

By Ms Chan Jing Jing

Wong Chen Seong has written numerous plays and won several competitions in the past few years. His winning scripts have even been given dramatised public readings by TheatreWorks. Recently, he wrote, co-directed and co-produced the Faculty's centennial musical, "Operation Theatre (A Good History – A Modern Medical Musical)". Now the medical school's resident playwright talks about the first commercial staging of his play and why he loves to do what he does.



A Prescription for Drama



Playwriting Milestones:

1. 2001: **First runner-up**, SPH-Theatreworks Singapore Young Dramatist's Award (Inaugural competition, for "Not Children")
2. 2002: **First runner-up**, SPH-Theatreworks Singapore Young Dramatist's Award (for "Take Me There")
3. 2003: **Second runner-up**, SPH-Theatreworks Singapore Young Dramatist's Award (for "Love.Park.Hate.Park")
4. 2003: **Merit Award**, Ngee Ann Polytechnic Short Screenplay Competition
5. 2004: **Champion**, SPH-Theatreworks Singapore Young Dramatist's Award (for "Driving Home")
6. 2004: **Member** of the Theatreworks Writer's Lab Greenhouse Programme (wrote "Half a World")
7. 2005: **First runner-up**, Theatreworks 24-hour Playwriting Competition (for "The Dinner")

Note: All the abovementioned plays were given public dramatised readings by Theatreworks.

You have just had your play staged at the recent Singapore Theatre Festival. How does it feel and how has the experience of rehearsals and dealing with the press and reviews help you grow as a playwright?

“Salsa Salsa Salsa!” was one of the plays given its world premiere at the Festival by Ivan Heng of Wild Rice Theatre and Jeffrey Tan of Theatreworks. Obviously, it felt – and still feels – fantastic! I have been writing since I was 14, and seriously since 18, so to finally have a play given a full, commercial staging was a real thrill, and a validation of the work, hopes and expectations I pour into every script. It has also reinforced my drive to write and create works that resonate with people and make them laugh and think. Playwriting is something I want to continue doing in the future, and such affirmation is especially sweet given how difficult it is for a young, untested writer (or artist of any sort) to gain a public, commercial platform – and having “Salsa Salsa Salsa!” reach the audiences I dreamt it would makes me happier than a barrel of monkeys.

I was lucky to be involved in the actual process of staging the play. Jeffrey, the director, made sure I participated in working and reworking the script into a play. At readings, I listened to the cast read my lines and change what did not work. During actual rehearsals, not only was I able to see my script slowly come to life, I also offered my own input. The dynamism and openness was eye-opening and immensely enjoyable. Being more aware of the intricacies behind transmuting ideas and themes into theatre will help inform and energise my future writing.

One thing I had to get used to – in a hurry – was the publicity machine. I did an interview with *Front* on Central that, to this day, I still cringe when I think about it: once the lights came on and the producer said “Action!”, my mind went blank and my mouth went into auto-pilot mode. Most of my responses were spinal-level, and a friend asked me the day after the programme if I was drunk! I also had to give a live radio interview in Mandarin – which made most of my friends laugh – except I was not trying to be funny. Ultimately though, I am incredibly thankful for the publicity. More



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producers and companies now know that I am writing, and hopefully doors to future productions have been opened a little more.

What is it about plays that inspire you to write, as opposed to say, a screenplay or poetry? Was there anyone in particular who inspired you?

I started writing plays when I was in Secondary Two in Raffles Institution (RI). My group got tasked with putting up a short, 20-minute play for the Literature Festival. We drew lots and I got the job of writing the script – it was not very good, but it got me hooked. Thereafter, I found myself directing and/or writing in our yearly Drama Feste competitions in RI and Raffles Junior College, and my interest just got stronger. The adrenaline rush of seeing your work produced really does reinforce itself in a positive feedback loop.

In 2003, I took part in the inaugural Singapore Young Dramatist's Award, organised by Theatreworks, and won the second prize. Following that first minor success, I joined again for three more years (until they deemed me too old to be a “young dramatist” and barred me from future participation), winning another second, a third, and finally a first prize on my last try. I was then taken under the wing of Tan Tarn How, then Artistic Director of Theatreworks, and inducted into the Writers' Lab Programme. Under this writers' incubation scheme, I had the opportunity to write and share my writing with several other playwright aspirants under the tutelage of an experienced writer, and this helped my writing grow and develop tremendously.

