

Dark musical shines bright

A musical about suicide grabs a string of nominations at the upcoming Boh Cameronian Arts Awards. **Aref Omar** talks to its musical director Nick Choo

THE *Edge*, an original musical that examines the power of relationships revolving around a despairing young man contemplating suicide, garnered seven nominations in the Musical Theatre category of the upcoming 11th Boh Cameronian Arts Awards.

Staged last November to critical praise, it examined the histories of the troubled person with his mother, brother, girlfriend, close friends and colleague, which eventually led to deep revelations for all involved.

Nick Choo, who served as writer, composer and music director for the musical, was suitably excited and honoured for the recognition. It garnered nominations for Best Ensemble, Best Performers and Best Director.

"We were blessed to have a terrific, powerhouse cast and a director of great insight and creative vision," says Choo.

Actors Peter Ong and Tria Aziz, as well as director Sabrina Hassan were also individually nominated for Best Musical Performer and Best Direction respectively.

"Peter and Tria absolutely blew the audience away — Tria especially, given how powerful and emotionally demanding her role of the mother to the suicidal character was," he says.

Choo explains that he initially tried to downplay the suicide aspect of the show, thinking that people would find it too grave and dark a topic for a musical and focused on the theme of relationships instead. "But I think people were drawn to it because it dealt with a topic that you wouldn't conventionally find in a musical and the characters onstage were relatable," says Choo about the musical in which the audience never sees the suicidal character, Josh, onstage.

The songwriter, pianist, actor, writer and cartoonist got the idea for the musical back in 2005 when he was studying in Australia.

"I was chatting online with an acquaintance and he eventually

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14



Choo (second from left) with fellow nominees. Looking on is Low (second from right) and Caroline Russell (right) of Boh Plantations.

confided in me that he had attempted to take his life before, which brought up a whole slew of questions for me," he says.

Fortunately, that friend is perfectly fine today, according to Choo, who adds that the incident became the seed that would lead to *The Edge* — an exploration of how people react when somebody they know attempts to take his own life.

From the beginning Choo knew he wanted to present the idea as a musical with the story told primarily through song. "I wanted to attempt the challenge of musicalised monologues and dialogues — at least 95 per cent of the show was sung," he says.

"Although it was decided early on that I would be musical director since I know the music best but there came a point when I wished I had delegated that task to someone else, so that there could have been more objectivity in interpreting the music.

"But it all worked out well in the end," says Choo, who was also nominated for Best Original Music and Best Musical Direction.

WELL OF CREATIVITY

Choo's interest in musicals began when he was a teenager. "There was this CD-magazine set you could buy from the newagents, called *The Musicals Collection*, and I first got drawn to musical theatre through this collection," he says.

As he got older he was able to

invest in cast recordings — this was before the era of YouTube, downloads and the Internet.

"I'd started composing my own music at 12, having studied classical piano, and wrote songs for church by 14," says Choo, who wrote and staged his first show at 16.

"It was a terrible musical for my high school (St Xavier's Institution in Penang) — the less I say about that, the better," he adds.

Nostranger to the Short + Sweet Malaysia Festival circuit, held annually at the Kuala Lumpur Performing Arts Centre, his musical shorts such as *Float & Sync: The Rise N' Fall Of The Bad Streak Boys*, *Little Girl Lost* and *Dreaming Outside The Box* have won multiple awards.

Choo admits that he gets inspiration from everywhere — TV, books, articles online, news stories and people especially.

"But I do get motivated by knowing that there are people out there supporting me — which isn't the same as seeking public attention and demanding the spotlight," he says on what keeps him going in the theatre scene.

A well of creativity, Choo reveals that he is currently working on several works-in-progress projects simultaneously. "Right around the

corner is a children's musical that will be performed at my former alma mater in Perth, Murdoch University at the end of May — a fun, pirate-themed show called *Captain Quokka's Adventures On The High Seas*," he says.

Choo adds that every year, he works with his former postgrad supervisor, Prof Jenny de Reuck, on a children's show in Perth. "Towards the year-end I'm also slated to compose for a musical, also to be produced in Perth, called *Extra Ordinary People*.

"I won't give away the storyline here, but it deals with superheroes, and I'm super excited about it," says Choo.

As for taking on darker issues, he explains that he doesn't necessarily gravitate to morbid subjects but is interested in exploring issues in general. "I'm currently working on a project that involves transgender issues and how a family reacts to a loved one who decides to change his/her gender," he says.

Although he admits that he's not sure if the show will see the light of day here, he's always up for the task, given the opportunity, of exploring challenging topics.

"I am going to put it to full use and push the envelope as far as I can!"

REMEMBERING THE GREATS

The Boh Cameronian Awards was founded by Kakiseni in 2002 and has since been held annually, with the exception of a two-year hiatus in 2011 and 2012.

This year, the Awards will acknowledge the achievements of local arts practitioners through 35 awards in the categories of Dance, Music, Theatre, Musical Theatre, Technical Award for Musical Theatre and the Kakiseni Audience Choice.

The 11th edition of the Awards also features a 1960s Pop Yeh Yeh era theme and pays tribute to three legendary figures — Tan Sri P Ramlee, Datuk Krishen Jit and Datuk Usman Awang — who embodied the spirit of creative freedom.

During her speech at the Boh Cameronian Arts Awards Nominees Party in The Gardens Mall Kuala Lumpur, Kakiseni president Low Ngai Yuen said that the arts is an inseparable and invaluable part of humanity, as it represents the identity of the culture and its society.

"This year, we remember the greats and setup a conversation about our history — about what was, what is, and what will be," she added.

In conjunction with the Awards ceremony, Kakiseni has prepared a string of activities from today till Apr 27, billed under its InSeniTea campaign.

There will be a pop-up shop in Pavilion KL and guerrilla performances staged in public spaces around KL, which will lead up to the Gala Awards Night on Apr 27.

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