



An Esplanade Commission

Yusof: Portrait of a President

By Teater Ekamatra (Singapore)

21 – 24 Oct 2025

Singtel Waterfront Theatre at Esplanade

Pre-show Educator's Guide

Recommended Level: Secondary

A programme of 60 *Connections – At Home and Afar*, a year-long season of Singapore stories and international collaborations in celebration of SG60.

Dear Educators,

We are pleased to share with you the *Feed Your Imagination (F.Y.I)* resource pack, which contains a pre-show information guide for your students.

In this guide, you will find:

- Background information on the performance, *Yusof: Portrait of a President*.
- Suggested pre-show resources, activities, and discussion questions to engage your students and spark curiosity.

If you have any queries or feedback, please don't hesitate to reach out to our team. We hope you find these materials useful and inspiring for your classroom.

ABOUT YUSOF: PORTRAIT OF A PRESIDENT

In 1961, Singapore's first president, Yusof Ishak delivered a watershed speech at the National Day Mass Rally. A man of ideals who dared to dream of a peaceful and successful nation despite 200 years of colonial rule, he spoke of how democracy could transform Singapore into a country of great national unity and solidarity.

Yusof: Portrait of a President traces his journey from humble beginnings as a journalist to becoming Singapore's first head of state, and offers a rare glimpse into the life and times of this extraordinary leader who dedicated his life in service to Singapore.

First commissioned for *Pesta Raya – Malay Festival of Arts 2015*, *Yusof: Portrait of a President* is written by playwright and director Zizi Azah binte Abdul Majid and is based on her research and interviews.

A programme of *60 Connections – At Home and Afar*, a year-long season of Singapore stories and international collaborations in celebration of SG60.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this performance, students will:

- Understand the key events and accomplishments of Yusof Ishak's life
- Examine the significance of his role in Singapore's history
- Identify and consider the challenges he faced on his journey to the presidency
- Reflect on Yusof Ishak's values and leadership qualities to gain insights into effective leadership

WHAT TO EXPECT

STUDENTS

What will I be watching?

You're about to watch *Yusof: Portrait of a President*, a play about Singapore's first President.

Actors will take on different roles to tell the story of Yusof Ishak, from his time as a journalist to his role as a national leader.

The play explores big questions like: What makes a good leader? How do we stay true to our values?

Expect a mix of drama, emotions, and moments that show the human side of history. Look out for key scenes in newsrooms, political meetings, and quiet family moments.

What is a Playwright?

A playwright writes the scripts of theatre plays. They decide what each character says, where each scene takes place, and how the story begins, develops and ends, amongst other things.

Zizi Azah binte Abdul Majid is the playwright who wrote *Yusof: Portrait of a President*. As this is a historical play, she carried out detailed research to depict it as accurately as possible. To find out more about Zizi Azah binte Abdul Majid, refer to **page 4**.

What is a Director?

The director's role is to bring the script to life, creating a unified and memorable theatre experience for the audience. They guide how the story is told on stage, making sure every element, from the actors' performances to the look and feel of the show, works together to engage the audience.

They work closely with the actors to bring out their best performances, helping them understand their characters and emotions. They also collaborate with a team of designers for sets, costumes, props, lighting, and sound, ensuring all these elements support the mood, themes, and message of the play.

Mohd Fared Jainal is directing this year's staging of *Yusof: Portrait of a President*. To find out more about Mohd Fared Jainal refer to **page 4**.

Who are the main characters?

