

YOUNG ARTIST AWARD 2018

ZULKIFLI MOHAMED AMIN



Conducting Orkestra Melayu Singapura (OMS) Belia at the Inter Racial Inter Religious Harmony Nite by Thye Hua Kwan Moral Society, 2018.

Photo courtesy of Bryner Tan

Zulkifli Mohamed Amin (b. 1983) is a conductor, music director, composer and also educator. Recognised as a youth leader and a visionary of sorts among his contemporaries, Zulkifli has pursued his love of the arts since young. He began scribbling musical notations and fiddling with his uncle's electone at the age of ten. He went on to study at LASALLE College of the Arts where his love for music deepened and he graduated with a Diploma in Contemporary Popular Music in 2004.

As a multi-instrumentalist, Zulkifli has performed widely at home and overseas. He has performed with the Asian Contemporary Ensemble, Singapore Pop Orchestra, Singapore Wind Symphony and Orkestra Melayu Singapura (OMS). Zulkifli has written extensively for concerts, music festivals and performances. He is the conductor and music director of OMS Belia (OMS's youth orchestra) since its formation in 2005, and has become known and respected for pushing artistic boundaries and for his dynamic leadership.

Since the age of 19, he has worked as a music director on multi-disciplinary productions and his compositions span a broad spectrum of contexts and settings. He is currently the Youth Leader for OMS Belia, a group under People's Association (PA) Talents. He was also responsible for developing the Music Discovery Programme which provides opportunities for the learning of Malay music to youths of all races through hands-on experience.

In 2015, Zulkifli co-founded Nusantara Arts with the aim of integrating literary arts, traditional arts and culture. As its artistic director, he believes in drawing inspiration from traditional art forms whilst exploring experimental works. He led the team in the creation of their debut 'The Archipelago Crossroads' (2015), a work that pushes music beyond its cultural norms. In 2016, Zulkifli organised 'Belia.Bahasa.Budaya' (B3), a poetry writing competition and workshop that culminated in a concert where music and literary arts were featured together. B3 garnered over a hundred entries and was reprised for the Singapore Writers Festival that same year. 'Traditionally Avant-Garde' (TAV) (2017), a two-part lecture-concert series, is another work that demonstrates his conviction in fusing creativity and knowledge. Like his other productions, it brought Malay music to a new frontier.

As an arts educator, Zulkifli's focus is on developing young talents who are passionate about the arts. As reflected in the programmes he organised through Nusantara Arts, his approach is based on his belief in bringing different art forms together and being inclusive. ■



A CONVERSATION WITH ZULKIFLI MOHAMED AMIN

Tell us about your earliest memories encountering the arts. Who or what were your key influences?

I was a choir member in primary school and that was my first experience of performing on stage. My first exposure to formal music education was in secondary school where I was a member of the school band. These experiences got me started on my musical journey. The music of Claude Debussy and Maurice Ravel are strong influences in my work as a composer. I remember very clearly visiting the old National Library at Stamford Road every week after school. I would plant myself in the music scores section where I spent many hours studying the works I admired.

I was roped in to Orkestra Melayu Singapura when I was 17 by a friend I met at a music camp. That was my introductory encounter with Malay music and I fell in love with it. Thank you, Fauzi Ravi.

“I hope that the audience will hear beyond what is on the stage and look beyond their experience of sounds. This is why I have been bringing literary artists and musicians together as the Artistic Director and Composer at Nusantara Arts.”

What were some of the biggest challenges you faced in your artistic journey, and how did you overcome them?

When I was studying in LASALLE, juggling Western arts during the day and traditional arts at night was not easy. It was overwhelming, having to make that switch all the time. But gradually, I learnt to appreciate the differences between the two traditions and to see how they could complement each other. I didn't know back then that these experiences would add colour to my works.

Deadlines are oxymoronic in nature. They put pressure on you but they also keep you going and they make you push beyond your limits. In the end, you may produce something amazing.

What is the most rewarding aspect of what you do?

I enjoy talking about the arts with my students. Performing, and the music we make, can be very rewarding because it connects us with people of diverse backgrounds. To be able to see how my students grow and develop into trailblazers, and know that I played a part in their success – this makes me feel simply euphoric. I am humbled to have touched the hearts of many who have gone on to pursue the arts.

What do you want the audience to experience through your work?

I hope that the audience will hear beyond what is on the stage and look beyond their experience of sounds. This is why I have been bringing literary artists and musicians together as the Artistic Director and Composer at Nusantara Arts. Close friendships with young writers are fostered, and this has been the foundation of honest and sincere work. Musical language, culture, sounds are all re-created into multi-sensory works.

Please share what a typical day in your life as a conductor/music director/performer is like.

