.

Por Por’s Big Fat Surprise Wedding takes place at One Farrer Hotel and includes a four-course meal designed by chef Manjunath Mural, who helms one-Michelin-starred The Song Of India. The menu is a fusion of Indian and Chinese, with vegetarian and non-vegetarian options.

Hosted by restaurant Tandoor Is The Night, the audience will be seated at 20 tables. Seating is on a first-come-first-served basis.

The production offers dinner bookings on weeknights, with lunch options on weekends. It is closed on Mondays.

While most theatre productions run for one to three weeks, SRT has not set an end date for Por Por’s Big Fat Surprise Wedding. Ms Nors says this gives audiences more opportunities to catch the party, and SRT is also targeting corporate clients.

“Not only is it a perfect alternative to the traditional corporate dinner and dances, but this is also such a fun way of getting together with friends and family. We are offering weekday lunches for the corporates, not shying away from experimenting with where and when theatre can be ‘consumed.’”

When asked about how Por Por’s Big Fat Surprise Wedding might compare in popularity and sales with SRT’s first dinner theatre hit, Ms Nors says: “It’s been 25 years since our last dinner theatre, so I don’t think we can compare Singapore then and now in terms of audience behaviours. Last-minute purchases have always been the case and the pandemic sure didn’t change that.”

Book it/Por Por’s Big Fat Surprise Wedding

Where: One Farrer Hotel, 1 Farrer Park Station Road

When: From Nov 8, various times

Admission: \$148 for previews, from \$158 for other shows

Info: srt.com.sg/show/porpors-wedding

Nathania Ong comes home Into The Woods



Into The Woods by Pangdemonium is the first staging by a Singaporean theatre company in over 20 years.
PHOTO: PANGGEMONIUM

Singaporean actress Nathania Ong, who just finished a year-long run as Les Miserables' Eponine in London's West End, plunges straight into another musical for her homecoming.

In Pangdemonium's Into The Woods, she makes her Singapore debut as Cinderella.

Over a Zoom call from London, Ong, who is in her mid-20s, says she auditioned for the role before her big West End break and was initially a bit worried about the schedule.

"I looked at the timeline and it happened to fit right in for me to do Le Miz and then have this wonderful production to look forward to when I come home."

Ong, who played Eponine in the United Kingdom and Ireland tour of *Les Misérables* from November 2021 to August 2022, moved to the West End stage to play the same character. Aptly, her nightly performances were in the Sondheim Theatre, named after Stephen Sondheim, the American composer and lyricist of *Into The Woods* who is widely regarded as one of the most influential figures of 20th-century musical theatre.

Directed by Pangdemonium's artistic director Tracie Pang, the musical is being staged by a theatre company here for the first time in almost 30 years.

It was last staged by the SRT in 1994, starring notable names such as Pang's husband Adrian Pang, the late guitarist Alex Abisheganaden and Broadway star Lea Salonga.

Through the interwoven fairy tales of *Cinderella*, the Baker (Benjamin Chow) and his wife (Ethel Yap), and Jack (Andrew Marko) from *Jack And The Beanstalk*, the show tackles themes of family, love and what it means to walk through difficult periods in life.

Tracie Pang, who is in her mid-50s, says: "I think it's my favourite Sondheim, which is why we chose it. Unlike when we did *Rent* in 2016, I don't know that I feel pressure, I'm mostly looking forward to jumping into it. There have been different interpretations throughout the years and people are just waiting to see a much-loved musical."

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Yap, who is in her mid-30s, adds: "I think audience appetite and cultural landscape are some of the reasons Sondheim doesn't get produced much in Singapore, so whenever it gets produced locally, it's something really special. It's crazy and moving, and has something for everyone."

Ong finished her run as Eponine last Saturday and immediately flew back to Singapore to begin rehearsals for *Into The Woods*, a week after her castmates began work.

However, she has been brainstorming ideas for the role and jokes that Tracie Pang will have to "deal with all the crazy things that I throw at her".

Ong's energy will certainly fit right in with the cast. Chow and Marko, in a light-hearted Zoom call, expounded enthusiastically on working in a Sondheim show.

Marko, 30, says: "I'm a bit terrified because it's such a big musical and a heavy role. I've been learning the music and lyrics for the past few weeks and done my highlighting, but this is like the Shakespeare of musical theatre."

Both actors share a love of the musical's ability to layer difficult conversations around love, family and parenting through the use of fairy tales.

Marko says: "It gives you so many perspectives, like how hilariously the princes view love as something unattainable."

Chow, 33, adds: "For the Baker, it's a discovery that he can love deeper as both husband and father. Jack has an innocent and pure love for everyone."

