

# Stage flight

The response from young people to the Singapore Arts Festival was lukewarm this year. The reason: examinations, higher ticket prices, lack of blockbuster fare... Sujith Kumar has the details



Going against the tide of apathy for the arts is Linette Cheong, 15, from Tanjong Katong Girls' School, a designer for the *ItsMyLife!* musical.

It's no contest – textbooks trounce the arts. Secondary school students, tied up with homework and exams, had little time left for the theatre, or any other performance at this year's Singapore Arts Festival. Luring students to the arts fest got tougher in 2008 for several reasons. Examinations were moved up in the school calendar, turning the June school holidays into cram time filled with supplementary and remedial lessons that clashed with performances. The number of shows independent of the arts fest also competed for the teen dollar, leaving many to save for shows later in the year. Plus, observers say, a lack of blockbuster fare with a broad appeal, coupled with poor marketing, may have lessened interest.

Veteran theatre practitioner Tan Kheng Hua, the producer of teen musical *It'sMyLife!*, said the festival needed a clearer identity. She said: "I think we should inject more infectious, old-fashioned fun and irreverence into our arts festival. The best festivals, with the most loyal followings, are the ones which are infectious, charming and witty." Her point was brought home by a majority of the 35 students who spoke to IN. Most were unaware of the month-long festival, with one of the more dazed responses coming from 14-year-old Jeremy Tan, a Secondary 3 student at Saint Andrew's School: "Huh? Arts Festival means what?" This, despite the 31-year-old season of drama, dance, music and outdoor performances being the biggest do on the island's arts calendar. Unfortunately, this year, the festival sold the lowest number of tickets in almost 30 years: only 74.2 per cent of seats, compared to last year's 81.2 per cent. The National Arts Council (NAC), the festival's organisers, refused to confirm a decrease in the number of student concession tickets sold. However, it revealed that 4,000 student concession tickets were sold this year, forming 18 per cent of the 22,047 total sales. Teens say another factor which kept them away from this year's \$7 million festival were ticket prices. Even with concessions and school subsidies, prices of at least \$15 to as high as \$120 per ticket were still expensive. Rozaihan Ramlan, 14, a Secondary 3 student from Evergreen Secondary School, said: "I would rather spend the money on other, more useful, things. After all, it's just one show."

The Straits Times' arts observer Ong Sor Fern blamed the year's lacklustre attendance on a split arts audience in Singapore – people either find programming too inaccessible, or too commercial. Many students, who attend arts performances under school auspices, belong to the first group, and find avant garde shows incomprehensible.

This year, teachers who organise arts outings for their classes had a hard time. Evergreen Secondary School's Ms Pushpalatha Krishnan scoured the festival programme for suitable shows which students from any background could understand and enjoy, but could not find much. "Though the programme was definitely very attractive and progressive, some of the events may not have been appropriate for students," she said. "They are mainly foreign productions which are confusing and difficult to understand. We have to be sensitive to our students' maturity levels and their tastes."

Only a few are like Sarah Cheung, 15, a Secondary 3 student at Crescent Girls' School, who looked forward to a mix of accessible and avant garde performances, from local and foreign artists during the arts fest. She said: "You see, if they don't bring some of this in, we won't know what it's like, and if we don't know what it's like, we won't know whether we like it or not."

Fortunately for students, schools can afford to be choosy nowadays. With the bounty of arts events throughout the year, there is no pressure on students to binge at the Singapore Arts Festival, as they did in the 1980s. The Singapore Fringe Festival, Esplanade's Baybeats, Mosaic and Da:ns festivals are a hit with youth audiences. Meanwhile, arts companies

also stage their own big productions. The Singapore Repertory Theatre (SRT), for one, reports that students purchased as many as 4,500 tickets for just one show – its interpretation of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The company even has one employee dedicated to marketing its shows to schools. Wild Rice theatre company's *Blithe Spirit*, staged last year, was also popular with young people. Directed by Glen Goei, it starred Tan Kheng Hua, Lim Yu Beng, Neo Swee Lin and Selena Tan, and came with an educational pack for students to get them discussing the play in class. Its spokesman, Ms Nadia Dawood, said that one play alone drew around 1,200 students. When students do not go to theatres, arts groups come to them. Teachers invite groups to perform, so students are introduced to various cultures and artforms. Wild Rice, SRT and Act 3 International all add that schools want interactive performances which tie in with their National Education programmes. Act 3 International, which has conducted school tours since the late 1980s, has noted a "steady growth in interest" over the years. This interest has been especially "rigorous" since 2003, said its artistic director, Ms Ruby Lim-Yang. "The support and mindset from schools has changed dramatically, compared to the decade before that."

Additional reporting by Malini Nathan

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more than 300 scripts from students aged 11 to 12. Of these, 12 were shortlisted and will be performed next month by professional actors such as Celine Rosa Tan and Dwayne Tan. The theatre company's spokesman said: "The young will grow up to be not only our future audience but the future theatre audience for Singapore, and we believe that once you have experienced good theatre it will hook you in for the rest of your life." Meanwhile, *ItsMyLife!*, an all-teen musical production to be staged on Nov

27 at the University Cultural Centre, received more than 400 interested youths at its auditions, from which 17 were finally chosen. Already, the production has attracted big sponsors such as Great Eastern, Nokia, SingTel, MAC, Bistro Gaga and Audio Image Engineering. Mr Jeremiah Choy, president of the Association of Singapore Actors, observed: "Students have it good these days. Schools generally try to incorporate some form of the arts in their curriculum.

