

# Embracing the unknown

With studies, gigs and internships disrupted and dream jobs hard to come by, graduates are trying to make the most of their circumstances



Toh Wen Li

Fatima Bano was three weeks away from finishing her fine arts degree at Lasalle College of the Arts last April when she was diagnosed with the coronavirus.

"We were already adjusting to how we wouldn't have physical project submissions. Then, in the middle of all that stress, I got Covid-19," says the 24-year-old.

After a feverish week of flu-like symptoms, she ended up staying in hospital for six more weeks as she continued to test positive for the virus.

Her college was very supportive, she says, and gave her a month-long extension. Even then, isolation from her loved ones, and the lingering effects of coronavirus – fatigue, occasional gastric issues and heart palpitations – took a toll on her morale and productivity as she worked on her final-year project.

"I felt lost, because all my friends were getting their result slips, while I wasn't even done with my project," adds Fatima, who eventually graduated and is now a full-time mixed-media artist working primarily with watercolour. These days, she gets most of her income from running paint-making workshops in cafes and schools.

She is one of the cohort of Generation Z artists graduating into an industry hard hit by the pandemic. Many face an uncertain future and are anxious about their career prospects.

The strict social distancing precautions, particularly during last year's circuit breaker, scuppered best-laid plans, sounding the death knell for internships, performance gigs and physical graduating shows.

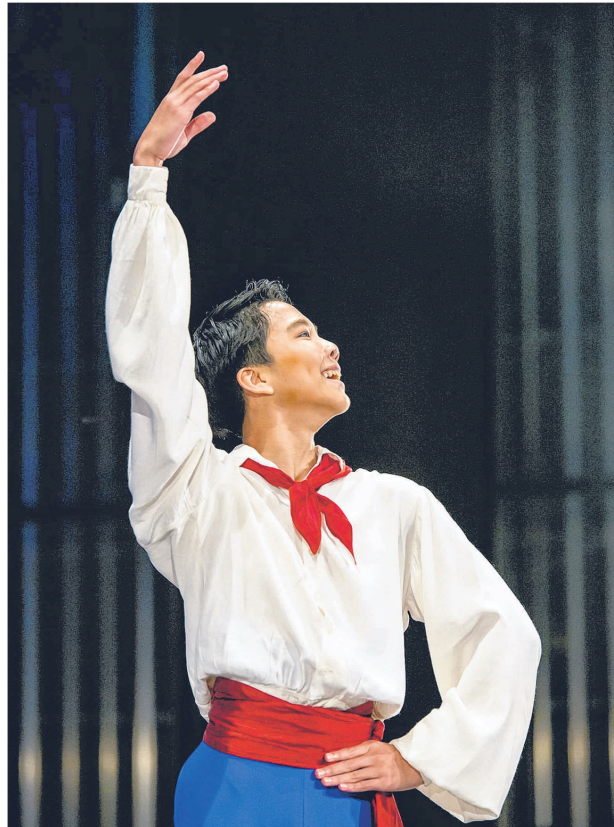
Some students even cut their overseas studies short.

If not for Covid-19, ballet dancer Timothy Ching, 19, would already have a diploma from the New Zealand School of Dance. But in March last year, when New Zealand started shutting its borders, he made the hard decision to discontinue his studies and head home.

"My family and I thought it would be best to fly back to Singapore while flights were still available," says Ching, who was then a final-year student. "Also, I thought it would be better to be surrounded by family in case of emergencies."

Back in Singapore, he enrolled in classes with the Singapore Dance Theatre and, on Saturday, will perform in the company's in-studio dance presentation of the comic ballet Coppelia.

Ching starts national service this year, but will keep up with dance classes and plans to audition to be



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LIM JING JIE (above), who graduated from the Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music last year and is now doing a traineeship there, on the tough job search

(Left) Ballet dancer Timothy Ching cut short his studies at the New Zealand School of Dance and came back to Singapore in March last year, where he is now enrolled in classes with the Singapore Dance Theatre.

(Below, left) Lasalle College of the Arts graduate Fatima Bano exhibited some of her watercolour artworks at Singapore Art Week. Young arts practitioners like her welcome opportunities for industry experience. PHOTOS: AMBER GRIFFIN, TAN EETONG (TET PHOTOGRAPHY), YONG LI XUAN

mindset towards the arts will be much more impactful.

Many of the young people ST interviewed want more funding and public awareness of the arts as a possible career. They also welcome opportunities for industry experience, such as working closely with mentors in the arts scene, as well as financial advice.

Fatima, for instance, benefited from the exposure when one of her Lasalle seniors, a co-founder of the Tekad Kolektif art collective, invited her to show her watercolour and video works at its Singapore Art Week group exhibition this year. She got a glimpse into the various aspects of organising an art show, such as logistics, budgeting and having a sense of scale.

Ms Tay has not given up on her dream of working in a museum one day. She volunteers as a museum docent and is also one of 20 members of the National Gallery Singapore's Kolektif initiative, which gives youths aged 17 to 25 the chance to shape its programmes.

At the Light to Night Festival last month, they created a youth-friendly space showcasing different projects. Kolektif, Ms Tay says, helped her build her portfolio and offered some solace during her transition into adulthood.