“What I think is very strong about Into The Woods is its messaging about parenting, especially in the final song Children Will Listen. It’s for parents to see that we all make mistakes and forgive themselves. Kids will turn out how they turn out.”

Marko says: “I want audiences to feel that it’s okay to be going through troubled times. They can be very destabilising, but it doesn’t all have to be doom and gloom. It’s a matter of how you perceive it because you’re not alone.”

Book it/Into The Woods

Where: Singtel Waterfront Theatre @ Esplanade, 8 Raffles Avenue

When: Oct 27 to Nov 12, various times

Admission: From \$35 for previews, from \$45 for other shows

Info: str.sg/iqKb

Cabaret offers serious themes with side of raunch



(From left) Kimberly Chan, Dwayne Lau, Hossan Leong and Vester Ng hope that people see Cabaret as more than just a raunchy show.
ST PHOTO: HESTER TAN

Actress Kimberly Chan says her grandmother attends every show she is in, but her latest production could come as quite a shocker for the elderly woman. The 30-year-old adds: “She has absolutely no idea what she’s going to watch and that I’ll be wearing very little clothing.”

Chan is playing the lead role of Sally Bowles in Sing’theatre’s production of Cabaret.

Bowles, an English singer in pre-World War II Berlin, falls in love with American writer Cliff Bradshaw (Vester Ng). Set in the raunchy Kit Kat Club ruled by the flamboyant Emcee (Dwayne Lau), the romance unfolds against the backdrop of rising Nazism in Germany.

While the classic 1966 musical by Joe Masteroff, John Kander and Fred Ebb is associated with racy humour and scantily clad performers, director Hossan Leong, 54, says the show is about “everything except the sex”.

“It’s about racism. It’s about everything else. Cabaret approaches things in a very, I wouldn’t say hidden, but intentional manner, layered under the frivolity and raunchy, provocative stuff. The darker messages are made more palatable for people to come into the theatre and understand it,” he adds.

There are deeper discussions about basic human rights and what it means to stand up for them.

Chan says the musical is still surprisingly relevant today. “Sally Bowles is a very selfish character, opposite to who I am. She decides to close her eyes to the politics of the world because she feels like she can’t even take care of herself, but with the way the world is now, you can’t do that anymore.”

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Opening on Oct 5 at the Drama Centre Theatre, the show has a large cast of seven actors and 11 ensemble members. An eight-piece band play live accompaniment.

Leong says: “As I started researching the script last year, I was scared and panicking. But I’m glad the challenge was thrown at me, because looking at the show we have now, I’m so proud of it.”

Ng, 31, adds: “For younger audiences, I hope they don’t just watch it at face value and ignore the messages underneath. It’s the challenge I put on myself, to get the storytelling and message across.”

Some conservative elements might write off the show due to the overt sexuality.

Leong has received questions about why “people are not wearing clothes” after the teaser trailer was released. His mother does not want to watch the show either, because of the attire and perceived messaging.

Lau’s father, a pastor, is supportive of his work and will attend the show.

Lau says: “A lot of my church friends are coming too. I have shared with them what the story is about because not everyone reads up on it. If we can help them understand the rich history behind it, they are more likely to come.”

Book it/Cabaret

Where: Drama Centre Theatre, 03-01 National Library, 100 Victoria Street

When: Oct 5 to 15, various times

Admission: From \$50

Info: singtheatre.com

Revisiting Snow White 15 years later



Wild Rice founding artistic director Ivan Heng (left) and resident playwright Alfian Sa'at (right) intended to restage *Snow White & The Seven Dwarfs* in 2020, but had to defer it until the end of 2023. PHOTO: WILD RICE

Wild Rice's pantomimes have become an annual tradition on Singapore's arts calendar. This year, the theatre company is restaging *Snow White & The Seven Dwarfs*, which premiered in 2008.

Written by resident playwright Alfian Sa'at, the pantomime follows the Queen (Chua Enlai), who enforces Enhancements on all 18-year-olds in the Eternal Kingdom to ensure they are not as perfect as her.

When her beautiful stepdaughter Snow White (Nadya Zaheer) escapes a procedure meant to kill her, Snow White ends up living in the Outer Limits with seven dwarves banished for their inability to uphold the Queen's perfection.

Leong, who directed the first run, returns to helm the update.

Alfian, 46, says: "We had to revisit some of the jokes because they were a bit dated, but at the same time, we felt there were certain lessons about self-esteem and comparison to others that are still quite relevant today.

"This is a difficult question we sometimes face when creating a pantomime where much of the humour is driven by political incorrectness. Previously, everything was fair game and people 'should' be able to take a joke. But the climate has shifted and people are becoming more aware of certain power being wielded. I think our targets are people who can take the hit."

