

The local theatre scene has never been more promising. Just how far have we come and where do the rest of us fit in? LYNN LEE and LORETTA TAN report.

GETTING IN ON THE ACT

You deserve a round of applause if you've attended a local theatrical production in recent memory. And if you've been enthusiastic enough to head back for more, then give yourself a standing ovation.

Today's stage offerings are a far cry from the days when our sunny shores were condemned as a cultural desert. It's true — blatant neglect had our National Orchestra (yes, it existed) and National Dance Theatre, dissolved. Not only are more Broadway hits like *Guys and Dolls* and the *Chorus Line* swinging our way, audiences here are also cutting their teeth on work by local writers, actors and production companies. And here's the amazing news: We seem to be enjoying ourselves. "The arts scene is at an exciting and explosive stage because it has reached another level of maturity. There's growing confidence in Singapore artists and a realisation that they are of high caliber," says Lucilla Teoh, Theatreworks' public relations manager.

This exposure may lead to a more sensitive audience who genuinely appreciate the arts. "There's still a lot of work to be done," says Goh Boon Teck, artistic director of the Toy Factory Theatre Ensemble. "We need more energy, performances and helpers to make the scene more vibrant."

One great confidence booster is the commercial success that local productions have been garnering overseas. Action Theatre's *Chang & Eng* ("Singapore's longest running local musical!") wowed audiences in Beijing while Theatreworks' innovative, multi-cultural *Lear* won critical acclaim in Japan. Also, The Theatre Practice's *The Spirits Play* was showcased in Hongkong. It would appear that local efforts in the theatre are finally getting the world's attention. No wonder, the arts scene seems to have hit the boom time.

"It is more diverse now than before. There are multi-lingual works created from various ethnic starting points. You have musicals and entertainment acts, to plays with



Judging by these past productions, our Singapore stage is more diverse today than ever before!

social commentary and postmodern explorations," says Alvin Tay, artistic director of The Necessary Stage. That translates into an array of productions from non-English theatre groups like Teater Kami, Hokkien Huay Guan Arts & Cultural Troupe and Ravindran Drama Group, to experimental works like Amp Theatre's *Are You Right There Medea, Are You Right?* and Asia in Theatre Research's thought-provoking *Siddharta*.

So has the time come for closet drama queens to ditch their day jobs and pursue the calling of the stage? The options are aplenty: Playwrights can get pointers from Theatreworks' The Writers Lab, while budding thespians can try acting workshops organised by theatre companies like Asia in Theatre Research and Theatre Ox. The latter trained under the late Jerzy Grotowski, world-renowned theatre guru. Students can also pursue their dreams academically at the National University of Singapore's Department of Theatre Studies or LaSalle College of the Arts.

With more avenues opening up, especially with the upcoming Institute of the Arts and the Theatres on the Bay at Marina, we are finally witnessing an attitude shift towards Made-In-Singapore works. But whether we become a regional arts hub depends, like in theatre, on real-life people: Those who follow their dreams onto the stage, and those lucky enough to catch those dreams in action.