

### **The Studios**

AN ESPLANADE COMMISSION

DIRECTED BY RENEE YEONG WRITTEN BY MICHELLE TAN

# I am trying to say something true

8 & 9 APRIL 2023

SAT, 8PM SUN, 3PM & 8PM

ESPLANADE THEATRE STUDIO



A programme of TRIP—a platform to showcase work by early-career directors.

Esplanade is Singapore's national performing arts centre. It hosts a year-round line-up of about 3,500 live performances and activities presented by Esplanade, its partners and hirers. As an arts centre for everyone, Esplanade also creates opportunities for seniors, youth, children and underserved communities to experience the arts. More than 70% of the shows that take place each year at the centre are free for all to enjoy.

Esplanade also brings the arts virtually to audiences in Singapore and beyond, through its diverse range of digital programmes on Esplanade Offstage, an all-access backstage pass to the performing arts and guide to Singapore and Asian arts and culture, with videos, podcasts, articles, guizzes and resources.

The centre works in close partnership with local, regional and international artists to develop artistic capabilities and content, push artistic boundaries and engage audiences. Esplanade supports the creation of artistic content by commissioning and producing new Singapore and Asian work for the international stage. It also develops technical capabilities for the industry nationally.

Esplanade - Theatres on the Bay is operated by The Esplanade Co Ltd (TECL), which is a not-for-profit organisation, a registered Charity and an Institution of a Public Character. The Charity Council awarded TECL the Charity Governance Award - Special Commendation for Clarity of Strategy in 2016 and 2022, and the Charity Transparency Award from 2016 - 2019 and 2022. Esplanade is Singapore's first Dementia-Friendly Arts Venue and a certified Dementia Go-To Point, as well as a Guide-dog Friendly centre.

TECL receives funding support from Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth and its Community Programmes are supported by Tote Board Family, comprising Tote Board, Singapore Pools and Singapore Turf Club.

Visit Esplanade.com for more information.

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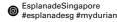


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www.esplanade.com







# Programmer's Message

The Studios is Esplanade's longest running platform for presenting challenging, innovative and exploratory contemporary theatre and performance. Since 2003, it has established a reputation for presenting thought-provoking works and giving space for theatre-makers to explore different issues in a variety of forms.

As *The Studios* season moves into its next decade of growth and with the recent opening of the new Singtel Waterfront Theatre at Esplanade, we wanted to explore new ideas. One of these possibilities is *TRIP*, a programme aimed at supporting the next generation of theatre directors who are bringing a different energy to Singapore theatre.

We saw an opportunity to create a programme within *The Studios* that could support early-career directors by giving them opportunities, resources and a platform. Through connecting them with an experienced creative and technical team, and providing them with a professional venue, we wanted to create a safe and supportive environment for these directors.

With this in mind, we launched an open call for *TRIP* in May 2022. Each selected director will direct two productions over the course of two years. In the first year, they will select a work from an assigned pool of scripts. In Year 2, they will stage a work of their choice. It is our hope that the selected directors can build on their experiences in *TRIP* to broaden their capacity and develop their careers.

After interviews and discussions with our Resource Panel of experienced theatre professionals (Aidli 'Alin' Mosbit, Edith Podesta, Sean Tobin), we selected Sim Yan Ying "YY" and Renee Yeong as our directors for the inaugural edition for TRIP. For their first year productions, YY will be directing No Particular Order by Joel Tan and Renee will be directing I am trying to say something true by Michelle Tan.

We're excited to see these two passionate, thoughtful and articulate directors step up to this challenge, and invite audiences to join us in supporting their journeys.

Alicia Chong Programmer, The Esplanade Co Ltd

### About TRIP

TRIP is a new programme by Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay, presented as part of The Studios, that provides early-career directors with the opportunity to direct their own productions and showcase their work at the Esplanade Theatre Studio.