"Kolektif has widened my network of museum professionals and enthusiasts and reaffirms my belief that the work a museum does and its art offerings are essential in today's society," she adds.

In the National Arts Council's surveys of arts and creative freelancers in July, September and December last year, more than half of the 1,500 respondents said they were still looking for jobs.

After applying for dozens of roles in fields such as design, programming, marketing and education, she found a job as an executive in a healthcare IT firm.

She feels more needs to be done to make careers in the arts more sustainable. "I did a quick survey with my friends who just started or are already working in the arts industry, and a common concern was job progression and job security."

"Art practitioners have bills to pay too. While policies and schemes may help, a change of



a company dancer with SDT later.

The pandemic has made it harder for fresh graduates in general to secure full-time jobs. An annual survey released last week showed that close to seven in 10 students who graduated from four

local universities last year had found permanent employment, down from over eight out of 10 in 2019.

Those wishing to enter the arts industry have had their work cut out for them. Singer-songwriter

Lim Jing Jie, 26, who graduated from the Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music last year and is now doing a traineeship there, says the job search was "tough".

Lim, known as Keat in the music industry, sent out as many as 20 applications a day in May and June for roles such as social media marketing and events management, which he had some experience in. Nothing much came of this, except for an internship and his current traineeship.

Before graduating, he had planned to teach voice as a freelancer while writing, producing and performing his own music. Those plans had to be put on hold when the circuit breaker began.

"I really had to rethink what I could and wanted to do and just go with the flow," he says. "The real challenge was having to live with the uncertainty of everything, and not knowing where to really go."

The economic uncertainty has also prompted some graduates to shelve their plans to enter the arts industry, as they prioritise stability over experimentation.

Ms Tay Yu Qing, 24, who last year graduated from Nanyang Technological University's School of Art, Design and Media, wanted a source of "stable employment" as she had a student loan to pay off.

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## Creating opportunities for fresh grads

From C1

One avenue of support for young theatremakers is Bridging The Gap, started by theatremakers Alvin Tan, Rebekah Sangeetha Dorai and A. Yagnya last December. It aims to give fresh graduates a platform to work closely with established theatre practitioners and designers as they transition into the industry.

Earlier this month, Bridging The Gap staged its first production – subtitled LO – at The Substation, directed by Tan and starring Dorai as well as final-year Lasalle undergraduates Indumathi Tamiliselvan and Melva Lee.

Tan notes that emerging theatremakers might be vulnerable to issues in the industry such as harassment, vague contracts and not getting paid.

"Covid brought out the worst of it," he says. "These young people who are emerging dare not voice their grievances because they don't want to be blackmarked."

Several arts companies already have youth wings for young actors. But Tan, a Cultural Medallion recipient and founder of theatre company The Necessary Stage, adds: "Every year, there are more emerging artists than there are opportunities for them. Established groups will be very careful about taking on emerging artists. But in order for



subTITLED cast members (from far left) Melva Lee, Indumathi Tamiliselvan and Rebekah Sangeetha Dorai. The production was the first by Bridging The Gap, an initiative to give fresh graduates a platform to work with theatre veterans. PHOTO: BLACK BEANIE

them to get good, they need to act, they need to do more jobs."

Yagnya, 30, observes that Gen Z artists are very concerned about sustainability.

"Even before they graduate, they are thinking, how do I sustain this lifestyle – how do I sustain being an actor, how do I sustain myself physically, emotionally, monetarily," subTITLED cast member Melva Lee, 20, says. "We can get mini-projects that tide us through two or three months, but I think the longevity of our jobs (is a concern)."

"With the pandemic, I realised that everyone in this industry

needs a back-up plan."

She plans to get a teaching certificate and apply for gigs in a commercial production house after she graduates.

While it is daunting trying to break into the local theatre scene, she says it has been heartening to see other young people create opportunities for themselves too.

"Young collectives such as Patch and Punnet have been producing a lot of online work. And you see Gen Z artists venturing into YouTube, and trying to grow their social media following by doing IGTV. We are all struggling, but the support for each

other's works is overwhelming."

Another person trying to ride with the times is 21-year-old Priscilla Fong, a final-year student at the Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music who still hopes to do a postgraduate degree overseas, depending on Covid-19 regulations.

She helped organise her school's graduating concert, which was live-streamed from the Victoria Concert Hall. Last year, she co-founded Artpeace, a youth group that uses art to reach out to marginalised groups. It has hosted virtual events such as an e-busking series.

### Virtual job fair

The National Arts Council's Arts Resource Hub is organising a virtual jobs fair in partnership with NTUC's Employment and Employability Institute (e2i). The #SGUnited Virtual Career Fair runs till March 7 and has more than 150 job vacancies from more than 20 employers in the arts and creative sector – including the National Gallery Singapore, Singapore Book Council, Apsara Asia and Nam Hwa Opera. For more information, visit [go.gov.sg/artscreativevc2021](http://go.gov.sg/artscreativevc2021)

"Career-wise, I would say I am more excited rather than apprehensive," says Fong, who hopes to combine multiple streams of income such as teaching, performing and production.

"The pandemic offered us a lot of opportunities to put our work out there, in ways we might not have thought of in the past. If we really want something, it's up to us to create opportunities for ourselves."

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• To donate to Bridging The Gap, go to [str.sg/JHWQ](http://str.sg/JHWQ)