Actor	Character(s)
Sani Hussin	Yusof Ishak
Siti Khalijah	Noor Aishah
Ghafir Akhbar	Ishak, Aziz Ishak, Tunku Abdul Rahman
Dalifah Shahril	Aishahton, Wati, Inah
Farah Ong	Lily Ishak, Sri
Fauzie Laily	Ramley Ishak, Samad Ismail

ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHT – ZIZI AZAH BINTE ABDUL MAJID

Zizi Majid is a playwright whose plays advocate for a shared humanity. Recipient of the 2025 New York State Council for the Arts/New York Foundation for the Arts Artist Fellowship as well as a Playwriting Fellowship with the Dramatists Guild Foundation, her work has been developed at the Lucille Lortel Theatre (NYC), Syracuse Stage (Syracuse) and WP Theatre (NYC). She won the Pacific Rim Prize for Playwriting (Kumu Kahua Theatre/University of Hawaii Manoa); and has been named alternate for the Princeton Arts Fellowship, a finalist for the Blue Ink Playwriting Award; a thrice semi-finalist for the O’Neil National Playwrights Conference and a finalist for the Columbia@ Roundabout New Play Reading Series. Plays include *On the Vessel* (formerly titled *Milk*), *They Came in the Night*, *Return to Fall*, *Yusof* and *How Did the Cat Get So Fat*.

Zizi was formerly the artistic director of Teater Ekamatra (Singapore) garnering multiple awards during her tenure. Zizi received her MFA in Playwriting from Columbia University and lives in Central New York where she teaches at Syracuse University and Hamilton College.

ABOUT THE DIRECTOR - MOHD FARED JAINAL

A recipient of the Goh Chok Tong Youth Promise Award, Fared engages in cross disciplinary work that delves into the realms of both visual and performing arts. He graduated with a Master’s in Arts (Design) from Open University/LASALLE College of the Arts.

Fared has collaborated extensively with various theatre and art groups in Singapore as a director, performer, visual artist and set designer. He has won several awards as a director, designer, and actor for the Straits Times Life! Theatre Awards and BOH Cameronian Arts Awards.

Fared is the founding member of Neon Tights, a visual art collective dealing with theatre design. He served as the Artistic Director (2013-2023) of Teater Ekamatra and does consultancy work with Malay Heritage Centre (MHC). Fared teaches at School of the Arts (SOTA).

ABOUT TEATER EKAMATRA

Teater Ekamatra is an established and exciting Singaporean arts company that spotlights artists of diverse ethnicities. The company is living out their vision of being at the heart of theatre by staging daring works that address socio-political issues.

Teater Ekamatra has been commissioned by notable international arts festivals and has also garnered numerous nominations and accolades, especially at Singapore's highest platform for excellence in theatre, the Straits Times Life! Theatre Awards. These include Best Director, Production of the Year, Best Original Script, and more.

Guided by their values of diversity, inclusivity, integrity, accountability, and people-centredness, Teater Ekamatra is committed to their mission of creating engaging art that inspires, as well as incubating emerging talents and expanding diversity within the industry.

Follow Teater Ekamatra on IG: [**@teaterekamatra**](#)

EDUCATORS

Yusof: Portrait of a President explores themes such as leadership, identity, integrity, and nation-building through the life and legacy of Singapore's first President, Yusof Ishak.

The following pre-show resources and discussion activities will help prepare your students to engage more deeply with the performance. Their experience will be more meaningful if they are given time to explore these materials and reflect on the suggested questions prior to attending the show.

Use this guide to prompt class discussion, introduce historical and biographical context, and activate thinking around the values and challenges of leadership, both in the past and today.

How to Use This Guide

This pre-show resource contains:

1. **Background context** for Yusof Ishak and Singapore in the 1960s.
2. **Discussion prompts** to activate students' prior knowledge.
3. **Activities** that develop observation, empathy, and critical thinking skills.
4. **Reflection questions** for use during the performance.

Tip: Schedule at least **one class period (40–60 minutes)** before the theatre visit to complete these activities.

Outcome of Pre-Show Work

By completing these activities, students will:

- Be familiar with Yusof Ishak's life, values, and leadership style.
- Recognise the historical and social context behind the events in the play.
- Engage with the performance on an emotional and intellectual level.

Section 1 – Introducing Yusof Ishak (15–20 minutes)

Instructions

1. Begin with a warm-up question: “Whose face is on Singapore’s currency notes? Why do you think they were chosen?”
2. Show students an image of the Singapore note with Yusof Ishak’s portrait.
3. Distribute a short biography (you can adapt from [National Library Board resources](#)).
4. Play a short video about Yusof Ishak.