For more information about *TRIP*, please visit: www.esplanade.com/get-involved/artist-development-platforms/trip

## Director's Message

Last October, YY and I were given four plays to choose from for our first year production at *TRIP*. Michelle Tan's *I am trying to say something true* was the fourth and final script I read, and immediately I knew I had to do it.

The beauty of Michelle Tan's script is its open-endedness and how it tells the story of a woman's life from childhood to adulthood. Each director will have a unique interpretation of its central idea, which could be about themes like death, distance, or longing. For me, it is about the relationship between happiness and grief, and how we cannot fully experience one without the other.

Our protagonist, Risa, has recently experienced a series of losses—her career, a family member, her lover—and she has felt the excruciating and all-consuming pain that loss brings with them. In order to circumvent further suffering, Risa divests herself from her relationships, her career aspirations, and herself: If you never go for what you want, you can never lose anything. But in her avoidance of loss, she ends up missing out on joy, beauty, happiness. Brene Brown, an author and researcher says: "You can't selectively numb. When we numb feelings like pain, loss, grief, regret, we also end up numbing joy, gratitude, and happiness." This is exactly what Risa is doing, by living her life according to others' wishes instead of her own. So, at 28, she snaps. This is where the play begins. You are witnessing a woman who is just beginning her journey of healing. And by the end of it, you might realise she still has a long way to go.

I want to thank a bunch of people who have made this specific production of I am trying to say something true come to life.

To my creative and production team, whose depth of experience and thirst for rigour has challenged me to see new perspectives and pushed me out of my comfort zone.

To Michelle, whose vulnerability and flair for language birthed a poignant and complex script.

To Sabrina, whose honesty and hard work paid off in the most beautiful way on stage.

To the Esplanade programming team, who has been a huge pillar of support and my biggest advocate in *TRIP*.

To the Resource Panel, who has helped me every time I 'tripped', and from whom I have learnt the most.

To my family, friends, and my partner, who have walked with me through life and have shaped me to be the person I am today.

Thank you.

Lastly, I want to thank the queer community, who are no strangers to loss, grief and pain, who have fought battles so people like me and Risa can come out earlier in life and live authentically, and who have been emblematic of "finding joy through pain".

Renee Yeong

#### I AM TRYING TO SAY SOMETHING TRUE

# Synopsis

After smashing her work computer in the office pantry in an uncharacteristic fit of rage, Risa is now sat in a room with Dr Robert, her newly acquired therapist. She cannot go back to how she was living before. Risa must look back on her own life to look forward. What caused her to end up at this exact spot?

Was it her Catholic ah ma whose funeral she skipped, her ex-girlfriend whom she loved deeply but broke up with, or her tendency to feel too much? Or maybe... something else entirely?

This is a story about loss—except, there is no new way to write about loss. You can't speak or write about loss, until you realise you can't speak or write about loss. So instead, this is a story about distance: the spaces between people and places, the gaps between past and present; and about living in the gulf between what we know and what we feel.

First commissioned for the 2018 season of *The Studios*, Michelle Tan's deeply intimate script explores the complexities of personal truth and emotional vulnerability.

(1hr 15mins, no intermission) Advisory: Some mature themes

### Q&A with the Director

### 1. WHAT ARE SOME KEY THEMES YOU WANTED TO HIGHLIGHT IN THIS STAGING OF I AM TRYING TO SAY SOMETHING TRUE?

Without giving too much away, I would say one of the biggest ideas we worked with in rehearsal was loneliness. Particularly the great big loneliness you feel when you're not your true authentic self, when you are hiding who you really are from the world and the people you love.

### 2. WHAT HAS THE CREATIVE PROCESS BEEN LIKE, ESPECIALLY SINCE IT'S YOUR FIRST TIME WORKING WITH THESE DESIGNERS?

Like most of my creative processes, it's been tremendously collaborative. The beauty of working with Esplanade is that they have relationships with very experienced designers, and it is a privilege to work with such an esteemed team of professionals so early in my career. They bring with them a deep understanding of their individual craft but are also great advisors beyond their area of expertise—it has been a very rich collaborative experience.

