

# SOWING THE SEEDS OF LOVE

Something To Write Home About, an arts and cultural initiative organised by a group of New York-based Singaporeans to commemorate SG50, has given rise to new friendships and collaborations between Singaporeans and the international community.

PHOTOS LEE MIN WEI, HIU ZHI WEI, SOMETHING TO WRITE HOME ABOUT

New York may be half the world away from Singapore but that has not stopped a group of Singaporeans there from celebrating the country's 50th year of independence in a special way.

Over 11 days in September 2015, a group of New York-based Singaporeans staged a multi-disciplinary arts festival, featuring more than 40 Singaporean artists, to showcase the country's rich heritage and diverse culture. Called Something To Write Home About, the independent event was held at the cultural institution La Mama in downtown Manhattan and was curated by New York-based Dr Wee Hong Ling, who was its producing artistic director.

Both New York- and Singapore-based creatives from a wide range of disciplines, such as visual arts, dance, music and film, took part in the festival. They included playwright Haresh Sharma and director Alvin

Tan from theatre company The Necessary Stage, writer Amanda Lee Koe and graphic novelists Yen Yen Woo and Colin Goh.

The festival was the brainchild of Dr Wee, a Nasa scientist-turned-ceramic artist, who was driven by a desire to start a conversation on what home is, and to provide New Yorkers a small window into life in Singapore.

"I've been away from home for 23 years. Yet, I could not think of a better way to celebrate our Golden Jubilee than putting this festival together," says Dr Wee.

Her initial idea of holding a group visual arts exhibition grew into a much bigger one as other Singaporean artists in New York pitched in on how they could be involved, from performing music or reading poetry during a visual arts exhibition to serving iconic Singaporean dishes during the performances. The festival took Dr Wee and

some 20 Singaporean and non-Singaporean volunteers more than 14 months to organise.

## INTANGIBLE BENEFITS

The festival attracted equal numbers of Singaporeans and non-Singaporeans, with full attendance for ticketed performances every night. Some people even came from as far as North Carolina, an eight-hour drive from New York. Although these quantifiable results were impressive for an inaugural grassroots event, intangible factors motivated volunteers to put on a good show night after night.

For Dr Wee, the biggest reward was what it achieved in breaking down boundaries. An American told her that he could relate to the main character in Singaporean director Boo Junfeng's film, *Homecoming*, as it was exactly what he had felt before he had enlisted in the army. The movie depicted a young

"These stories – whether they be through theatre, literature or dance, and regardless of where we are from – show that we are as different as we are similar."

**Ceramic artist Wee Hong Ling**

Singaporean's struggle between national duty and personal liberty two days before his enlistment in the army.

She says: "These stories – whether they be through theatre, literature or dance, and regardless of where we are from – show that we are as different as we are similar."

Singaporean Charmaine Chua, 26, who works as a senior strategist in the finance industry and serves on the board of the New York Singapore Association, helped out as

Singapore-based Maya Dance Theatre and community organisation Singai Tamil Sangam worked with New York-based Singaporean dancer Chua Yun Chun during the festival. The performance also featured works choreographed in collaboration with New York-based artists and choreographers Janis Brenner and Esme Boyce.





BELOW: San Francisco-based photographers and painters Angie Tan and Gregory Burns created their latest series, *Singapore Shophouses*, to celebrate the country's 50th year of independence.



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"The highlight for me was watching the crowd and interacting with the audience after the shows. This connection trumps being in the limelight because the friendships formed across borders are so real and so strong."

**Dancer Chua Yun Chun**

the festival's programme and ticketing manager. She says: "Having been here for seven years, a lot of my New York friends hear me talk about home all the time. Some of them have been to Singapore, but most are unlikely to make that 20-odd hour flight.

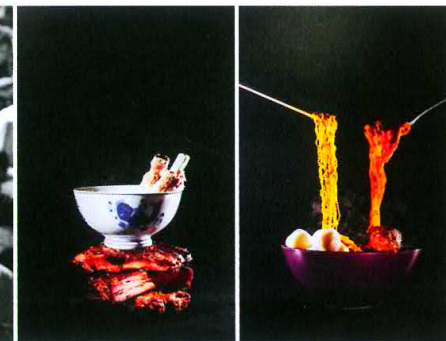
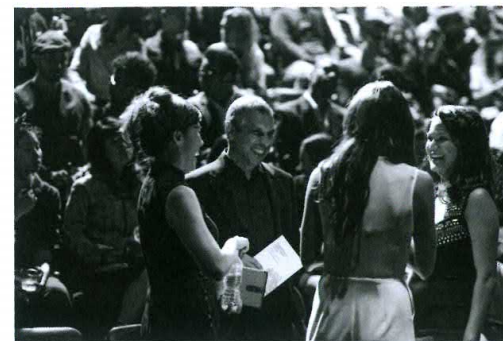
"The festival was very authentic and shared a really interesting side of Singapore that's not the typical sterile, no gum-chewing and millionaire reputation we have in the media."

Korean-American Martin Kim was one of several non-Singaporean volunteers at the festival. Kim, 22, who is the founder of multimedia creative company Storysmith Productions, was tasked to document the festival with his photos.

Recounting his festival experience, he says that he learnt immensely from being part of the working team. He adds: "Singaporeans taught me Hokkien and Malay expressions and introduced me to different kinds of food.

"The United States is often cited as a melting-pot society and is, in many ways, remarkable. But I feel that here, many cultural roots have become muted over generations and people have become generically American. Perhaps it is because I am an outsider looking in, but it seems to me that Singapore's constituent cultural roots have managed to maintain a level of authenticity while still allowing people of different races and backgrounds to get along just fine."

The geographical distance between New York and Singapore also gave rise to interesting ways of collaboration. For a dance performance,



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Singapore's Ambassador to the United States Ashok Kumar Mirpuri at the festival; Boston-based photographer Jonathon Teo contrasts favourite Singaporean dishes with their foreign counterparts; Ceramic artist Wee Hong Ling's installation *50 Stories* was created in celebration of the Golden Jubilee.

Chua Yun Chun, a Singaporean dancer based in New York, used Facetime to work with Shahrin Johry, a dancer and choreographer from Asian contemporary dance company Maya Dance Theatre in Singapore. The pair had to battle different time zones, busy work schedules and an unstable video connection to practise their routine.

Despite meeting only two days before the actual performance for rehearsals, they pulled off a seamless performance. Chua, 29, who also helped with some of the other festival dates, says: "The highlight for me was watching the crowd and interacting with the audience after the shows. This connection trumps being in the limelight because the friendships formed across borders are so real and so strong."

Although Dr Wee has no plans to stage another such festival any time soon, she hopes that it will spark something more. She says: "I hope to inspire overseas Singaporean communities to organise themselves and do something that they are interested in, whether it's a Singaporean fashion show in Paris or a Singaporean food festival in London. We can all dream bigger. As a community, we can do a lot." ☺

