

## The Life Theatre Awards Best Director nominees



(From left) The Straits Times' Life Theatre Awards Best Director nominees Tracie Pang, Nelson Chia, and Ong Keng Sen. PHOTOS: DESMOND WEE, JEANNIE HO

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### The Best Director nominees shine a light on issues that plague humanity

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🕒 PUBLISHED: MAR 13, 2018, 4:59 AM SGT | UPDATED MAR 14, 2018, 11:29 AM

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All the world's a stage but the directors nominated for The Straits Times' Life Theatre Awards this year used the stage to show the world.

In Art Studio by Nine Years Theatre, Nelson Chia combined three art forms - text, theatre and painting - to create a universal story about art, love and companionship.

In Dragonflies by Pangdemonium, Tracie Pang addressed global issues such as climate change and xenophobia through intimate stories.

In Trojan Women, Ong Keng Sen showed how Greek tragedy remains sadly relevant today as savage cycles of violence continue to shape history.

All three productions were presented under the Singapore International Festival of Arts 2017.

## **TRACIE PANG, 50**

**Nominated for:** Dragonflies (Pangdemonium and Singapore International Festival of Arts 2017)

**Previous nominations:** Ten for Best Director including for the 2013 productions Rabbit Hole and Next To Normal; Fat Pig (2014) and Tribes (2015) **Previous wins:** Best Director for the 2016 production Falling (Pangdemonium)

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Pang knew just how to put climate change on stage, to the dismay of those designing sets and sound for Dragonflies

"The very first thing I said was, 'I want rain.' My sound designer was like, 'Are you kidding? Do you know how loud rain is? How do I silence the rain?'" she says, laughing.

The story of a Singaporean man ejected from the United Kingdom after the death of his wife and facing problems keeping his adopted child in Singapore, was staged under the umbrella of the Singapore International Festival of Arts 2017 and will be restaged in May and June at the Victoria Theatre.

Last year, simulated thunderstorms, haze and blackly comic xenophobia made the set a microcosm of the world today.

Dragonflies has received eight nominations at The Straits Times Life Theatre Awards, including for Best Set Design (Wai Yin Kwok), Best Sound Design (Jing Ng) and Best Ensemble. It is also up for Production of the Year and Best Original Script (Stephanie Street).

Pangdemonium made its name reviving Broadway and West-End favourites, but, this year, branched into original work. Pang says: "We had writers who were very keen to collaborate and had themes we wanted to talk about and were open to experimenting with storylines."

Another original work staged by Pangdemonium, family drama Tango by Joel Tan, is also up for Best Original Script this year. The troupe has 11 nominations in total including best supporting role nods for Andy Tear for The Pillowman and Chloe Choo for Fun Home.

"I was very pleasantly surprised," Pang says. "I was not expecting it. It's just wonderful for the company and everybody who worked on the shows."

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## **NELSON CHIA, 46**

**Nominated for:** Art Studio (Nine Years Theatre, Singapore International Festival of Arts 2017)

**Previous nominations:** Best Director for Oleanna (Theatre Practice, 2002); Best Actor for Mad Phoenix (Toy Factory Theatre Ensemble, 2003)

**Previous wins:** Best Director for Art (2014) and Twelve Angry Men (2013), both staged by his troupe Nine Years Theatre. Art also tied with Wild Rice's Monkey Goes West for Production of the Year in 2015.

Best Actor for White Soliloquy (Toy Factory Productions, 2010). In 2013, he won Best Actor for A Language Of Their Own (Robin Loon and Casey Lim, Singapore Arts Festival 2012) in a tie with Matt Grey in Freud's Last Session (Blank Space Theatre).

In the five years since Chia set up Nine Years Theatre with his wife, actress Mia Chee, the troupe has won over audiences and critics with sharp, slick reworkings of contemporary classics of Chinese and Western theatre.

It was an act of courage to move forward and create a new, original work - and from a novel of a quarter million words. Yeng Pway Ngon's critically acclaimed Art Studio (or Hua Shi, published in 2011) is a rambling epic that follows several artists over three decades. It is a tapestry of human connections and took several days just to read out loud - as Chia did with his cast as a first step towards creating a script for the stage.

"The biggest challenge was how to put on a play that spans at least 30 years and create that space and time in a fixed physical space," he says.

The resulting play, which opened last year's Singapore International Festival of Arts, had Chia deploy his cast like calligraphic strokes over three hours, creating striking visual tableaux in addition to stellar acting.

"I didn't set out to do a play where all these art forms are represented, it just happened like that," he says. "Or maybe we've always been doing this and didn't notice."

He credits then-festival director Ong Keng Sen - also nominated for Best Director this year - for commissioning the play to open the arts festival.

Art Studio is also nominated for Production of the Year and Best Ensemble, accolades which are not new to Chia, but which mean a lot this year. "It's our first original work," he explains.

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## **ONG KENG SEN, 54**

**Nominated for:** Trojan Women (Ong Keng Sen, National Theater of Korea and Singapore International Festival of Arts 2017)

**Previous nominations:** Best Director for the 2015 production The Incredible Adventures Of Border Crossers (Ong Keng Sen, Chris Lee, Reckless Ericka, Kaffe Matthews, Brian Gothong Tan, Francis Ng; Singapore International Festival of Arts; Singapour en France - le Festival) and Lear Dreaming (TheatreWorks, 2012). Best Script for Goh Lay Kuan & Kuo Pao Kun (TheatreWorks, 2012) and National Broadway Company (Esplanade - Theatres on the Bay, 2012) Previous wins: Best Director for the 2006 production Geisha (TheatreWorks)

Ong is nominated for revisiting a Greek tragedy he staged in 1991 at a stone quarry in Singapore. Trojan Women was then based on Jean-Paul Sartre's French translation, done with the French-Vietnamese war in mind.

Last year's Trojan Women, staged under the Singapore International Festival of Arts, then helmed by Ong, retained the tale of captive women waiting to be shipped off as war prizes after the fall of Troy. However, the staging put the tragedy in the context of the Korean peninsula, where Japan's World War II imperialism still casts a long shadow. It was inspired by changgeuk, a form of Korean opera, but returned to the origins of changgeuk's forebear, pansori, where a singer was accompanied by one particular instrument.

Trojan Women was first staged in South Korea and, at the time, Ong often passed the Japanese embassy, where a statue stands commemorating the women abused as sex slaves during World War II. There was controversy then over relocating that statue.

Ong recalls: "Every day I would meet these kids who were camping there to save the statue. It was getting frosty and they would put mittens on her, scarves on her. There was so much love."

Cast and director often broke down in tears during rehearsals. "Trojan Women has been performed by women in every major war as a memory that war should not be repeated, but unfortunately, it is," Ong says.

- The winners of The Straits Times Life Theatre Awards will be announced on March 27.

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**Correction note:** An earlier version of the story said that Director Nelson Chia won Best Actor for A Language Of Their Own (Robin Loon and Casey Lim, Singapore Arts Festival 2012) in a tie with Oliver Chong (Roots). It was actually a tie with Matt Grey in Freud's Last Session (Blank Space Theatre). We are sorry for the error.

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