#### 3. WHERE DO YOU START WITH A SCRIPT LIKE THIS?

I start with the actor. In a one-person show, the entire show rests on the shoulders of one person. So Sabrina and I worked together to create Risa, drawing on Michelle's words and mixing that with Sabrina's own life experiences to make Risa as real and honest as possible to the audience.

### 4. WHAT ARE SOME OF THE CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES YOU HAVE FACED IN PUTTING TOGETHER THIS PRODUCTION?

The biggest and most exciting challenge when directing a one-woman show is figuring out how to keep things dynamic and interesting for the audience. We are very accustomed to watching plays with at least 2 people—sometimes with full ensembles of 20 or 30 people in the case of operas or musicals—so when there is only the single actor on stage, we need to find ways to tap on the imaginations of the audience to recreate entire worlds and characters through a single person. Sabrina and I therefore spent a lot of time in rehearsals creating and defining all the characters Risa encounters and her relationships with all of them: as much as it this is a challenge for me, it is the biggest challenge for Sabrina, who has to carry the entire show on her shoulders!

### 5. TELL US MORE ABOUT WHAT IT HAS BEEN LIKE WORKING WITH THE RESOURCE PANEL. WHAT HAVE YOU LEARNED FROM THEM?

Edith, Sean, and Alin, who make up the resource panel, have a great diversity of theatre-making experience among them. So, no matter the question, there will always be someone who can give me advice or a new perspective on the challenges I'm facing. They question my understanding of certain topics, recommend materials to research and read up on, and are relentless in their pursuit of rigour, which I deeply appreciate. I know that every time I walk out of a meeting with them, I will walk away having learnt something new. It is rare that you get such a resource (pun, intended) outside of the confines of school, and I am very grateful.

# 6. AS AN EARLY-CAREER DIRECTOR IN SINGAPORE'S THEATRE LANDSCAPE, WHERE DO YOU SITUATE YOURSELF AND HOW WOULD YOU LIKE TO GROW IN/CONTRIBUTE TO THE SCENE?

At this point in my career, I don't want to box myself into a specific genre or style. Though I naturally gravitate towards naturalism, I owe it to myself to explore texts and genres that both excite me and scare me so that I am continuously growing and learning as an artist. My goal is that as my body of work expands, I eventually get to a point where I have an assortment of directorial tools that I can apply to any kind of art that I work on—whether it is theatre, film, audio, or multi-disciplinary works. I am excited to see how this curiosity transforms me as an artist and as a person.

### Renee Geong

DIRECTOR

Renee Yeong (she/they)
is a Singaporean director
interested in telling
contemporary stories
about women, the LGBTQ+
community, people of colour,
and other marginalised
groups in Singapore, America,
and beyond.

Her recent directing credits include Lotus Root Support Group (Singapore), When We Were Young and Unafraid, Dry Land (Playwrights Horizons Downtown/NYU), Annie Aspen's Musical Space



Spectacular! (Ars Nova's ANT Fest), and I LOVE WHITE MEN (Dixon Place, Ars Nova's ANT Fest, and Caveat NYC).

As an assistant director, she has worked with Tony Award-winning director Rachel Chavkin on Bess Wohl's world premiere play *Continuity* at Manhattan Theatre Club and Huzir Sulaiman on *The Nuclear Family* in 2020 for Checkpoint Theatre, up until its postponement.

Renee also works as a sound designer. Notable sound design credits include *The Nine O'Clock Problem* and *All the Different Ways Commodore Matthew Perry Could Have Died...* (Theatre in Quarantine), *Romeo + Juliet* (Hypokrit Theater Company), *Our Options Have Changed* (Flux Theatre Ensemble), among others.

