

Unboxed melodies

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IT may be just as well that composer Nick Choo has decided not to take part in this year's Short+Sweet Malaysia festival, a decision that will likely see other participants breathe a sigh of relief.

The 35-year old would insist that it is not because he has surpassed the annual theatre, music and dance amateur competitive festival, yet his multiple awards from four Short+Sweet musical entries over the last few years, including a Mercedes Benz Creative Excellence Award for his contributions to the festival, would speak otherwise.

His official reason — an upcoming showcase at No Black Tie entitled *Dreaming Outside The Box* — is nevertheless a timely shift to new

horizons. An oeuvre of selected works from his musical theatre compositions, Choo has rounded up Peter Ong, Stephanie Van Driesen and Cheryl Tan to perform with him on Wednesday and Thursday.

“They are the strongest musical theatre performers in KL ... in my opinion,” said Choo of Ong and Van Driesen. “He’s (Peter) very versatile, and can go from opera to pop-boyish sounds, and Steph has such a powerful voice, it’s a shame we don’t hear more of her.”

Relatively unknown to the Malaysian public, Tan’s career as producer and performer has centred mostly in Singapore, with stints in New York, San Jose, and Japan, among others. Having performed in Choo’s successful musical from Short+Sweet 2013’s *Dreaming Outside The Box* in Singapore, the two became friends. Tan’s interest in doing more work back home in Malaysia spurred the decision in May to put together this showcase.

“She’s also got a crisp, clear voice,” Choo describes Tan, who doubles as producer. The showcase will have two 40-minute sets with about 16 songs, as well as two Short+Sweet award-winning 10-minute musicals.

Some songs will be extracted from his minimalist and rather unusual musical exploring suicide, *The Edge*, which was staged in 2013 and won multiple Boh Cameronian Arts Awards last year, including best original lyrics, best musical direction, and best musical performer by its star, Tria Aziz.

“There will also be songs from *Follow The Light*, which was performed in PJ Live Arts in 2010 ... and bits and pieces from shows that have not been staged in Malaysia,” said Choo. One of it is *Extra Ordinary People*, a “superhero” musical that he wrote last year with a collaborator from his alma mater Murdoch University in Western Australia. “I’m really hoping to produce it here in the future. It was a really clever show, with very catchy music if I may say so myself. I’m happy to be able to preview some of these songs in the showcase,” said the former journalist turned full-time composer.

Ong and Tan will be performing the title piece *Dreaming Outside The Box* which imaginatively addresses loneliness and isolation through two jack-in-the-boxes who have been neglected and are stuck in the box. “They are soulmates in essence ... and all they want is to see each other again. That’s the recurring phrase in the musical. It’s a bit of a comment on today’s technology and how children don’t play with these old-fashioned toys anymore,” said Choo.

The other musical piece will be *Cartography of A Relationship* which was staged in 2014’s Short+Sweet. Van Driesen will give an almost entirely solo performance in this piece about two young lovers and their relationship as told from the point of view of the GPS (Global Positioning System). “It’s almost like the voice of God,” quipped Choo with a laugh, “It’s omnipresent. Everything has got to do with road directions and signs as a metaphor.”

Choo said that the title of the showcase reflects their aspirations of thinking big and being unusual. It is certainly descriptive of the rarity of his accomplishments in an artistic field. “I’m entering my third year now. As someone once said to me, it’s an industry of feasts and famines,” he said of taking the full-time plunge.

While he quips, “Parents won’t let you starve!” stating at least there’s always food at home, the fact that Choo has sustained himself merely on theatre work is quite extraordinary. However, like many other arts practitioners, he is also looking south of the border towards Singapore for new opportunities.

“There is a lack of producers and production companies in Malaysia,” he observes, “As a composer, I need producers. I hope to have a team of my own in the future, but not yet you see.”

Meanwhile, Choo has no lack of things lined up for the year. Another musical of his, Zak Zebra’s *African Safari* will be touring to South Korea next month as part of a cultural event, followed by a possible project with his alma mater in Perth. After that he will be working with Lasalle College of Arts in Singapore for a month as a composer-in-residence.

But first, Choo is ready to present all that has brought him on his journey “outside of the box” thus far. “It’s a night of musical theatre with wonderful singing and hopefully good songs. It’s unique and entirely original stuff,” he sums up the show.