

Nick Choo has been dreaming outside the box all his life

By TERENCE TOH



ARTS

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Homegrown composer Nick Choo (far left) with the cast of Dreaming Outside The Box: (from left) Cheryl Tan, Stephanie van Driesen and Peter Ong. Photos: The Star/Azlina Abdullah

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When local composer and musician Nick Choo was young, he was a huge fan of sitcoms such as *Full House* and *Perfect Strangers*. So much so the first song he ever composed was a sitcom theme.

“It was when I was about 12. There was no title, it was just a piece on the piano. I still remember the melody!” recalls Choo during an interview in Petaling Jaya, Selangor.

“See, when I was a kid, I used to imagine all sorts of stories. I grew up on sitcoms, so I used to imagine that one day I would produce one. And the music that I wrote was going to be the theme song for this imaginary sitcom. I don’t even remember what it was going to be about!” he elaborates.

Flash forward two decades or so, and Choo, 35, is still writing music to accompany stories.

Instead of scoring sitcoms, however, the Penang-born music man has risen to become an exceptional musical theatre composer, with shows such as *Follow The Light*, *Zak Zebra* and the Boh Cameronian award-winning, *The Edge*, under his belt.

Starting Aug 12, this self-taught composer’s music takes centre stage at *Dreaming Outside The Box – An Evening Of Theatre Music By Nick Choo*, which will take place at No Black Tie in Kuala Lumpur.

The two-night engagement features Choo’s songs performed by musical theatre veterans Peter Ong, Cheryl Tan and Stephanie van Driesen. Music is provided by Rohnie Tan on the violin, Tan Jen Wei on guitar, double bass and electric bass, and Choo on piano.

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Dreaming Outside The Box is indeed an appropriate name for the first showcase by Choo, who never thought of himself as ever becoming a full-time composer. Originally trained as a journalist, Choo worked with several media companies in Malaysia and Singapore before deciding to go full time with his music in 2013.

Now, several shows and awards later, Choo has his very own showcase. *Dreaming Outside The Box* will feature songs from Choo’s most well-known works, as well as new music. This includes *This Can’t Be All*, a new song from his upcoming musical *Esya*, and songs from *Extra Ordinary People*, a Choo-composed musical previously only performed in Australia.

Snow Angels, which Choo named as one of his favourite songs, will be featured. It is one of the few stand-alone tunes, not part of any musical.



Nick Choo’s pieces are known to be complex, so the showcase will be a “good challenge” for the actors, says Peter Ong (far right).

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“It’s a very personal song to me. It’s about faith, and questioning your purpose in life. It’s about when the messages you receive in your life contradict with where you want to go, and how you reconcile the two,” says Choo.

The showcase will also see two of Choo’s 10-minute musicals being performed in their entirety – *Dreaming Outside The Box* and *Cartography Of A Relationship*. Both won numerous awards at the Short and Sweet Musical festivals held at KLPac.

“*Dreaming Outside The Box* is my favourite song in the show. It’s how I got to know Nick. I was looking for a Malaysian-Singapore musical theatre repertoire for a show I was doing last year, and I came across this,” says Tan, who will perform the musical set with Ong. The musical tells the tale of two jack-in-the-box

longing to see each other.

“He’s created something quite universal, all about feelings of disconnection and loneliness, and being out of control of life. And all sung by toys!” she adds.

Tan, 26, an accomplished vocalist who has performed in Singapore, Vietnam, Japan and New York, also serves as the show’s producer. “I really think that not enough people have heard this sort of music, and this sort of singing, and we need to get it out there,” she says.

The musical *Cartography*, on the other hand, is a tale of a couple in love, as told by a GPS device. An odd concept, to be sure. Yet Choo’s writing and music make it work.

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“I watched *Cartography* when it was first performed by Ida Mariana last year. I remember watching it and thinking: what a fascinating piece of work!” says Van Driesen, 31, who has starred in local musicals such as *Cabaret*, *The Wizard Of Oz* and *The Secret Life Of Nora*. “I really like the storytelling in it.”

The singers will also be performing group numbers, such as *The Edge* and *The Greatest Measure* (both from the musical *The Edge*).

“*The Edge* is one of the most beautiful ensemble songs that I’ve ever sung. When it’s being sung by good singers, it feels like you’re just flying,” says Ong, 39, who was in the original production of *The Edge*, as well as *The Producers*, *Cabaret* and *Symphonic Swing*.

How do they feel about singing Choo’s songs, which are known to be very complex?

“It’s a good challenge. Nick writes with a lot of chord changes, so it’s very psychological and musical at the same time,” says van Driesen.