Renee is a member of the 2019 Lincoln Center Director's Lab and an associate member of the Stage Directors and Choreographers Union. She earned her Bachelor of Fine Arts at NYU in Directing in 2018.

### Michelle Tan

PLAYWRIGHT

Michelle is a writer and drama educator and has recently concluded a six-month residency at Centre 42 as their inaugural writer-in-residence. As a playwright, her work has been produced by several local companies, including Cake Theatrical Productions and Singapore Repertory Theatre. Michelle currently teaches in the theatre department at the School of the Arts.



Photo credit: Juliana Tan

### Sabrina Sng

PERFORMER

Sabrina Sng is a performer who works with interdisciplinary approaches centered around the themes of culture and the body. Her process involves the investigation of various philosophies of physical training while questioning the body in performance. She was a recipient of the NAC (Undergraduate) Arts Scholarship and graduated with a BFA (Hons) from New York University's Tisch School of the Arts. Experimental Theatre Wing.



Photo credit: Crispian Chan

### Gabriel Chan

#### LIGHTING DESIGNER

Recipient of the NAC Overseas Bursary, Gabriel graduated from Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts with First Class Honours in Lighting Design. He was also awarded the Strand Lighting Scholarship, funding his training at the Metropolitan Opera, New York ('09 Winter Opera Season). He was conferred the Young Artist Award in 2019 for his artistic excellence and contribution to Singapore's performing arts scene. A chameleon of a designer, Gabriel is well versed in lighting for the theatre, dance, music concerts and live events.

Signature theatre designs include *The Almighty Sometimes*, Constellations, Rising Son, Shakespeare in the Park: Julius Caesar, Romeo & Juliet, The Tempest (Singapore Repertory Theatre), The LKY Musical (Metropolitan Productions), First Fleet (Nine Years Theatre), A Dream Under the Southern Bough: Existence (SIFA 2021), Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove, Sometime Moon (Toy Factory Productions) and Fluid (The Theatre Practice).

Other design ventures include *Symphony of Life*, the Gardens By The Bay opening festival anchor, *Marina Bay Countdown 2015: Drum Gaia*, *Halloween Horror Nights* 2018 and 2019 theatre performances and last but not least, Singapore's National Day Parade 2017, 2018, 2020 and 2021.

Gabriel also goes by the moniker Linesmith (www.linesmith.net) authorised directly by Vectorworks Headquarters based in Washington for conducting training of the Vectorworks software, the leading drafting solution for Entertainment and Performing Arts technical design.



Awarded the National Arts Council Scholarship, Jing graduated with first class honours from Rose Bruford College (UK) specialising in Performance Sound. Having designed for various productions over 10 years of practice, he aspires to provide a wholesome sonic experience for the audience—what, why and how you listen through a live performance.

Jing's work has been nominated for Best Sound Design in the 2014 Off West End Theatre Awards, and the 2018, 2022 & 2023 Singapore Straits Times Life! Theatre Awards.

### Petrina Dawn Tan

SET DESIGNER

Petrina Dawn Tan holds a Master of Art in Collaborative Theatre Production and Design from Guildhall School of Music and Drama in London. She practices scenography and has conceptualised a range of projects including music festivals, circus acts and installations with elements of audience participation.

She won Best Set for *The Truth* (Singapore Repertory Theatre, 2019) at The Straits Times' Life! Theatre Awards 2020 and was nominated in 2021 for Best Set for *A Dream Under the Southern Bough* (Existence), and in 2017 for Best Lighting for *Manifesto*. Other designs for theatre performances include *Brown Boys Don't Tell Jokes* (Checkpoint Theatre), *I and You* (Gateway Arts), *Kwa Geok Choo* (Toy Factory Productions), *Electrify My World* (Nine Years Theatre) and *The Son* (Pangdemonium!).

