

HAN XUEMEI

HAN XUEMEI (b. 1987) believes in a socially engaged practice, and imagines the arts as an integral ingredient for beauty and hope in society. As a theatre practitioner, she designs multi-disciplinary experiences for creativity, disruption of routines and deconstruction of paradigms. She works with youths and communities, explores participatory practices, and experiments with visual media and spatial design.

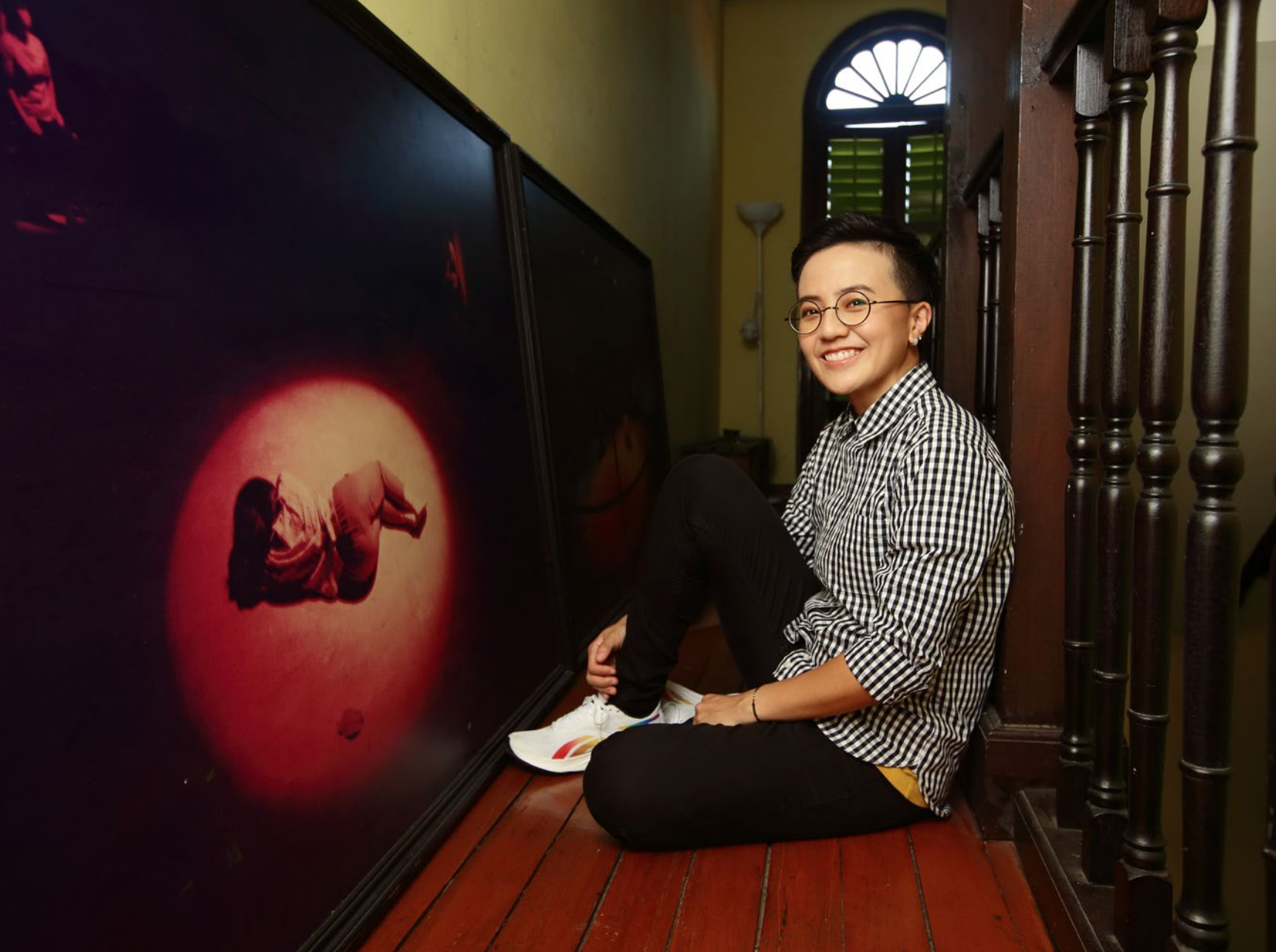
Xuemei's foray into local theatre started in 2008 with ARTivate, the youth wing of Drama Box where she participated in ARTivate's projects as crew, stage manager, performer, facilitator, designer and co-director while juggling her studies, and subsequently, her full-time job as a trailer editor.

In 2012, she became a resident artist with Drama Box, and since then, she has conceptualised, directed, designed and facilitated projects for youths and communities, including '40 Strokes' (2013) and 'IgnorLAND of its Loss' (2016). Her directorial debut '40 Strokes' was featured at the Forum Theatre Exchange in Taipei. Her recent explorations, 'MISSING: The City of Lost Things' (2018), 'The Gift' (2018), and 'FLOWERS' (2019), engage the audience in visceral and personal ways. 'MISSING' was also nominated for Best Multimedia at the 2019 Straits Times LIFE! Theatre Awards.

