

 **esplanade**

Feed Your
Imagination



21 – 24 Oct 2025,
Tue – Fri

An Esplanade Commission

Yusof: Portrait of a President

By Teater Ekamatra

Director's message

Let us delve into the life of Yusof bin Ishak, the first president of Singapore.

Yusof bin Ishak was a remarkable individual deeply attuned to his environment. He aspired to be the best not only for himself, but for his entire community. He recognised the urgent need to elevate the standard of the Malays.

The establishment of *Utusan Melayu* was his means of championing his people, empowering them through access to news and information. He understood that knowledge fosters self-understanding and a deeper comprehension of the world. With knowledge, they could engage in critical thinking and make informed decisions. Furthermore, knowledge plays a crucial role in advocating for social change, enabling them to overcome obstacles, innovate and contribute to societal betterment. This was the essence of Yusof Ishak's mission, executed in a humble manner. He travelled from village to village to persuade them of the importance of *Utusan Melayu* and sacrificed his own electricity when his neighbours had none, so that he could be equal with them. Even after becoming the head of state, he chose to reside in a smaller house called Melati House, previously used by the part-time workers of the Istana.

As human beings, we possess distinct values and principles that define our individuality. These values serve as guidelines in our lives,

influencing our actions and decisions. They are shaped by both external factors, such as family, culture, peers, education, and religion, and internal processes, including personal experiences, reflection and independent thought. These influences, particularly during childhood, establish a foundational moral compass. However, they are dynamic and can be refined or altered over time through new experiences and conscious self-evaluation.

By sharing the life of Yusof Ishak and the individuals who shaped him, we are inspired and informed of our own identity and potential. In the face of a precarious world characterised by heightened political, economic, environmental and social challenges, it is with great responsibility that we uphold our values and strive to create a beautiful and peaceful society.

I conclude with a line by Yusof from the play:

"I realise now that if we set aside our principles and ethics, we will begin to lose our integrity. Without integrity, we are only a hollowed shell, empty, rootless and useless. That is the important lesson that I must teach my family and my children."

Thank you for watching *Yusof: Portrait of a President*.

Mohd Fared Jainal
Director

BEFORE THE SHOW

What will I be watching?

You are 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.

Before Watching Prompt

Circle one word to describe what you expect this play to be like before the show.

Exciting
Serious Inspiring
Funny Emotional
Thought-provoking

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.

- Zizi Azah binte Abdul Majid is the playwright who wrote *Yusof: Portrait of a President*.
- Playwrights bring history to life by imagining conversations, exploring emotions, and highlighting moments that help us understand the past in new and exciting ways.
- Some playwrights write **historical plays** – stories based on real people and events. But these aren't just facts on stage!
- To find out more about Zizi Azah binte Abdul Majid, refer to **page 5**.

Activity 1

IMAGINE YOU'RE A PLAYWRIGHT

If you could write a play, what story would you want to tell?

What is a Director?

A director oversees the creative vision of a theatre production. They work to bring out the best performance in the actors and to tell the story in the best way possible using the set, costumes, props, and more.

- 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 5**.

Activity 2 DIRECTOR'S TASK

If you were directing a story about Singapore today, how would you stage it? Describe or draw in the box below.

Who are the main characters?



Sani Hussin
Yusof Ishak



Siti Khalijah
Noor Aishah



Ghafir Akhbar
Ishak, Aziz Ishak,
Tunku Abdul Rahman



Dalifah Shahril
Aishaton, 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.

Prompt

If you could ask Zizi one question about writing *Yusof: Portrait of a President*, what would it be?

ABOUT THE DIRECTOR – MOHD FARED JAINAL

Fared is a theatre director, performer, visual artist, and set designer. He has won awards at the Straits Times Life! Theatre Awards and BOH Cameronian Arts Awards.

He co-founded a visual arts collective called Neon Tights and was the Artistic Director of Teater Ekamatra (2013–2023). Today, he teaches at the School of the Arts (SOTA).

ABOUT TEATER EKAMATRA

Teater Ekamatra is a Singaporean arts company that creates daring works about important social and political issues.

They have won many awards including Best Director, Best Original Script and Production of the Year. They are guided by values of diversity, inclusivity, and integrity.

Follow them on Instagram: [@teaterekamatra](https://www.instagram.com/teaterekamatra)

Activity 3 REFLECTION

Why do you think it's important for a theatre company to tell stories about Singapore's history?



QUESTIONS TO THINK ABOUT BEFORE THE SHOW

As you watch the play, try to keep these questions in your mind:

- How do the characters feel at different times in the story?
- What reasons or beliefs guide Yusof Ishak's choices?
- What challenges or problems does he face? How does he deal with them?
- How do Yusof Ishak's personal values affect his decisions?
- What do you think the play is trying to say about what makes a good leader?

Jot down or draw out your first thoughts after the show.

AFTER THE SHOW

Activity 4 REFLECTING ON THE PLAY

Objective: Recall key moments and characters in the play and connect them to leadership qualities.

1. Who were the main characters?
2. What were the turning points in Yusof Ishak's journey?
3. What challenges did Yusof Ishak face personally and publicly?

Discussion Prompts

- What was your biggest takeaway from the play?
- Which moment impressed you most, and why?

Activity 5 LEADERSHIP UNDER PRESSURE

Objective: Understand the challenges Yusof Ishak faced and how he made tough decisions. Identify three challenges Yusof Ishak faced and the decisions he made in the play.

Challenges	What was at stake?
A	
B	
C	



What decision did he make?

What value did he show?

Activity 6

VALUES IN ACTION: HOT-SEATING

Objective: Build empathy by stepping into characters' shoes.

Take turns "hot-seating" as Yusof Ishak, Noor Aishah, Ramley, Aziz, or Tunku Abdul Rahman. You can also roleplay as reporters from *Utusan Melayu*, asking tough questions and uncovering different perspectives.

Reflection

Did playing the character (or reporter) change your understanding of their challenges? Why?

Sample Reporter Questions:

"Yusof, what was the biggest challenge you faced as President?"

"Noor Aishah, how did you support your husband during difficult times?"

"Tunku Abdul Rahman, what inspired your decisions for the country?"

"Ramley/Aziz, how did your actions impact the people around you?"



Activity 7 THEN AND NOW – COMPARING LEADERSHIP

Objective: Connect the play's themes to leadership challenges today.

1. What issues did Yusof Ishak face?
2. How do these compare to issues today?
3. What lessons from Yusof Ishak's story are still important?

In your opinion, how important are these qualities for a leader to have? Rank these values from 1 (most important) to 5 (least important).

- ☐ **Honesty**
- ☐ **Courage**
- ☐ **Intelligence**
- ☐ **Communication skills**
- ☐ **Empathy**

Follow-up

1. Which quality do you think Yusof Ishak valued most? Why?

2. If you could add one more leadership quality, what would it be?

Creative Extension

Design a commemorative poster or leadership slogan inspired by Yusof's values.
Share it with your friends or upload it onto your social and tag us at **#EsplanadeSG**.

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

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