She was also co-artist for the artwork *YELLOW* commissioned by National Arts Council for the Public Art Trust, Associate Lighting Designer for *From Singapore to Singaporean - The Bicentennial Experience* and Associate Lighting Designer for *Art of the Brick* at ArtScience Museum.

More at: www.petrinadawntan.com

## The Backstage Affair

PRODUCTION MANAGEMENT TEAM

The Backstage Affair (BA) is made up of three passionate backstage management professionals, who came together with a question on how to make a career in the backstage scene more sustainable.

We strongly believe in shaping the future of backstage management and are dedicated to committing our full effort and resources towards this mission. We want to bridge the gap between education and vocation and create opportunities for aspiring young talents from diverse backgrounds to carve out meaningful, sustainable and long-term careers in the arts, entertainment and recreation industry. We are invested in both professional and personal growth.

We believe in community and the importance of collaboration. We support artists and performing arts companies and take their ideas from concept to reality by providing high-quality, professional backstage management services. We work with a strong network of practitioners from various sectors to develop a suite of well-rounded vocational programmes. We believe in sharing resources, ideas and knowledge.

We want to create a better tomorrow.

### Aidli 'Alin' Mospit

RESOURCE PANEL

Aidli Mosbit graduated from Queensland University of Technology and has worked extensively with local companies like The Necessary Stage, Teater Kami, Wild Rice, Cake Theatre, Toy Factory, The Theatre Practice, Teater Ekamatra and Drama Box. With Noor Effendy Ibrahim and Alfian Sa'at, Aidli published an anthology of Malay plays in the book, *Bisik*. She has toured Scotland, Australia, Malaysia, Indonesia, Romania, Hong Kong and Hungary, performing Singapore-brand theatre.

A recipient of the National Art Council's Young Artist Award for Theatre in 2008, she played the leading role of Murni alongside Malaysia's legendary actor, Datuk Haji Rahim Razali, in Sanif Olek's film Sayang Disayang (2013), Singapore's official 2015 Oscar® Entry for Best Foreign Language Film. In 2016, she published her collection of Malay plays entitled Chantek, which was awarded the Hadiah Persuratan (Literary Award) 2017 by the Malay Language Council, Singapore.

Aidli is currently working in Temasek Polytechnic as the Deputy Manager of the Arts Division, in the Student Development & Alumni Affairs department and has a Master of Education from the University of Adelaide.

### Edith Podesta

RESOURCE PANEL

Edith Podesta is an award-winning actor, theatre-maker and choreographer based in Singapore. She studied Acting and Movement Studies at the National Institute of Dramatic Art (NIDA), holds a Master of Arts Fine Arts from LASALLE College of the Arts, and is currently the Associate Artistic Director of Young & Wild at Wild Rice.

Her diverse artistic background includes co-founding A Group Of People, an award-winning collaborative ensemble of Singaporean actors and theatre-makers, whose production of *A Cage Goes In Search Of A Bird* won Production of the Year at the Straits Times Life! Theatre Awards in 2010. In 2014, she won the Straits Times Life! Theatre Best Actress Award for her role in Cake Theatrical Productions' *Illogic*, directed by Natalie Hennedige. In 2017, she was awarded Best Original Script and Production of the Year for *BITCH: The Origin of the Female Species*, commissioned by the M1 Singapore Fringe Festival. In 2019, her production of *Leda and The Rage*, commissioned and produced by Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay, received the Production of the Year Award.

Edith has lectured at LASALLE College of the Arts, Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts and School of the Arts in Singapore, as well as NIDA, Conservatorium of Music and University of Technology in Australia.

### Sean Topin

RESOURCE PANEL

Sean has almost 30 years' experience working in theatre and education, most of it in Singapore. Sean has spent his career mostly teaching and directing in the theatre, starting out with his first full-time job at Act 3 International.

Sean loves to direct but also sometimes performs and writes, and has a special interest in devising theatre and directing Singapore work. He has directed a range of professional productions, as well as a range of productions in education, community and even church settings.

