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MUSE

Stand By Me

Evanna Ramly

Revisiting the joys and pitfalls of childhood, Sifu Productions presents Clark Gesner's vibrant masterpiece *You're A Good Man, Charlie Brown* this month. First staged off-Broadway at Theatre 80 in New York's East Village in 1967, the musical is based on the famous Peanuts comic strip and features some of the most loved characters in cartoon history: Charlie Brown, Sally Brown, Lucy van Pelt, Linus van Pelt, Schroeder and, of course, Snoopy.

"We've always wanted to do a family or children's theatre show," says Freddy Tan, the musical's director who is also the artistic director of Sifu Productions. "The Peanuts comic strip is something I grew up with and while I understand that kids nowadays may not be so familiar with Charlie Brown, they would at least know Snoopy. What's more important is that their parents still remember these characters and feel the nostalgia."



Tan feels the musical's positive message resonates with people of all ages

Tan points out that a lot of the themes portrayed are still relevant today and will resonate with adults and children alike. "To me, the strongest theme of the musical is happiness. Throughout the story, Charlie Brown always questions himself and towards the end, his friends help him realise that we do not need a lot of big things in life in order to be happy. Sometimes happiness is in the simple things that you already have."

There is a strong message in Charlie Brown's story that subtly addresses depression among children, a subject that was rarely discussed before. "Daily roadblocks for kids, such as dropping an ice cream or not being able to fly a kite, are a big deal to them. To them, it can feel like it's the end of the world," Tan notes. "What I like about the musical is that it shows them how you can go on with your life. The characters don't cry or dwell on their problems; they always find a way to carry on."

This is the theatre company's first production that is not an original work. "We wanted something people would be familiar with in terms of the subject matter and premise. I believe this is a great musical with excellent music and a storyline that is simple yet meaningful. Personally, I feel the script is not easy to stage – just ask the cast – but I believe we have the talent and capability to deliver a great show."

An advertisement for CHM Hotels. The top half shows a man and a woman in a modern hotel room. The man is holding a bag and looking at the woman. The room has a large bed, a sofa, and a dining table. Below the image is a dark banner with white text. The text reads: "Enjoy the Conveniences and Comfort", "Totally Fulfilling Experience", "BOOK DIRECT & SAVE at www.chm-hotels.com", "Refer to Our Best Rate Pledge at selected hotels, T&C apply", "CHM Hotel Management Sdn Bhd (198103-W)", and a list of hotel brands: "BUDA LUWIPUS • M-Casa All Suite Hotel • Cititel Mid Valley • HOTEL EMERALD • Cititel Express IPOH • Cititel Express • PENANG • Cititel Penang • Cititel Express • KANGKOR • Residevelopment". The CHM Hotels logo is in the bottom right corner.

Despite its youthful characters, it is interesting how the musical has almost always been performed by adults. "It has only been played professionally by kids once and it was not well received," Tan reveals.

One of the main things the award-winning director is striving for is not to add anything new. "I'm not going to localise it just because it's played by Malaysians; it doesn't make sense. At the same time, I'm not going to pretend we're Americans. To find the middle ground, we have to come up with a staging device that will transport the audience from Malaysia to America."

For this, projections will play a key part in translating the comics into a musical. "That's the world I invite the audience to come into. If you can forget these guys are adults and believe that they are kids, then I've succeeded."

Tan hopes to show the Malaysian audience that it does not require 30 people to have a good musical show. "There are only six actors in the cast and four live musicians but I think it is enough to wow you. It's enough to let the music tell the story; you don't need quantity to have quality."

He is particularly pleased with the cast and looks forward to their performance when it opens. "Even before rehearsals started, I knew this ensemble would work," he grins.



At rehearsal

Leading the ensemble as the title character is Joel Wong, who was initially cast as Schroeder but stepped up to the plate when Peter Ong was forced to pull out of the production due to an injury. At the time of the interview, Ong was in the hospital undergoing an emergency procedure. Rising talent Izen Kong will now be playing Schroeder.

Wong says his challenge lies in striking a balance between his own personality and the truth of that character. "I find this helps make the character more natural, but not too much or I'll be playing me instead," he laughs. "Audience members may already have their own expectations on how this character is like, so my job is to keep them engaged either by meeting their expectations or bring a twist to it."

Safia Hanifah joined Sifu Productions earlier this year and is the executive producer of the show. It was she who suggested doing the musical. Besides producing, she will also portray Lucy, the sharp-tongued friend and Charlie Brown's five-cent psychiatrist.

"I remember watching my seniors perform this in drama school and thinking we could do it here as we have the talent," she recalls, adding that the team's good chemistry is especially rare. "My main challenge is playing a seven-year-old. As an actor, playing a different age is always tricky. You would think that a seven-year-old would interact a certain way but no, and especially not Lucy."

Ivan Chan Atienza takes on the role of Linus, who has a charming dependency on his blanket and his elder sister. "There's something about kids talking about adult subjects that is funny to me," says Atienza. "It's hilarious yet finding that balance between the two can be a challenge."

He admits that with a major production such as this one, there is the pressure to deliver a good performance yet he feels safe with this cast. "I can have fun. It's such a close-knit group, which is great since all the characters are friends. It's very important for the synergy of the group to translate on stage."

For Tria Aziz, finding the voice of her character, Sally, is a major concern. "I'm always afraid that tweaking my vocal folds as we run the show might spoil it and I'm trying to find a way of doing it without hurting myself," she reveals.

Her favourite part of the production so far is reliving her childhood. "Being candid, exploring things that I did as a kid, and seeing these memories now with adult eyes bring me so much joy. As a kid, you're always told that you cannot question adults but Sally questions everything and even makes sure that she's heard. That's the best part as kids today are like that too. Sally teaches them that it's okay to be confrontational and it's okay to be special. Just be yourself."

Rekindling the nostalgia of such an iconic character is the most challenging aspect for Benjamin Lin, who plays Snoopy. "The musical caters to the older generation who grew up with Charlie Brown, who will look out for that familiarity when they watch the show," he says. "At the same time, it appeals to a younger audience who loves Snoopy as a fun animated character. He's so imaginative, happy-go-lucky... and very sassy."

Lin feels it is precisely because the cast is so small that the dynamics are seamless. "I know for sure that they know what they are doing so there's a certain confidence in knowing we all put in our best."

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