

Youth gun for the stage

More theatre groups set up by artists in their 20s have sprung up in the past few years. The Straits Times speaks to four of them



Malavika Menon

An actress in a goldfish costume shakes her head. In front of her, on the same level, audience members are seated on chairs or a sofa in a shophouse attic in Little India.

This is a scene from a performance of *Fika & Fishy*, a show that is about a goldfish and a pet dog, yet not quite for kids, which ended its run early this month.

The show is presented by Patch and Punnet, a three-year-old theatre group started by millennials.

Like Patch, more young theatre groups set up by artists in their 20s have sprung up in the past few years.

All five young theatre groups The Straits Times spoke to have noticed an increase in the number of such groups.

Astley Xie, 27, who manages Patch and Punnet alongside two other artists, estimated that about 12 such theatre groups have been set up in the past two years.

Kristine Ng, 25, a producer at Second Breakfast Company, which was set up in 2016, has also observed the trend. She said: "At the time, we felt there was a gap when it came to theatre companies that involved youth. There were many accomplished theatre companies, but most worked with seasoned practitioners and few had platforms for aspiring or emerging young talent, be it on stage or for production or creative roles."

"Of course, there are a lot more young theatre companies now."

These young theatre groups differ in terms of team size, years of operation and whether they have registered as a company or continue as an informal arts group.

Some, like *Hole In The Wall*, which was set up last year, face the dilemma of whether to register as a company, which would mean producing more shows, maximising profit and running full-time, at the risk of losing flexibility and free-lance collaboration opportunities.

After staging its first production, *Now She Lives*, which sold 145 seats at The Substation across two days last October, the group is considering its plans for the future.

Qing Yi Xuan, 24, an actor with the group, said one challenge is deciding on its identity. "How can we keep the space organic yet formalised? How do we tell people we exist and that the work we do is important even though we do not run this full-time?"

Meanwhile, other groups have gone on to stage more productions with the help of grants from the National Arts Council.

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PATCH AND PUNNET

Patch and Punnet is managed by (from left) Astley Xie, Krish Natarajan and Sharmaine Goh.

ST PHOTO: GUN TAY

With a focus on light and quirky scripts that deal with issues that speak to today's youth, Patch and Punnet sets out to appeal to a local millennial audience.

Started in 2017, it is managed by artists Astley Xie, 27; Sharmaine Goh, 23; and Krish Natarajan, 24.

The team hopes to redefine what it means to "come to the theatre", presenting a cosy space for comedy and discussion as opposed to a conventional setting.

The group has staged four original productions so far and its audience numbers have risen steadily, with about 170 tickets sold for its first production, 2042 (2017), to 400 tickets sold for its most recent production, *Fika & Fishy*.

One of its original founding members, lawyer-turned-artist Xie, who manages the group full-time, counts each production as a milestone.

In line with its aim to appeal to millennial audiences, the team chose a renovated shophouse attic in Chander Road in Little India as the setting for *Fika & Fishy*, which ran from Feb 14 to March 1.

The original work, which features a goldfish and a dog, focused on death, loss and the dichotomy between comfort and happiness.

In January last year, Patch and Punnet presented a preview of *The Adventures Of Abhijeet*, which is about migrant workers in Singapore and a homage to *The Wizard Of Oz*, at the M1 Fringe Festival.

The group also has the distinction of being selected as local theatre company Wild Rice's first company-in-residence.

Xie said: "Aside from being able to enjoy free rehearsal space, we have also had extensive consultations with the Wild Rice family on how to run a theatre company."

"It is great being able to rely on the advice of veterans to help guide our decision-making process and, better still, knowing they are just a text or e-mail away."

The team has an upcoming production slated for November, titled *How To Hantu 101*.

The horror-comedy, which features three inept ghosts that attend a bootcamp, will be followed by another production slated for March next year, titled *Straight Chinese Male*.

THE ASSEMBLY POINT

The Assembly Point was started in 2018 by a team of four artists, originally established as a working ensemble of artists from the same graduating class of Lasalle College of the Arts.

The group focuses on ensemble cast-based theatre, in which different actors take on different roles that come together as a whole, instead of a focus on any one character or storyline.

Tia Andrea Guttensohn, 24, who doubles as an actor and the team's engagement director, said: "Our ethos rests on the power of collaboration and we believe that through the assembled effort of a group of artists, the strength of our unified voice will incite braver and bolder discussions within our audiences."

Guttensohn, along with producer Fatin Syahirah, 28; artistic director Jeremy Lim, 27; and marketing manager Jelaine Ng Sha-Men, 25, staged the collective's debut production, *Affections*, last December at the Alifal Arts Centre, which filled about 165 seats.

