



Disney's Frozen The Hit Broadway Musical played at the Sands Theatre in February and March 2023. PHOTO: DISNEY THEATRICAL PRODUCTIONS AND BASE ENTERTAINMENT ASIA



Benson Ang
 Lifestyle Correspondent

In 2023 alone, Mr Jian Yang has already watched four top international musicals.

The 43-year-old put on his dress shoes and ironed his shirts for We Will Rock You in January, Disney's Frozen The Hit Broadway Musical in February, & Juliet in September and Mamma Mia! in October.

The managing partner at integrated communications company Distilleri, who used to travel to Broadway in New York and West End in London to watch his favourite song-and-dance stage productions, says: "2023 has been a blast. During the pandemic, it was not possible to watch musicals in the flesh, so I guess I am making up for lost time."

Mr Yang is among many Singaporeans who are enjoying a post-pandemic blitz of internationally renowned musicals performed here. Some are larger-scale imported productions on tour, while others are titles put on by local theatre companies.

The bigger, glitzier shows have generally been staged by live entertainment company Base Entertainment Asia at Marina Bay Sands' Sands Theatre, where it has been the venue's resident developer, producer, programmer and manager since 2010.

After safe distancing measures were relaxed in 2022, the company brought in the family-friendly classic The Sound of Music, followed

Musicals are enjoying a post-pandemic boom, with theatregoers flocking to both bigger, glitzier imported shows and titles staged by local groups

by Frozen, fresh off Broadway jukebox musical & Juliet, and ever-green favourite Mamma Mia!, which ends its run on Sunday.

And audiences returned to the theatre with gusto.

Base Entertainment Asia's chief executive Chantal Prudhomme says: "We had sensed people's level of interest wanting to see live content again as soon as we were allowed to stage smaller shows earlier in the post-pandemic phase, but did not know if we would get back to where we were pre-pandemic. We were pleasantly surprised."

In some instances, sales are even stronger than before the pandemic, she reveals, like for Mamma Mia!, which previously played in Singapore in 2014 and 2018. Base is also bringing in more shows to Singapore, with the increase in demand for them, she shares.

The latest feather in Base's cap is Hamilton, the Tony Award winner that will hit Singapore's shores in April.

Ms Prudhomme says: "Hamilton is one of the top musicals worldwide. It is a lyrical and choreography masterpiece and has revolutionised the world of musicals."

"Many Singaporeans, even those who have travelled abroad, have not had the chance to see it live, as tickets have constantly been sold out. We knew from our research that it is a very anticipated title and can see from our first announcement made in October that it will be hugely successful."

She feels that the Singapore musical theatre scene is as vibrant as that of London or New York, but the seasons are shorter due to the smaller population here.

"Singaporeans are well-read and well-travelled, allowing for such shows to be appreciated here."



(From left) Musicals & Juliet and into The Woods are among the slew of productions that add to the vibrant musical theatre scene in 2023. PHOTOS: DANIEL BOUD, FANGDEMONIUM

She adds "Base was established in 2010 with the intention of making Singapore the Broadway of Asia, and has done so by presenting many world-renowned musical titles here, as well as many Asian premieres of these titles."

Local theatre company Pangdemonium, founded in 2010 by theatre power couple Tracie and Adrian Pang, is known for staging one musical a year, on top of its usual line-up of stimulating and challenging plays.

Its current musical, Into The Woods, is playing at the Singtel Waterfront Theatre at Esplanade until Nov 12.

A subversive mash-up of beloved fairy tales, it features spellbinding music and lyrics by the late American composer Stephen Sondheim and a witty script by American playwright James Lapine. Among the actors treading the boards are Singaporeans Nathania Ong, Benjamin Chow and Frances Lee.

Pangdemonium's co-artistic director Tracie Pang says Into The Woods, last performed here in 2011, has been on the company's wish list for a while.

