



YOUNG ARTIST AWARD 2022

## GUO NINGRU

GUO NINGRU (b. 1987) is a sound designer with more than a decade of experience designing sound for both local and regional productions.

Her interest in music and theatre took root in secondary school and led her to pursue a degree in Technical Theatre Arts at LASALLE College of the Arts, specialising in Sound Design. In 2016, upon receiving the National Arts Scholarship from the National Arts Council, Singapore, she furthered her education pursuing an MFA in Sound Design at the renowned Sound Design programme at University of California Irvine (UCI) where she graduated in 2019.



Behind her tech table at 'Miss Julie' at Singapore Repertory Theatre, 2022.

Photo courtesy of Singapore Repertory Theatre

Ningru believes strongly that art not only has an impact on lives but can also inspire social change. She sees her work as an extension of that possibility and continues to explore ways to elevate the human experience through sound design. Her MFA Thesis, 'Going Immersive: The Case for Spatial Audio Systems in Theatre Sound Design', specifically identified and discussed the current technologies available for sound designers to implement spatial audio designs which aids storytelling and helps achieve hyperrealism through the aural experience.

Ningru's body of work explores the use of multidirectional audio and time-based localisation, recreating a three-dimensional aural space which presents audiences and listeners with hyperrealism, or the opposite – to create an expressionist larger-than-life world of sound. Some examples of such techniques were seen in her designs for UCI's 'Pajama Game' (2019), T.H.E Dance Company's 'PheNoumenon' (2019) and Singapore Repertory Theatre's 'Fly High' (2020).

In the T.H.E dance production of 'Infinitely Closer' (2022), she implemented a 360° d&b Soundscape system to envelope the listener from all directions. The result was not just a heightened aural experience, it also helped to drive the narrative of the dance performance. The work served as the opening performance at Esplanade's latest venue – Singtel Waterfront Theatre, paving the way for many more ground-breaking designs in the space.

Ningru is committed to nurturing the budding sound designers, taking every opportunity she can to serve as a resource and mentor to the next generation.





## A CONVERSATION WITH GUO NINGRU

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

In secondary school, I loved English Literature classes. I also played the piano. Being in the choir, we would put up musicals every year. I was intrigued not just by the music but also the creation process of musical theatre. I loved how the choreography, text and design elements came together so magically with the music. Upon finishing my A levels, I decided to pursue a degree in Technical Theatre for my higher education. My love for music and a keen understanding of physics and programming then led me to choose Sound Design as my specialisation.

**What were some of the biggest challenges you faced in your artistic journey and what motivated you to continue in spite of these challenges?**

In a small country and busy city like Singapore, it can be difficult to continuously create fresh work. We need new challenges, a change of



Ningru and her course mates at 'Pajama Game' at University of California, 2019.

Photo courtesy of Guo Ningru

scenery, new people and places, to inspire us. I have to constantly remind myself to not just do what is easy or comfortable, but also ask myself what I bring to each project. What can I try in every project to think out of the box, and push my own boundaries, and drive my personal growth?

**Please share what a typical day in your life as a sound designer is like.**

It is based on which phase of production I'm in. There is the pre-production conceptualisation phase, the rehearsal/creation phase, and the technical rehearsals/performance period. During conceptualisation, the director and designers have meetings to discuss the look and feel of the show, bounce ideas off each other, and come up with a design plan. During rehearsals, I would create and try out the content of the show.

Eventually the entire show's content is crafted before we go into the load-in, technical rehearsals, and performance period. These are long days putting together all the design elements, leading to the opening night.

**What is your personal philosophy in life, and how does it translate into your artistic practice?**

The work we do has to inspire positive change, and tell important stories. Art has no purpose if it's not felt and understood by its audience. Neither does it serve any purpose in society if it's art for its own sake. The music I write, or the systems I design, must help to tell the story, convey emotions, and touch the hearts of the audience.

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

In a well-designed system design, the audience would be immersed in the story without being distracted by the sounds; to feel and be part of the story, and be moved by the compositions and sound design content I create.

**What advice would you give the younger generation who would like to pursue a career in your field?**

Be bold. Be brave. Never be ashamed of your creations. Don't be shy to put yourself "out there." Always be professional. Stand up for what you think is right. Always reflect and seek areas of improvement. Never stop learning new things. And remember to give back.



Behind her tech table at 'Mrs Packard' with D-Mitri and Spacemap at University of California, 2019.

Photo courtesy of Guo Ningru

**What are your hopes and vision for Singapore's sound design scene?**

I hope that theatre sound design will become more recognised when compared to its visual design counterparts (lighting design, scenic design, projection design, and more). Very often only the very obvious sound content will be mentioned in reviews and critiques, while the technical sound design is barely understood by the audience or reviewers.

I hope that local theatre awards will mature and acquire more depth in this area so as to give due recognition fairly and accordingly – the way the Tony Awards in the US now understands the differences between Sound Design for a Play, and Sound Design for a Musical. It is also my hope that more young sound designers pursue this invisible craft.

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

The award is not only an affirmation for the work I do, but it also gives recognition to my collaborators. I hope the award will lead to a wider range of sound design projects, and become a springboard for more international and local collaborations. I hope to provide better mentorship to the younger generation and help them start their own journeys as sound designers.



## WORDS OF APPRECIATION

This award is a great honour of the craft that I put my heart into for so many years. I am grateful to the family and friends who have been with me through this journey:

My husband Brandon, you are my cornerstone, my bedrock, my anchor. Thank you for being with me through all these years, and thank you for being you.

Mummy, Xingru, Ma, and our darling little Carmelle, you all have been the greatest support through my busyness.

My dearest friends and battle-mates Elim, Melissa, Jing, James, Genevieve, Rong Zhao for always running alongside me. Thank you for all the good times and friendship.

Thank you to my mentors Vinnie, Jeffrey Yue, Mike Hooker, Jeff Polunas, BC Keller for your guidance, friendship, and helping me achieve the things I can today.

Thank you Gaurav, Heng Leun, Jian Hong, Swee Boon, Tracie, Juliet, Darron, Carolene, Tusitala and d&b for supporting me and believing in me.

Thank you National Arts Council, Singapore for the affirmation with the award and thank you for the support and believing in me through the years.

Lastly, thank you to all my collaborators, friends and colleagues in theatre, music and the arts scene for shaping me and my craft.