Discussion Prompts:

- What do you already know about Yusof Ishak?
- Why might Singapore choose to honour him on its currency?
- What qualities do you think make someone worthy of being remembered in history?

Section 2 – Understanding the Historical Context (15 minutes)

Instructions

1. Give a **brief overview** of Singapore in the 1960s:
 - Newly independent nation.
 - Multi-racial society seeking unity.
 - Media and press environment.
2. Divide the class into **small groups** and assign each group one topic. Students are tasked to do brief research on their assigned topic using pre-selected links or printed articles given out by the teacher.

Group Topics:

- Singapore’s independence in 1965.
- Role of the President in Singapore’s government.
- Racial harmony and multi-racial policies.
- Press freedom and media history in Singapore.

Sharing: Each group presents **three key facts** to the class.

Section 3 – Quotes for Reflection (10–15 minutes)

Instructions

1. Display these quotes from Yusof Ishak:
 - **On Multi-racialism:** “No man need feel that to belong to a particular religion puts him at a disadvantage or gives him an advantage. Only in this way can a multi-racial society like Singapore live in peace and prosperity.”
 - **On shared virtues:** “Peace, goodwill, and tolerance... can be and should be used to bridge other kinds of differences between men.”
 - **On cultural pride:** “He has every right to be as proud of his language and culture as you are of yours.”
 - **On understanding others:** “You should make an effort to understand his language and culture because there may be much you can learn from them.”
2. Assign **one quote per group**.
3. Ask students to discuss:
 - What does this quote mean in your own words?
 - How is it relevant to Singapore today?
 - Can you think of a recent event that connects to this value?
4. Groups share key points with the class.

Section 4 – Pre-Show Thinking Prompts (10 minutes)

Encourage students to keep these in mind **during the performance**:

1. How are the characters feeling at different points in the story?
2. What motivates Yusof Ishak to make certain decisions?
3. What obstacles does he face, and how does he respond?
4. How do his personal values shape his public actions?
5. What qualities does the play suggest are most important in a leader?

Instructions for Teachers:

Print these questions so students can bring them to the show or keep them in their notebooks.

Optional Extension Activities Before the Show

1. **Mini Research Presentations (30 minutes)**
 - Assign small groups to present one aspect of Yusof Ishak’s life:
 - Childhood and education
 - Journalism career and *Utusan Melayu*
 - Presidency

2. Role-Play Debate (20–30 minutes)

- In groups, imagine Yusof Ishak is advising a potential political candidate on an issue (racial harmony, press freedom, cultural identity).
- Half the group plays Yusof Ishak's perspective, the other half plays the potential candidate.
- Present the dialogue to the class.

ON THE STUDENT GUIDE

1. The Student Guide will be distributed to all students on the day of performance.
2. The Student Guide is designed to help you carry out post-show reflection and discussions and to further the conversation. We urge you to take some time and carry out some of the activities given in the guide to extend the learning into the classroom, after the show has ended.

THEATRE ETIQUETTE

Minding our manners helps everyone enjoy the show. Here are some things to note:

- When the lights dim in the theatre, turn your attention to the stage — the show is about to begin.
- During the performance, keep an open mind, watch and listen carefully. Talking during the performance will disturb others around you.
- Refrain from using or checking your smart devices (e.g. mobiles phones, watches, PLDs). Bright screens distract both the audience and performers.
- Do not eat or drink in the theatre.
- When the show has ended, pick up after yourselves, take all your belongings and dispose of any trash.

Interested to learn more about the arts? Check out www.esplanade.com/schools for more resources and content!



Principal Sponsors

A&O SHEARMAN Bloomberg Deloitte



Principal Sponsor



Supporting Sponsors



Supported By

How's Catering
Matthew Teng
Saw Wei Jie



#EsplanadeSG #WonderHere