

Private becomes public

Four Singapore artists reveal the personal stories behind their shows at this year's Fringe Fest



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ONCE a year, the periphery decides it could do with a bit more attention and takes centre stage.

And so begins, in less than two weeks, the annual M1 Singapore Fringe Festival.

Revolving around the theme of Art & Faith, this year's edition features 17 works from 11 countries, from an exhibition that puts a humorous twist on an assortment of world dictators to a children's tale about three penguins faced with *The Great Flood* to a contemporary dance take on the story of the *Tower Of Babel*.

Included this year are six Singaporean shows, including the re-staging of *The Necessary Stage's SINGAPORE* and Sean Tobin and Jason Wee's *Tongues*. This time we take a look at the artists behind the four remaining offerings.

The festival runs from Feb 15 to 26. Visit www.singaporefringe.com for details. Tickets from S\$19 from Sistic. For our complete interviews, visit *For Art's Sake!* (<http://blogs.todayonline.com/forartssake>)



Alecia Neo's *Goddess Of Mercy*. PHOTOS COURTESY M1SFF



Alecia Neo's Mother Instincts

"I like making portraits of my mother because I think that she is very beautiful — but it's quite funny that she never finds them flattering," shared artist photographer

Alecia Neo. But at some point, it was her mother herself, Tay Siew Hwa, who asked for one — a series of portraits of her dressed in Buddhist robes in various meditative poses.

The images will be part of *Goddess Of Mercy*, a multi-media installation by Neo and sound artist collaborator Clarence Chung, which brings together the worlds of two mothers and their respective sons — Neo's mother and brother Alex, and

Dr Nalla Tan and son Tan Ying Hsien.

The Tans were involved in Neo and Chung's site-specific installation last year, *Villa Alicia*, which recreated what was, back then, the family's soon-to-be-demolished colonial bungalow. Among the most moving elements were the scribbles that Dr Tan, a devout Christian, made on the house's walls to fend off her Alzheimer's disease. It parallels with Neo's mother's own journey towards remission from breast cancer as she devoted her time to Buddhism.

"Her journey through chemotherapy was a tough one, as she struggled with the loss of her hair, physical pain and tiredness, and also with the mental stress of the uncertainty of the disease," recalled Neo.

In *Goddess Of Mercy*, viewers can walk through two constructed living rooms containing videos, family and religious

paraphernalia that flesh out multiple layers of relationships, not only between the two families but within them as well — all bound together by the idea of rituals, something which as always fascinated Neo.

"I've always been interested in the act of rituals. Which rituals and healing systems do people adopt to help them cope during times of crisis and illness?" she said.

Goddess Of Mercy, Feb 15 and 16 at The Substation Gallery. Free admission

Irfan Kasban's Prophetic Stories

"When I was younger, I dreaded going to weekly Madrasahs every Sunday morning," admitted playwright Irfan Kasban about his religious education. It's a good thing he didn't play truant, because the stories his teachers told would prove to be fodder for the Teater Ekamatra trilogy *Hantaran Buat Mangsa Lupa* (*Offerings For The Victims Of Amnesia*).

Inspired by three specific events leading to the establishment of Islam, the three plays include two previously staged ones — *Genap 40* (about a pregnant woman who requests to meet an angel tasked with giving her unborn child its soul) and *W.C.* (featuring the awkward situation of two men trapped in a toilet) — and the newly-written *94:05*, a monologue of a man who foresees his impending death and recounts the stories of the Prophet Muhammad to himself.

"Much of the characters' struggles reflect my own," said Irfan. "Presenting my tussles with faith, helps me gather

peace in some very perverse narcissistic manner, where these plays are almost like a conversation with God."

It's the second time that playwright, whose first English play *We Live In A Box* was staged in 2009, had proposed the trilogy for the festival. A "nerve-wracking" moment considering the somewhat controversial premise of *W.C.*, among other issues. But it was the actual writing of *94:05* that Irfan had the most difficulty with.

"I had to enter the psyche of a 39-year-old man, and it was my first time writing a proper monologue, playing with colloquial Malay, and conceptually fitting the stories of the Prophet with the experiences of the character," said the 25-year-old. "Sometimes when I read these scripts, I feel like I write for an imaginary audience, one who may exist, has existed or has yet to exist."

Hantaran Buat Mangsa Lupa, Feb 16 to 18, 8pm, The Substation Theatre. With a 3pm matinee on the 18th. Tickets at S\$19 from Sistic

Eng Kai Er And The Meaning Of Life

Technically speaking, the solo piece *The Prayer* will be choreographer Eng Kai Er's first performance in Singapore. But some might recall another performance of sorts she did back in 2009 — as one-half of the infamous couple who walked naked through Holland Village.

On hindsight, the streaking incident, for which the two were fined, holds bitter-sweet memories for the Sweden-based



HE SAID

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Teater Ekamatra's *Hantaran Buat Mangsa Lupa*. PHOTOS COURTESY M1SFF



Singaporean. "I did it because it was fun. I have some beautiful memories from the night itself, and some really, really ugly ones from the aftermath. Due to the extreme ugliness of some of those memories, I must say that I deeply regret it," she said.

These days, it's not about finding one's clothes as it is about one's self. The A*Star scholar and Mensa member, who plans to base herself back home by next year, is presenting the movement-based work inspired by some existential questions.

"I know people often say that we create our own meaning in life. But to me, it is sad that we have to put in effort to create our own meaning — it means there is no intrinsic, absolute meaning, there is only some artificial meaning that we must make up and superimpose over our lives."

» Continued on T4

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