With Sondheim's death in November 2021, she says "it was time to put our spin on this much-loved musical".

"People often treat the show with such reverence that they miss its inherent humour and pathos, and I am heartened that reviews of our version have been positive."

According to her, Into The Woods is "pretty close" to selling out, with mostly single seats left.

"This is a huge relief as it has been four years since we have had a show with this kind of sales, the last one being 2019's Urinetown."

In 2024, the company will stage the Tony-winning musical Dear Evan Hansen, which tackles

themes like youth suicide and mental illness.

Compared with plays, musicals take much longer to stage, she adds.

"They are also more expensive, and hence risky from a commercial perspective, which is why not many organisations in Singapore will attempt to produce a full-scale professional musical."

Even so, she hopes Pangdemonium has helped raise the bar when it comes to what audiences believe Singapore companies can do.

"We also hope we can offer an alternative to touring shows that are brought in wholesale from overseas."

Then there is musical theatre academy and production company Sing'theatre, which primarily uses the genre to bring social conversations and personal struggles to the stage.

In 2023, it staged three musicals

- I Love You, You're Perfect, Now Change; Rent; and Cabaret. Another production, an original work called Once Upon A Like, is being staged in November. Little Shop Of Horrors will open in April 2024.

Its associate artistic director T.J. Taylor says: "2023 is our year to go big. We hope to keep bringing a variety of styles of musical theatre to Singaporean audiences, to expose them to shows that they may not always see on television or from touring casts."

Another of Sing'theatre's goals is to showcase the best of Singapore's musical theatre talents, which it has done plenty of this year, adds the 30-year-old.

For example, Cabaret - performed at the Drama Centre Theatre from Oct 5 to 15 - was the company's biggest production to date, with an 18-member cast headlined by Dwayne Lau, Kimberly Chan and Vester Ng.

The production's eight musicians also had a chance to shine when they performed the musical's tracks live, with veteran entertainer Hossan Leong at the helm as director.

Taylor says: "For the team of nine at Sing'theatre, it was an incredible adventure, our biggest challenge so far, which we embraced and overcame. We could not be prouder of the result."

Another international title Rent, staged at the School of the Arts Singapore's Studio Theatre from June 30 to July 2, was performed by amateurs with day jobs. It was put on by The Showstoppers, a musical theatre ensemble under the Sing'theatre Academy, which provides a platform for adult musical theatre performers to stage a full-length musical.

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Growing appetite, increasing affluence add to boom

FROM C1

Taylor says: "It was the biggest show that our academy has produced, with over three times the number of tickets we usually sell.

"We are proud to give such a professional platform and training ground to everyday performers who are interested in pursuing the arts, or just want to scratch the itch of performing that they gave up to follow a career in another industry."

Nanyang Technological University's associate professor of drama Marcus Tan attributes the larger appetite for musicals to the country's growing population, rising global reputation and expanding economy.

The burgeoning expatriate community, as well as Singaporeans' increasing affluence and willingness to spend, may also be contributing to the industry's apparent boom, he adds.

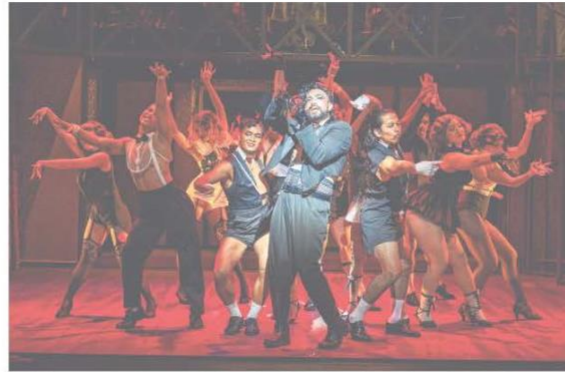
It also helps that the country has

more than enough venues, as well as technical and technological expertise, to support such imported productions.