Xuemei believes in the importance of youth engagement and regularly teaches workshops and mentors youths. She conceptualised 'The Young Can Change The World' as part of SCENES: Forum Theatre (2015), and mentored participants in their creation of forum theatre plays. Her practice has also expanded to include curation and has co-curated 'TBC: Workshopping the Future' (2020) that was presented by Taipei Performing Arts Center as well as Drama Box's quinquennial festival SCENES: Participatory Practices (2020). Additionally, Xuemei has regularly been selected to participate in regional and international platforms including being part of the NTU Centre for Contemporary Art Singapore (NTU CCA) Artist Residencies Programme currently.



'MISSING - The City of Lost Things', 2018
Photo courtesy of Kang Sheng



A CONVERSATION WITH HAN XUEMEI

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

My mother had heard from a friend of hers that the Chinese drama society was a great co-curricular activity (CCA), so she encouraged me to join, even though I wanted to continue with badminton. While theatre was not my foremost choice, I went along with it and spent the formative years of my life with a group of dear friends learning about drama, and never looked back. In my second year in university, I was at a friend's birthday party and someone mentioned an audition by Drama Box's youth group, ARTivate. I went for the audition, and it planted the seed for my theatre-making journey. I have been blessed with extremely good fortune in that the people I have met at different points in life have pointed me towards theatre. They have guided and nurtured me: teachers and schoolmates, mentors at Drama Box, and theatre practitioners I have had the pleasure to learn from.



'Flowers', 2019
Photo courtesy of Alecia Neo

What were some of the biggest challenges you faced when creating new works, and how did you overcome them?

The biggest challenge is finding the right balance between having a distinct voice and creating works that connect with people. I usually start every project with two questions: why it is important to create this work, and what the artistic experiment is. It can be easy to get distracted and be influenced by past experiences, so I constantly revisit these questions. That said, I have also learned to enjoy the process of getting lost and figuring things out together with collaborators.

What is the most rewarding aspect of what you do?

To encounter different people with various life experiences, share a moment with them through theatre, and learn about things that matter to us as human beings, as a community, and as a society.

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

I hope for the audience to connect more deeply with themselves, the people around them, and the environment we live in; to feel that we can step out from our familiar routines and try to imagine the world differently.

Please share what a typical day in your life as a theatre practitioner is like.

My day starts with exercise. I believe in training the body and the mind, and I use that time to condition my body to be ready for the day's work. At my busiest, it can look like this: researching for new projects (reading, interviews, walking around parts of Singapore), meetings to discuss projects, workshops, rehearsals, as well as administrative tasks such as clearing e-mails.

I have also set aside time to do random things that may not seem related to work. For example, I watch documentaries, give haircuts, and help out with chores at a friend's food stall. This "randomness" is an important destabilising force and complements my inclination to be structured. It is this "randomness", this element of chance, that opens up my field of perception and imagination for me.

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

I look forward to the day when theatre is present in almost every neighbourhood, connected with people's lives, and something everyone can encounter at a young age. I also hope those who have passion and talent in theatre can become practitioners without worrying about livelihood.



'The Gift', 2018

Photo courtesy of Zinkie Aw

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

Be relentlessly curious about life, and never be afraid to attempt what is deemed as "futile." Have the courage to fail, but also the humility to learn. I quote a piece of advice that has helped me stay grounded: "One does many things on the way to becoming an artist. There is much to learn from entering these different worlds, just so one does not get stuck." There is something magical and humbling about being on the way, yet never arriving.

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

I am humbled and honoured to receive this award. I see it as an opportunity and also a responsibility to consider how I can deepen my practice by addressing social issues and working with communities, including engaging with youths. In my capacity as an artist with Drama Box, I also hope to find ways for other practitioners to continue their practice, especially during these difficult times.



WORDS OF APPRECIATION

This award is an honour and a reminder that my journey as a theatre practitioner will not have been possible without the generosity of the people around me. I am deeply humbled by their brilliance, love and wisdom.

My family:

Thank you for your trust and support in my decision to pursue the less familiar path.

My mentors and teachers in theatre and life, Hui Ling and Heng Leun:

Thank you for your anchoring presence and guidance throughout my struggles, and for inspiring me to do the same for others.

My former and current colleagues and comrades at Drama Box:

Thank you for your tireless efforts in helping me realise the ideas and dreams throughout the years.

All whom I have had the pleasure to collaborate with (artists, designers, actors, production and stage management personnel, community participants, programmers, producers):

Thank you for your trust, patience and ingenuity.

My peers from ARTivate who embarked on this journey of theatre-making together all those years ago:

Thank you for growing together and motivating me with your respective endeavours in life.

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