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The process of updating the show began in 2019.

Wild Rice founding artistic director Ivan Heng, 60, says: "It was going to be the pantomime that brought our opening at (shopping mall) Funan to a fitting finale, but we all know what happened in 2020."

The delay, however, means this show now coincides with the centennial anniversary of the founding of the Walt Disney Company by brothers Walt and Roy Disney.

Snow White was the first of five pantomimes Alfian wrote. He says of the original script: "I wanted to deconstruct the panto and it was awful, full of cliches and tropes that made it boring. I'm so glad my cynical deconstruction never saw the light of day."

In its updated and non-deconstructed format, Snow White is truly a production meant for everyone.

Heng says: "Part of the magic of the Wild Rice panto is that it's a family show where everyone walks out of the theatre feeling the holiday mood. It's wonderful that it's intergenerational so everyone can enjoy themselves."

Book it/Snow White & The Seven Dwarfs

Where: Wild Rice @ Funan, 107 North Bridge Road

When: From Nov 16, various times

Admission: From \$25 for previews, from \$30 for other shows

Info: str.sg/iqKa

Other productions

Immortal Variables

What: The kidnapping of a country's president leads to questions about who controls information and what happens when people leak it. Performed in Mandarin with English surtitles, this modern sci-fi story is a collaborative effort by Singapore's Nine Years Theatre and Taiwan's Hsing Legend Youth Theatre.

Where: Wild Rice @ Funan, 107 North Bridge Road

When: Oct 6 (8pm), Oct 7 (3 and 8pm), Oct 8 (3pm)

Admission: \$35 to \$65

Info: str.sg/iqKs

Session Zero

What: In this restaging, an estranged couple attempt to reconnect over a foundational game of Dungeons & Dragons, bringing real conflicts to the game table. This show sold out its first socially distanced run in 2021.

Where: Drama Centre Black Box, 100 Victoria Street

When: Oct 19 to 29, various times

Admission: \$38

Info: str.sg/iqKn

Puppet Origin Stories @ One-Two-Six: Persona Paradox

What: In his inaugural production as artistic director, Oliver Chong brings together fashion designer Max Tan, artist Rizman Putra and daredevil Xyn Foo for a triple-bill of puppetry.

Where: ONE-TWO-SIX Cairnhill Arts Centre, 126 Cairnhill Road

When: Oct 25 to 29, 8pm

Admission: From \$30

Info: str.sg/iqK7

Happy Indian Women

What: Written by Sindhura Kalidas, who recently starred in Psychob***h, this verbatim theatre piece explores what it means to be an Indian woman, based on interviews with 20 women.

Where: Drama Centre Black Box, 01-03 National Library Building, 100 Victoria Street

When: Nov 2 to 4, 8pm; Nov 4 and 5, 3pm

Admission: \$38

Info: str.sg/iqKd

Nine Years Theatre X Nafa

What: Graduating students team up with established theatre makers to put on three productions – Lord Of The Flies, The Fall and Buckets – about life and the nature of people.

Where: Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts Campus 3, Studio Theatre, 151 Bencoolen Street

When: Nov 9 to 26, various times

Admission: \$20

The Monkey King

What: Taiwan's acclaimed Contemporary Legend Theatre comes to Singapore with this take on the legendary story of Sun Wukong and his mischievous adventures in the Heavenly Castle, taken from the early chapters of Journey To The West. The company is known for its modern storytelling rooted in traditional Chinese opera.

Where: Esplanade Theatre, 1 Esplanade Drive

When: Nov 10 and 11, 8pm

Admission: From \$38

Info: str.sg/iqKW

Devising With Actors And Playwrights

What: These four productions by 20 theatremakers are the culmination of a six-month intensive training programme led by The Necessary Stage's resident playwright Haresh Sharma.

Where: Practice Space, The Theatre Practice, 54 Waterloo Street

When: Nov 30 to Dec 3, various times

Admission: \$15

Info: str.sg/iqKP

Crazy Christmas – Balls Of The Belles

What: The Belles of the Christmas Ball meets “Bridget Tan” in the 11th instalment of Crazy Christmas, Dream Academy’s light-hearted year-end comedy sketch show.

Where: Capitol Theatre, 17 Stamford Road

When: Dec 7 to 16, various times

Admission: From \$48

Info: str.sg/iqKe

The World Of Our Own

What: This restaging of a non-verbal puppetry performance follows Peng as he learns how to understand himself and how he wants to interact with the world. This show is ideal for children aged seven to 12.

Where: Central Plaza, Our Tampines Hub, 1 Tampines Walk

When: Dec 8 to 10, various times

Admission: Free

Info: str.sg/iqKX

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