But while Singapore is establishing itself as a hub for musicals, challenges still lie ahead – especially in the area of censorship and the perception that local audiences are more conservative than their Western counterparts.

Referring to how *The Book Of Mormon* – a popular Tony-winning production which satirises organised religion and highlights themes such as doubting one's faith – has never been performed here, Prof Tan says: "I am not sure if *The Book Of Mormon's* absence here is due to local audiences, and not censors. Perhaps it is both."

Perhaps liberal audiences might also see it as a small win that the LGBTQ-friendly *& Juliet*, which features a relationship between a man and a non-binary character, could be staged here at all – albeit with an Advisory 16 (Some Mature Content) rating. In the version per-



Actor Dwayne Lau (centre) in Sing'theatre's *Cabaret*, performed at the Drama Centre Theatre in October. PHOTO: YU KHING POH

formed in Singapore, a kiss between these two characters was replaced with them joining palms instead.

Still, Prof Tan concedes that the scene is more vibrant than before and Singaporeans are spoilt for choice, as companies will continue to strike a balance between importing international shows "to suit the popular taste" and slowly developing their own in the near future.

"In this regard, it is encouraging to see that *Pandemonium*, *Toy Factory* and *The Theatre Practice* are taking on this challenging genre and significant steps to de-

velop a Singaporean sense of musical theatre."

Mr Dayal Singh, programme leader of Lasalle College of the Arts' Bachelor of Arts (Honours) Musical Theatre course, also welcomes the "exponential growth" of the industry over the past decade.

He says: "The art form does come with hurdles, such as the fact that staging these works is a costly affair and involves a lot of moving parts. But it is an incredibly enriching experience that moves and empowers people. If you were to look at 2023 alone, we are seeing a wider variety of performances taking place, attracting a greater diversity

of audiences."

He adds: "Local theatre companies are to be congratulated on their efforts in championing the creation of a rich and broad spectrum of materials to engage with – making them accessible to audiences, building greater interest and taking risks. They are the ones making shows for young audiences, which then cultivates a lifelong journey of watching them."

Part-time yoga teacher and model Patricia Siswandjo says the higher ticket prices of musicals do not really deter her, as she usually watches them on date nights and special occasions.

The 27-year-old, who typically has a budget of \$100 to \$150 for each show, says: "Musicals are worth the money because they create wonderful memories that last a lifetime. Even today, I still remember the hours before, during and after my favourite musicals."

The fact that she is paying for a live performance that can change daily further justifies the cost, she adds. "The price is a proper remuneration for the cast members who give their all every day."

She has already secured tickets to catch *Mamma Mia!*, a musical based on the hits of Swedish pop icons Abba, on Saturday with her boyfriend.

She says: "My seat is perfect. I am close enough to see the actors, but far enough to take in the whole stage and appreciate the backdrops and special effects."

Mr Soo Zi Hao, 35, who works in financial services, saw six musicals in 2023, his favourite being *Cabaret*.

He says: "It was one of those non-blockbuster musicals that would have no chance of an overseas touring production coming to Singapore."

"So, to watch a home-grown version shows how the musical theatre scene has grown. The singing and dancing were immaculate, and I was impressed by how much local talent we have here."

Ms Su Chow watched *& Juliet* in October and will follow that up with *Into The Woods* this weekend.

She is most looking forward to seeing local actress Ong, having read about her "impressive achievements" playing Eponine in the musical *Les Misérables* on its United Kingdom-Ireland tour from 2021 to 2022 and at the West End from 2022 to 2023.

The 30-year-old, who works in the legal profession and watched her first musical without her parents at age 13, says: "It is great to be able to catch such a talent without having to travel overseas."

Reflecting on the worst days of the pandemic, Ms Chow adds: "It was tough for us musical lovers because theatres were shut. Filmed versions cannot replace the emotions and ambience of a live performance. So it is great to finally be able to hear a performer sing and an orchestra play in-person again."

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