

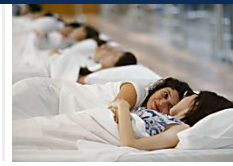
## THE STRAITS TIMES



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# Nanyang: The Musical is a pop song to pioneer Singapore painters Liu Kang and Georgette Chen



Nanyang: The Musical is based on the lives of the pioneer Singapore painters Liu Kang and Georgette Chen. ST PHOTO: KEVIN LEE

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SINGAPORE - Nanyang: The Musical is based on the lives of the pioneer Singapore painters Liu Kang and Georgette Chen, who fled China after the Japanese invasion and eventually settled in Singapore in the 1950s.

Inspired by what they saw, Liu and Chen blended Western-style fauvism and cubism with Chinese ink painting methods to cultivate the hallmark Nanyang style.

Unlike their lyrical paintings which cross boundaries and borrow from the best of both worlds, director Alec Tok's take on their history is not as much poetry in motion as it is a pop song.

The 70-minute musical on Thursday night succeeds by sticking firmly to the genre's conventions. It is a sturdily wrought, vigorous narrative, backed by soaring melodies, fleet-footed dance routines and an array of flutes, violins, drums and guitars.

The show's soundtrack is its anchor, from the big, brassy belt-along numbers to the small intimate ballads of yearning crooned by its winsome young leads. Each bears the unmistakable stamp of Mandopop songwriting duo Eric Ng and Xiaohan, famous for churning out radio hits, while the music arrangements by Singaporean music maestro Goh Kheng Long are taut and polished.

The play centres on painter Chen Kang, played by an energetic, fresh-faced Roy Huang, who falls for Li Ying (Seong Hui Xuan) at the Xinhua Academy of Fine Arts. But his affection is unrequited, as she falls instead for their teacher, Zhang Wen (Trev Neo). His character is loosely based on Georgette Chen's first husband, Eugene Chen, who died in 1944 while held in internment by the Japanese.

The story then traces Chen and Li's lives as they meet again in Paris, before Chen's detour to Bali, then finally in Singapore.

Special mention goes to Neo, who plays the morally upstanding Zhang with gravitas, but with baleful notes of internal conflict, as we learn that he is in fact married with a child to Nini (Malay singer Aisyah Aziz), his Balinese wife.

One of the show's highlights is an English-Mandarin duet by actress Andrea Xing and Aisyah, whose ringing soprano voice, redolent of longing, seems to fill up the whole theatre.

Xing is also memorable as the sharp-tongued but compassionate female artist Yue Ping. Her partner in the show, Dennis Heng, who plays Chen's friend Ren Hao, is unfortunately undone by poor articulation, especially stark in a cringe-worthy scene when he proposes to Yue.

The set's design by designer Izmir Ickbal transports the audience through time and location with the creative use of electronic panels that flash us through history. Tok also makes full use of the impressive chorus and dancers to dress up the milieu for his characters. At a train station in Nazi-occupied Paris, they are commuters lined up in the freezing cold. In the sunny

fields of Bali, they are the swaying dancers who inspire the artists.

The show also delves deeper at times, asking if art is an indulgence and worth fighting for in times of duress, or if it is the ultimate struggle against oppression. At one point, Neo's character sings: "Gun-shaft or paint brush, which is tougher?"

In a year filled with retrospective works that revisit history (see The LKY Musical), Nanyang: The Musical is a show more concerned with telling a story the good ol'fashioned way - through a rich and rousing tapestry of song and dance.

Book It

What: Nanyang: The Musical

Where: Drama Centre Theatre

When: Till Aug 8, 3 and 8pm

Admission: \$25 to \$75 from Sistic (Go to [www.sistic.com.sg](http://www.sistic.com.sg) or call 63485555)

Info: Go to [www.sifa.sg/sifa/](http://www.sifa.sg/sifa/)

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