

## 'The Edge' musical, which tackles issues of suicide, is back for 10th anniversary staging

The local production is one of this year's most exciting shows to watch.

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*The Edge* tells the intertwined stories of seven characters, all flawed and dysfunctional and trying to find their own understanding and resolution, through six equally powerful voices (Photo: Tarrant Kwok)

The doors open and we are ushered into a cosy space. A hush descends and there is a sense of occasion in the air. Soon we find out why as the lead character of *The Edge*, Jarrod, walks to the middle of the sparsely set stage, down into the rectangular pit and up onto a small pedestal. And we realise we are at a wake.

*The Edge*, which is about an emotionally fragile young man and his relationships with his brother, mother, girlfriend, best friend, roommate and colleague as they gather to mourn him — can be best described as a series of eulogies. Interestingly, in this case, what is an intense occasion is recounted through song and dance. Yes, that's right, *The Edge* is a musical, a sublime one.

In 2006, the young Malaysian composer, lyricist and writer Nick Choo was on MSN Messenger, chatting with a friend who told him about the moment he contemplated suicide. A former journalist, Choo naturally had many questions, most of them surrounding what happens to those around somebody who has suicidal thoughts, or takes his own life.

He thought why not explore this in the form of a musical? "As far as I know, nobody has written anything like this and I wanted to see how we could tell a story about suicide, depression and family relationships through songs rather than just words," says Choo.

It would not be an overstatement to say that *The Edge* is a work ahead of its time.

In February, a once little known Off-Broadway musical named *Be More Chill* will transfer to Broadway, and there is talk of a movie version in the pipeline. Based on a sci-fi novel by Ned Vizzini that deals with depression and anxiety, it is but the latest in a handful of musicals about difficult themes that have made a ripple over the last decade.

In the 1990s, *Rent* defined an era with its poignant and humanising look at drugs, AIDS and death, while musicals like *Next to Normal* and the hugely successful *Dear Evan Hansen* shone a light on pertinent issues surrounding mental health and the human condition in the 21st century.

Sitting through the restaging of *The Edge*, one would not guess that it was written more than a decade ago. One of the strengths of Choo's writing is his ability to capture the timeless nuances of the essence of humanity, its complexities and vulnerabilities.

This quality was evident from the musical's first workshop performance in 2008, then staged under the direction of Christopher Ling, who also directs this production. Its full-scale premiere in 2013, directed by Sabrina Hassan, snagged multiple Boh Cameronian Arts Awards, including nods for Best Original Script and Lyrics, Best Musical Direction, and Best Musical Performer.

Fast forward to 2018, when Choo — who is pursuing a PhD in creative arts at Murdoch University in Perth — had an opportunity to submit a work for staging, prompting him to revisit *The Edge*. A reworked version made its Western Australian premiere in May with an all-Australian cast.

That led him to think about bringing the show back to Malaysia. "I realised that it was the 10th anniversary of the workshop performance, and the 5th anniversary of the full-length staging, so I talked to Chris and suggested, 'Why not do the show again as a celebration of this milestone?'" Choo says.

Ling, who is the artistic director of Theatrethreesixty, says self-interest was behind his decision to revisit the work. "The topics of suicide and depression are very close to me," he says. That personal investment shows. Ling has brought a poetic, surrealistic and yet gritty tone to the staging, and has drawn out the compelling potential of Choo's characters.



Lead actors Michael Chen and Tria Aziz (Photo: Tarrant Kwok)

In many ways, *The Edge 2018* is a completely different show and, for those who have seen the previous production, it would be well worth a return visit. For one, the characters remain on stage in the cosy space at Lot'Ng — home of Theatrethreesixty — and the intimacy of the small theatre creates a sense of focus and energy that draws its audience in, making the two-hour show — which is 15 minutes shorter than the 2013 production — an enriching experience to savour. No shifting in the seats here, except maybe to lean forward and take it all in.

And there really is a lot to take in, which Choo concedes with a laugh during our post-show conversation. Ultimately, he says, the core is the relationships between human beings. While this is told through the musical's overarching premise of death and human fragility, how the stories and relationships are played out, to the point of no return, as we find out, is very much rooted in life itself, as well as dealing with the ones left behind, as we often say.

As the characters navigate shock, denial and guilt, and reflect and find closure, we the audience mirror them with our own thoughts, curiosity, judgment and perhaps, empathy. This is a credit to the ensemble — comprising lead actors Michael Chen and Tria Aziz who have reprised their roles, Michelle Tan, Kai Chalmers, Iz Sulaini and Ping Khoo — who give individually strong performances.

The other refreshing element of *The Edge* is that it tells the intertwined stories of seven characters, all flawed and dysfunctional and trying to find their own understanding and resolution, through six equally powerful voices.

Tan, who plays the girlfriend, says such realism and strong characterisation is a rarity in the musical theatre genre. Not that Choo and Ling left out what makes a musical entertaining — there is hilarity, romance, warmth, even a *High School Musical*-esque sequence, and the all-important element of surprise.

Yet, the cast does wonderfully well in executing the whole show — from Choo's minimalist approach to the music that ensures the focus remains on the lyrics, the clean, clear and emotive delivery of challenging songs, the layered acting and incredibly clever and detailed structuring of the plot progression and transition, the restraint shown in "preaching" its themes and, most impressively, the depth found in the engaging simplicity of good storytelling.

*The Edge* is one show that can go on to far bigger (or smaller) stages around the world.

A line from a song sung by one of the characters goes: "I am on the outside, outside looking in." But for two hours, we are allowed to step inside and ask ourselves this question: How would we respond? Go watch the show and decide for yourself.