

Passion plays by students

Student productions are not only cheap, but are also getting slicker and more professional

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 arts correspondent

Want a cheap and good night out to the theatre? Consider student plays, which are getting slicker and more professional, with tickets that cost about half that of regular shows.

Student productions, especially those by schools with performing arts departments, are the savvy theatregoer's best kept secret.

Gone are the associations with shoddy acting and directing, low budgets and rickety school halls.

Instead, expect professional directors at the helm, an enthusiastic talented cast of up-and-coming faces in the theatre scene and offbeat scripts seldom staged because of commercial pressures.

This month, several such plays will take place, with ticket prices starting from \$10.

Tonight, acting students at Lasalle College of the Arts are putting on *Kaspar*, a little-known 1967 play written by German director Peter Handke, about a boy who was able to speak only a sentence.

Natalie Hennedige, who is the artistic director of Cake Theatrical Productions, is directing this work about language and power.

At the same time, Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (Nafa) Theatre Arts students are staging an outdoor production of the Greek tragedy *Antigone*, which is directed by Chinese director Luo Jinlin.

Next week, Lasalle Musical Theatre students are putting on *Working*, a musical about ordinary working people such as teachers, waitresses and firemen. It is written by Stephen Schwartz, who also composed the hit Broadway musical *Wicked*.

Australian director and acting coach Tony Knight directs the Lasalle play.

Freelance writer and theatre critic Ng Yi-Sheng, 31, has been a fervent supporter of student productions, especially from



A dress rehearsal of *Kaspar* by Lasalle students which is directed by Natalie Hennedige, artistic director of Cake Theatrical Productions. PHOTOS: DELON HO, NANYANG ACADEMY OF FINE ARTS

Lasalle, over the past few years. He says: "The young cast may not always be polished, but they have passion and energy. The scripts chosen are non-mainstream, which most Singapore theatre companies won't be interested in."

He says this is a way to see, at cheap prices and high production values, the work of local directors such as Effendy Ibrahim, Oliver Chong and Hennedige.

Student productions are not new. Lasalle stages about 20 shows a year while Nafa does up to 10.

Both schools say the budget for their student shows has remained roughly the same over the years, although they declined to give figures. So it is not a question of money buying better directors, sets and costumes.

Instead, arts observers say the shows may be getting better because an increasing number of people are engaging in the arts as a serious occupation or means of livelihood in Singapore. And that profes-

sionalisation process has spread to schools.

Mr Sean Tobin, 39, who heads the faculty of theatre in the School of the Arts, says this is due to the efforts of the National Arts Council and the maturity of theatre companies.

He says: "There are more trained theatre professionals and this is true both in schools and in the industry."

Indeed, some recent student productions which have been mentored by theatre professionals have made waves.

The National University of Singapore's (NUS) annual arts festival has produced well-received original scripts such as *The Good, The Bad And The Sholay* this year and *wo(men)* last year, which earned student playwright Faith Ng a nomination for Best Script at the Life! Theatre Awards.

The scripts are mentored by Checkpoint Theatre artistic director Huzir Sulaiman, who teaches playwriting at

NUS. Other universities are also contributing to the buzz in the student theatre scene.

Next week, Singapore Management University's drama club, Stageit, is staging a doublebill called *Breakdown*.

It comprises *World Without Walls*, a comedy about privacy in the age of social media and the Internet, and *Stuck In The Middle*, a play about time. The production is directed by teacher and theatre reviewer Matthew Lyon.

Stageit president Yelyn Yeo, 21, says that working on the play has been "enjoyable and fulfilling". The third-year business student is the producer and stage manager for *Breakdown*.

"I love theatre and it's great to be able to contribute. The contacts I made with people in the industry, such as the venue managers, will be valuable in future if I enter arts management."

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WHAT TO WATCH

KASPAR

What: A play by German playwright Peter Handke, about language and power. Directed by Natalie Hennedige, by Lasalle College of the Arts acting students

Where: Flexible Performance Space, Lasalle

When: Tonight, 8pm

Admission: \$15 (standard) and \$10 (students and senior citizens) from Gatecrash (call 6100-2005 or go to www.gatecrash.com.sg)



ANTIGONE (above)

What: A Greek tragedy about a woman trying to get a respectable burial for her brother even on pain of death. By Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts English Drama students

Where: Rooftop amphitheatre, Nafa Campus 3

When: Tonight to Monday

Admission: \$10 (standard), \$8 (students), free for Nafa students. E-mail theatre@edu.nafa.sg for tickets

WORKING

What: A funny and moving musical about ordinary working people, such as waitresses and firemen. By Lasalle Musical Theatre students

Where: Creative Cube, Block C, Level 1, Lasalle

When: Tuesday to Sept 17, 8pm

Admission: \$25 (standard) and \$15 (students, senior citizens) from Gatecrash

BREAKDOWN

What: A doublebill of devised plays by Stageit, the drama club from Singapore Management University. The first is a comedy about privacy and the second about how people relate to time

Where: Drama Centre Black Box

When: Sept 16 and 17, 8pm

Admission: \$15 from Gatecrash