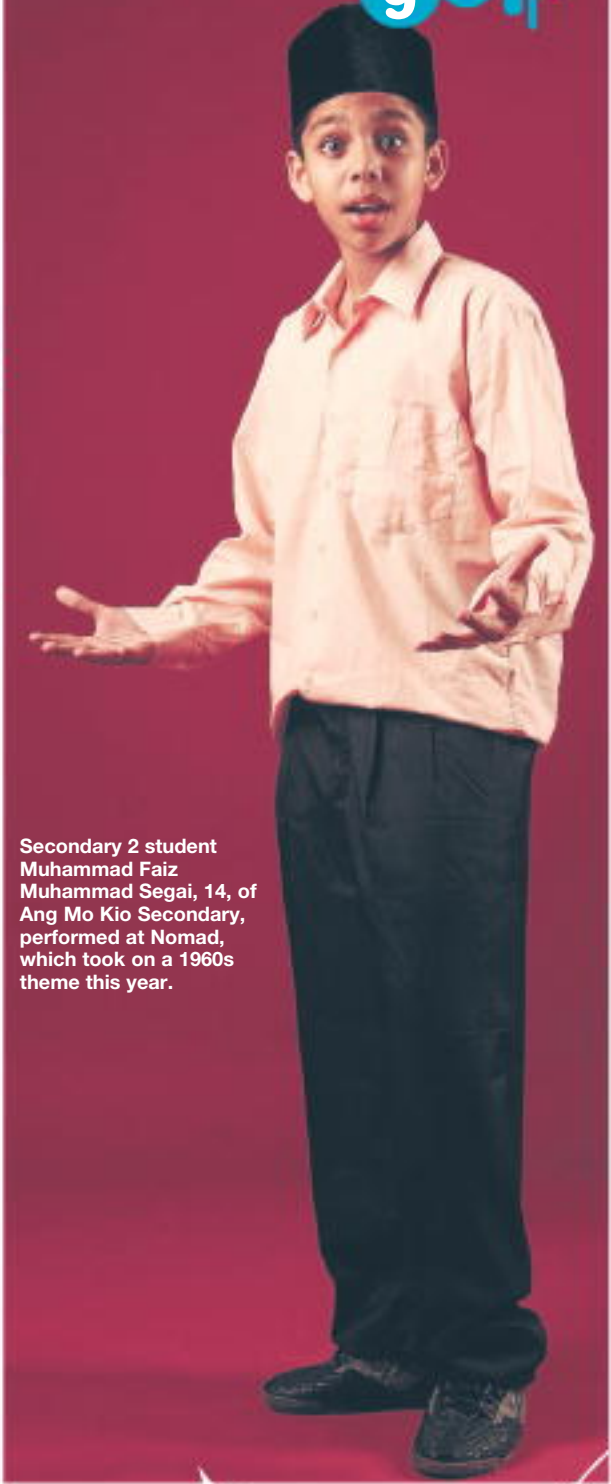
"In the past, we did not get regular performances in the school...we did it mostly out of interest." Ms Kimberly Marsh, assistant manager of corporate communications and public affairs at the Esplanade, said positive response from young people to the arts is rooted in how many are being exposed to the arts from a younger age. They also have access to more events and activities catered for them. "Younger audiences have a lot more to choose from and are better able to feed their artistic interests."



Apathetic about the arts? Not us, says Abdul Matin Tan, 15, Secondary 3 student, Ang Mo Kio Secondary, and a Nomad performer. Nomad is the school's biennial arts festival, which integrates drama, dance, music and visual arts.



Secondary 2 student Wendy Goh Wei Ling, 13, of Ang Mo Kio Secondary, performed at Nomad.



Secondary 2 student Muhammad Faiz Muhammad Segai, 14, of Ang Mo Kio Secondary, performed at Nomad, which took on a 1960s theme this year.



Iffah Rakinah, 17, who is waiting to enter a polytechnic, is also a designer for the *ItsMyLife!* musical.

## ALL THE WORLD'S THEIR STAGE

Ditching the Singapore Arts Festival does not mean young people do not care about the arts. Quite the contrary. Enrolment numbers for arts activities and courses are telling. Last year, the LaSalle College of the Arts became home to 2,300 students, a 35 per cent rise from 2005's enrolment of 1,700. For its nationwide scriptwriting competition, *The Write Stuff*, the Singapore Repertory Theatre received

more than 300 scripts from students aged 11 to 12. Of these, 12 were shortlisted and will be performed next month by professional actors such as Celine Rosa Tan and Dwayne Tan. The theatre company's spokesman said: "The young will grow up to be not only our future audience but the future theatre audience for Singapore, and we believe that once you have experienced good theatre it will hook you in for the rest of your life." Meanwhile, *ItsMyLife!*, an all-teen musical production to be staged on Nov

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