I actually started off writing in free verse, and was one of the UK Poetry Society's Foyle Young Poets of the Year (the only non-British winner in 2003). My screenwriting efforts have been considerably more sporadic, and limited to short screenplays – my excuse is that it is a medium I am still not that comfortable with.

My major idols have been, perhaps uninterestingly, other playwrights. I remember watching a dinner performance of Pearly Chua in (and as) Stella Kon's landmark “*Emily on Emerald Hill*” when I was 10 and deciding that writing was a real way to connect with and influence people. As I grew older (and started

getting more allowance, and later earning my own money as a debate coach), the works of local playwrights really started to impress themselves on my consciousness: Eleanor Wong's historic "Invitation to Treat" trilogy; Ovidia Yu's "Woman on a Tree on a Hill" and "Three Fat Virgins Unassembled"; Tan Tarn How's "The Lady of Soul and Her Ultimate 'S' Machine"; Russell Heng's "Lest the Demons Get to Me", and so on. Then, of course, Borders and Kinokuniya brought in their treasure troves of scripts, and I started ferreting out and devouring playwrights like Edward Albee, Alan Ayckbourn, Alan Bennett, Tony Kushner (whose "Angels in America" remains a major influence), Jonathan Harvey, Martin Sherman, Margaret Edson (whose "Wit" is one of the most gut-wrenching 'medical' plays ever written), amongst a constellation of others. It is the slightly immodest and maybe unrealistically lofty dream that your name may one day rank in the lower pantheons that keeps every writer writing.

How have you struck a balance between writing and studying? Were there times when there were difficulties, for instance when you had to miss lots of school for "Operation Theatre"?

My parents sure hope I have struck a balance between writing and studying! On a serious note, Medicine (or studying) and writing have always occupied important but distinct spheres in my life. Medicine is a calling for me, and medical school has been hugely enjoyable and gratifying; but writing (and, on a larger scale, literature and the arts) has been something I have been good at and loved all this while as well (ask any of my previous Chemistry and Physics teachers, go ahead!). For something I love doing so much and for which the rewards are so great, I have made the time: late nights, weekends and travelling time are all more or less spent thinking about ideas, developing characters, and writing.

"Operation Theatre (*A Good History – A Modern Medical Musical*)" last year was another kettle of fish altogether. Staging a full-length musical to celebrate the medical school's centennial and having to put on writing, directing and co-producing caps was no joke. I think, however, that the entire team (and I had absolutely incredible help from my colleagues)

really shared in the common vision of putting up a good show to fete the old lady's 100th birthday, and this geist helped pull all of us through. Any tutorials and lectures that had to be 'sacrificed' were worth it – it just meant more studying later, so it all evened out.

Who is your role model?

I live in admiration of my father. He has been a general practitioner in the community for 26 years, and the kind of respect and warmth he enjoys from his patients, many of whom he has seen from birth to adulthood and through their old age, is a constant inspiration. Quite apart from his practice, his moral values, libertarian beliefs and conviction in the ultimate goodness of people are all standards I am trying to grow into.

What would be your long-term goals, in life, in medicine, and in theatre?

My first "long-term" goal would be, of course, to actually get my MBBS without too much drama. Thereafter, I hope to train in Infectious Diseases and continue contributing to the community and the corpus of understanding in this exciting and perpetually emergent field of medicine. In this respect, I think I have many, many role models amongst the excellent doctors already practising in Infectious Diseases in Singapore.

My goals in theatre are relatively straightforward: I just want to keep writing and producing good work. Hopefully this means that my first commercial staging this year will not be my last.

Goals in life – a little more difficult to pin down. What can one say in good conscience (and within limits of reason) other than: to be a good person, to be happy, and to be useful?

What is your best/most memorable experience so far?

Good experiences and memorable ones are all relative, aren't they? When you live with the attitude that embraces how ephemeral and transient all our days and experiences are, I think you automatically start treasuring everything and everyone who comes into your life. As you can see – I am copping out a bit for this question. ■