I wish that I had more than 24 hours a day as I regularly put on multiple hats in a day. It is a blessing to wake up every morning knowing that I will be imparting knowledge to others as an educator. It is tiring yet rewarding and I have learnt to adapt. At night, time is spent in rehearsals and sometimes discussions over halal-mookata. Food is always the driver for new things.

My mind does not go to sleep even when I am asleep. I suspect it lives in a different time zone!

Sometimes it wakes me up with ideas – crazy ideas. I use my smartphone to keep track of my ideas. If I'm excited about a new proposal, I'll ring or text my team, no matter what time it is. Sometimes I end up waking them up.

Jokes aside, time management and work life balance are essential for success. I always set time aside for my family. As long as my calendar is clear, weekends will be spent in the kitchen cooking with my wife. That is also a type of performance art! And it is definitely therapeutic.



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Photo courtesy of Bryner Tan



Music lecture at 'Traditionally Avant-Garde'
by Nusantara Arts, Malay Heritage Centre, 2017.

Photo courtesy of Nusantara Arts

What advice would you give to students who want to pursue a career in your field?

Always have a vision in mind. Pursue your dreams wholeheartedly and keep on learning. Learn from your mentor and your mentee. Uphold your culture and values – for these are part of your being – way before your encounter with the arts. There are many things in the world that offer instant gratification. Success in the arts is a totally different equation. There are no shortcuts. Take every failure as motivation for a better outcome the next time.

Lastly, when things start to get comfortable, take a step back and revisit your vision and renew your first commitment; your first vows as an artist. There is always room for improvement. Progress is key.

What are your hopes and vision for Singapore's music scene?

It is encouraging to see the traditional arts scene growing. I hope to see more collaborations between artists across art forms, and that the arts scene will continue to be interactive and dynamic. No art form should be left behind. I envision a time when the arts in Singapore will become even more vibrant and accessible, allowing young artists to break new ground and explore uncharted waters. I also hope that we will continue to embrace our rich culture and heritage, and that public appreciation and support for the arts will grow. Schools are incorporating local music and art in their curriculum; this is certainly a big seed of understanding and appreciation for Singaporean artists. In future, when this hopefully bears fruit, we will see more responsive audiences who have a sense of belonging to local arts and music.

How does receiving the Young Artist Award change things for you? Tell us more about how you intend to further grow and contribute to the arts scene.

It is an affirmation for me and the entire arts fraternity. I receive this award with a responsibility to put the arts in the hearts of everyone. In the area of Malay traditional arts, I shall endeavour to bridge academics and practitioners, young and old, fundamentalist and nonconformist; engraving its rich culture and history into an encyclopaedia for the future and for all. I also hope to rally everyone in advocating arts education and the professional development of artists and practitioners, and to strive towards continually improving our work as artists.



WORDS OF APPRECIATION

Syukur Alhamdulillah. I am grateful for the blessing from the Almighty for strength and good health in pursuing my passion and for having supportive family and friends.

My sincere appreciation to National Arts Council for the award.

On this journey I have met many good people who provided me with valuable lessons in life. I would like to thank Mr Eric Watson for our many meaningful discussions about my work, the late Mr Iskandar Ismail, Cikgu Zubir Abdullah, Mr Mayuni Omar, Cikgu Osman Abdul Hamid. A big thank you too to my other friends who have helped me throughout this artistic journey.

At Nusantara Arts, I am privileged to work with outstanding young artists who have indulged my quirks in musical interpretation and other aspects. To my trusted comrade, Danial Ariffin Azman, thank you for making my works work. And of course the Nusantara musicians.

I am also grateful to the People's Association Talents for opening doors for me to explore and for believing in my work. My sincere gratitude to the good folks at Orkestra Melayu Singapura; the leaders Abang Ibrahim Hamid, Abang Roomaizan Omar and Abang Yaziz Hassan; Music Directors Abang Amri Amin and Abang Jais Minsawi. They have seen me grow and without their unfailing support and belief in me, I would not be here today.

The youth team of Orkestra Melayu Singapura Belia, past and present: you are such gems. I also want to thank Mr Muhammad Ghazali Abdullah Sani for his patience in managing the musicians.

A special mention to Tuan Almahdi Al-Haj Ibrahim (Nadiputra) and the late Datuk Suhaimi Mohd Zain (Pak Ngah) for their wisdom, sound advice and encouragement.

To my Abah, Mama and brother, thank you for believing in me. You have always been my pillars of support and love. I am forever grateful.

Last but not least, I wish to say thank you to my dearest wife, Shazliyana Mustapha for keeping me healthy, happy, and sane; for preparing delicious meals, the best reward for hectic days, for music is the food of love and vice versa. ■