From 2001 to 2004, Sean worked full-time with The Necessary Stage, where he began to hone his craft by directing productions such as *Such Sweet Sorrow*, *Sing Song and Close - In My Face*. During that time, he was appointed the company's Associate Artistic Director and headed the M1 Youth Connection, the Necessary Community Festival, while also leading the Theatre for Youth and Community.

From 2015 to 2020, Sean was the Artistic Director of the M1 Singapore Fringe Festival. He directed productions that featured in the festival, namely *Tongues* (in collaboration with Jason Wee) and *What Did You Learn Today?* (in collaboration with Natalie Hennedige). Sean also directed *The Perfection of Ten* for Esplanade's The Studios in 2012 and the performance tour of *Marco Polo*, written by Jovi Tan Yit Long, winner of TheatreWorks' 24-Hour Playwriting Competition 2013 (Youth Category).

Sean was Head of Theatre Faculty with SOTA from 2009 to 2019 and continues to teach at the school full-time. He has directed school wide productions and faculty productions, namely *Body of Land, Clusterfish* by Haresh Sharma, *Smartbutt* by Jean Tay as well as *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *The Glass Menagerie*, to name a few.

Sean is currently studying Creative Writing part-time at LASALLE College of the Arts, after which he hopes to publish a collection of plays for youth.

### Production Credits

- CREATIVE TEAM -

PLAYWRIGHT
PERFORMER
LIGHTING DESIGNER

SOUND DESIGNER

SET DESIGNER

DIRECTOR

RENEE YEONG
MICHELLE TAN
SABRINA SNG
GABRIEL CHAN
JING NG

PETRINA DAWN TAN

PRODUCTION TEAM

PRODUCTION MANAGER

STAGE MANAGER

ASSISTANT STAGE MANAGER

**PRODUCER** 

LAM DAN FONG

(THE BACKSTAGE AFFAIR)

CELESTINE WONG
(THE BACKSTAGE AFFAIR)

**CHONG WEE NEE** 

(THE BACKSTAGE AFFAIR)

**ALICIA CHONG** 

- RESOURCE PANEL -

AIDLI 'ALIN' MOSBIT

EDITH PODESTA SEAN TOBIN I AM TRYING TO SAY SOMETHING TRUE

### Behind the scenes











# /IS()R



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\$38\*^

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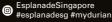
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to our Esplanade partner, arts benefactor, donors and sponsors for believing in our vision to be a performing arts centre for everyone. They made all these possible!



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**1,891** 



821

2,062,549

People attended our activities at the centre.



Non-Ticketed

379,989

Ticketed

**72,756** 

\*Figures for Esplanade's activities from Apr 2021 to Mar 2022.



We believe that everyone should be able to experience the joy of the arts, including children, youth, seniors, migrant workers and individuals with special needs. Our community engagement activities bring the arts to those in need.



#### Your contribution\* will make a difference.

On behalf of the communities we serve, thank you! Find out how you too can make a difference through the arts at Esplanade.

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To find out more, email us at donations@esplanade.com or speak with us at 6828 8321.

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#### With Gratitude

Esplanade –Theatres on the Bay is a charity, a not-for-profit organisation and Singapore's national performing arts centre.

We seek to entertain, engage, educate and inspire through the arts. We thank everyone who has helped us bring joy, inspiration and positive impact to Singaporeans from all walks of life by supporting the arts and Esplanade.

Our heartfelt appreciation goes especially to our Donors and Sponsors, for their steadfast belief in our mission and for their generous contributions.

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### Join us in sharing the joy of the arts and help us reach more communities in need.

We believe that an experience with the arts is special and that with your generous support, more people will get a chance to enjoy the arts. Join us in sharing the joy of the arts and help us reach more communities in need.



Esplanade also receives grants from the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth, and support for its Community Programmes from the Tote Board Family, comprising Tote Board, Singapore Pools and Singapore Turf Club.