Guttensohn believes years of working together have prepared the team to collaborate seamlessly. "What makes The Assembly Point run smoothly is the relationship our team has. We've known one another for almost six years and understand one another like family. Our vision is united and we know which buttons not to press," she said.

The group's upcoming production, which does not have a staging



date yet, is a collaboration with professional improv company Improvanopolis and centres on a semi-scripted series of shows set in 1990s Singapore.

"Inspired by sitcoms, the performances will run over several weeks and allow audiences to follow familiar characters as they negotiate life in the golden age of the five Cs," said Guttensohn, referring to cash, car, credit card, condominium and country club.

The Assembly Point is run by (clockwise from top left) Jeremy Lim, Tia Andrea Guttensohn, Fatin Syahirah and Jelaine Ng Sha-Men.

PHOTO: THE ASSEMBLY POINT

MORE STORIES ON C2

BOUND THEATRE

Returning after a short hiatus, Bound Theatre's journey shows the challenges facing fledgling groups in the arts scene here.

Initiated in 2011 by a team of 10 drama students, the collective was a stepping stone for many of its original members, who have since gone on to other individual pursuits.

The group took a break after its last production in 2018 as members found it difficult to find time to juggle their other commitments with theatre work.

But now, three members of the original team and a new member have decided to start anew.

Juliana Kassim Chan, 25, who holds a diploma in applied drama and psychology from the Singapore Polytechnic, manages the company with three others – Seet Yan Shan, 26, as well as Wee Jia Yi and Wee Xuan Yi, both 25.

Chan said the group's focus now lies in sustainable operations and immersive theatre.

"Finances and gathering resources are always a struggle. It is no secret that producing a show is not cheap. Rental for rehearsal spaces and performance spaces can easily set you back thousands of dollars," she said.

"We have been lucky we've had the support of various organisations in the past and that has helped us put on our shows and allowed us to focus on the creation of our works."

The collective enjoyed success with its play, *The Taste Of Water* (2018), which was based on an original script and explored questions of love and morality. The play sold more than 500 seats at the Goodman Arts Centre during its two-day run in August 2018.

Describing the creative process as organic and uninhibited, Chan said: "Bound Theatre's primary aim is to provide a collaborative environment



for our artists to create in a safe space. Through this, we are able to devise original and honest works that explore the contradictory tensions of the human condition.

"Our productions usually include a period of training and ensemble

building, which is as important as the production itself," she said.

The team is devising a one-on-one immersive experience set in a thrift shop, to be staged in the second half of the year.

Despite its bumpy journey, Chan

said the collective is charting an ambitious future. "The ability to provide a safe space for artists to create and take ownership of the work they create is a privilege we are proud of and we do not want to compromise on that."

Bound Theatre's *The Taste Of Water*, which was performed at the Goodman Arts Centre in August 2018, explored love and morality. PHOTO: BOUND THEATRE



The Second Breakfast Company's production, *Family*, was staged in Centre 42 Blackbox in October 2016.

PHOTO: THE SECOND BREAKFAST COMPANY

SECOND BREAKFAST COMPANY

The Second Breakfast Company was registered as a company four years ago, but it has already put on 10 productions.

The idea for the company emerged in 2015, when artists Adeeb Fazah, Mark Benedict Cheong, Denise Dolendo, Kristine Ng and Chen Ruiyu set out to explore what they saw as a gap in the theatre scene.

Two of them have since left and the team now consists of Fazah, 28; Ng, 25; Dolendo, 26; and Dominic Nah, 28.

Ng, a graduate of Lasalle College of the Arts, said the group took a year to complete ad-hoc projects such as staging pop-up performances, a project done with the National Library Board.

Its first official production, *Family*, ran in October 2016 at the Centre 42 Blackbox.

In line with the company's aim to rediscover local texts, the production was based on Malaysian writer Leow Puay Tin's work of the same name. It sold about 400 tickets.

Acknowledging that the theatre scene has flourished in recent years, Ng explained how the company's work sets it apart from its peers: "One key pillar involves exploring older works of Singapore theatre that are rarely staged and

often overlooked, ones that our generation are unfamiliar with.

"You would often see the same playwrights' works being staged, but what about the works of pioneers such as Goh Poh Seng, Robert Yeo or Lim Chor Pee?"

The group will be staging an unprecedented single production of Yeo's *The Singapore Trilogy*, three plays that explore political issues and milestones following Singapore's independence.

The plays – *Are You There Singapore* (1974), *One Year Back Home* (1980) and *Changi* (1997) – have been staged individually in the past.