

YOUNG ARTIST  
AWARD  
2015

# JAMES TAN



James Tan Khoon Song (b. 1980) is a lighting designer. He completed his undergraduate education in Theatre Studies at National University of Singapore (2004) before pursuing a Master of Fine Arts (Lighting Design), at the University of California San Diego's Department of Theatre & Dance (2010) supported by the National Arts Council's (NAC) Arts Professional Scholarship (2007).

James is committed to producing intricate lighting design with high production quality across art forms and performance genres. He has collaborated with various reputable theatres and companies in Singapore, including Esplanade - Theatres on the Bay. He designed for various prominent Esplanade series and festivals; including da:ns Festival, Feed Your Imagination, The Studios, Kalaa Utsavam, and Esplanade's tenth Anniversary Celebrations. James' recent notable theatrical lighting designs in Singapore include: *Public Enemy* (Wild Rice, 2015), *Red* (Blank Space Theatre, 2014), *Next To Normal* (Pangdemonium!, 2013) and *God Of Carnage* (Singapore Repertory Theatre, 2012).

James' dedication towards grooming the next generation of technical theatre professionals is evident. He was invited by the NAC to conduct Lighting Design Workshops for SPROUTS (New Works Platform for Budding Choreographers) and has recently given a talk to theatre industry players from the region, for the

inaugural Electronic Theatre Consoles Open House. In addition, James is a collaborator with LASALLE College of the Arts and Republic Polytechnic, dedicating his time as a professional mentor for young talent who are keen to pursue a career in theatre lighting design.

Although James primarily works behind the scenes, he has had the opportunity to tour his designs to countries such as Dubai, the Philippines, South Korea and Malaysia with the Singapore Repertory Theatre, The Necessary Stage and The British Theatre Playhouse. In 2007, Overseas Singaporean Unit engaged him to design the lighting for Singapore Day in New York City, commissioned by the Prime Minister's Office.

James is the first Singaporean to be awarded The United States Institute for Theatre Technology (USITT) YD&T Lighting Design Award. He is also a recipient of The USITT Commissioners Grant & International Association of Lighting Designers (IALD) Education Trust for IALD Enlighten Americas. In 2012, he was selected for the prestigious Allen Lee Hughes Lighting Design Season Fellowship at Arena Stage, Washington DC. James has also won various nominations, namely The Rolex Mentor & Protégé Arts Initiative (Switzerland), Gilbert Hemsley Lighting Programs (USA), and *The Straits Times Life!* Theatre Awards (Singapore).

## A CONVERSATION WITH JAMES TAN

*What are some of the biggest challenges you face as a lighting designer and how did you overcome them?*

I view lighting on stage as the most important supportive role for any performance genre. Be it channelling focus, creating emotions, dictating mood, translating energy, or telling the time of the day and season of the year; lighting design can achieve it. I draw parallels between lighting design and the camera's eye. In film and television, audiences have been subconsciously accustomed to editing techniques and changing camera angles such that it becomes second nature in their viewing experience. One of the biggest challenges I face as a lighting designer is in striking a balance between 'telling the story' and 'directing attention to poignant moments on stage'.

Also, because the Singapore market is small, we do not have substantial audience numbers to sustain long performance runs. Most local producers shorten the creative and production timeline to save costs. This, in turn, directly affects the design process and level of detail and intricacy designers can put into their work.

Knowing the time constraints and managing expectations with open communication is how I get around this challenge. I believe the entire creative team also needs to be aware of such limitations. Thus, I am not afraid to voice out my concerns early in the design process, especially when the producers refuse to work the schedule despite feedback for lack of time given. This is so that the production team is aware of our (design team's) creative abilities from the beginning.



*What is the most rewarding aspect of what you do?*

I see myself as a design collaborator contributing to a larger storytelling team. I enjoy watching the audience's expressions during performances. It brings great gratification when you are able to share that moment of grief, happiness, fun or surprise, live with the audience. Knowing that each and every person who has watched the show, has a new insight to a particular issue, or has somehow taken home a personal message in their own mind and heart, makes me feel that all the time and effort I had spent on each show is worthwhile.

*How do you see your role in relations to the artistic director, stage manager and even the actors of a production?*

There is a saying: "It is not how well you design in theatre as an individual artist, but rather, how long you can last in this industry as a team player and collaborator". I have learnt this through managing my role with many different production teams over the years. I believe every designer will go through this journey in their own way. We sometimes just need to learn how to look beyond our ego (designer pride) and when to let go of our creative ideas.

Trust is a major element in any relationship. I have learnt not to judge anyone and to put my utmost trust in each collaborator. Many directors and stage managers that I have worked with have also become my best friends and confidants in art and in life.

*What are your vision and hopes for Singapore's technical arts scene?*

I hope that local designers, technicians and production electricians/riggers, stage managers and their assistants are duly respected for their skills and knowledge as much as actors on stage are respected for their craft. I have met my fair share of directors who not value the collective technical creative output team nor treat the crew well.

Similarly, crew members need to work towards being valued and take pride in the work that they do. In this way, they will be equally appreciated. Ultimately, what is important is not how good you are technically, but your mindset towards each artistic creation and how you can value-add to them.



*Red (2014).*  
Photo credit: Ruey Loon Ung

## WORDS OF APPRECIATION

*Thank you Shao Ann, for kindly initiating this nomination.*

*To my BFF Samantha - let's continue to chase that dream.*

*Tracie and Adrian, I appreciate your unreserved trust and for granting me a home ground to dream, create and explore. You have become like a family and I truly cherish that bond.*

*Gaurav and Juliet, thanks for putting up with my occasionally demanding perfectionism, and for understanding the motives behind my creative decisions.*

*Hui Ling, Heng Leun, Xue Mei and Jia Ying - Thanks for taking the risk to accept me as a fellow collaborator. I am humbled to be able to work with each and every one of you at Dramabox.*

*Mdm. Yan, Shiji, Yandan and Sharon Jie. Thanks for your guidance over the years and for teaching me about hard work and respect.*

*Wee Cheng, thank you for always looking out for my well-being, providing valuable technical advice, and for staying cool whenever we are in tech crunch time.*

*Rydwon, Sara, Heryadi, Cindy and Isis - I am deeply grateful for your unwavering support.*

*To every single technical personnel, director, choreographer, designer, production and stage manager that I have collaborated with over the years, thanks for your kind patience with me.*

*To my buddies - Calvyn, Shan Shan, Petrina, Jason, Ah Guan, Ah Mong, Ismahadi, Seok, Jeff, Ian, Kailash, Grace, Andy, Evelyn, Ben, Chee Wai, Toh Lin, Pebble, Hsia Ling, Hairon, Cheryl, Junmin, Suraya, Patrick, Delvin, Fahmy, Faizad, Stanley, Kaishi, Melissa, Victoria, Elim, Ningru, Kimberly, David Sagaya, Gen, Leslie, Yihui, Ruoyi, Alisa, Yong Hui, Tennie, Weiqin, Eugene, Kai Tong, Guo Zheng, Wen Xiang, Jin Xing, Esther, Aldys, Pei Pei, Yong How, Quan Xin, Fu Chun and Kenny. Thanks for being there for me.*

*Lastly, I want to sincerely thank my dearest family. Thank you Daddy, Mummy and Jie Jie, for your support and for never questioning this unconventional career path that I have embarked in life.*