

YOUNG ARTIST AWARD 2019

GABRIEL CHAN

Gabriel Chan (b.1984) is a lighting designer. As a chameleon of a designer, he is well versed in lighting for the theatre, dance, music concerts and live events.

A recipient of the National Arts Council Overseas Bursary (2008), Gabriel graduated from the Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts (HKAPA) with First Class Honours in Lighting Design (2010). A Strand Lighting Scholarship awardee, he also completed training at the Metropolitan Opera (New York, USA, Winter Season 2009).

Gabriel was awarded Best Lighting Design under HKAPA's Technical & Entertainment Award (2010) for his design thesis project. To date, he has also garnered three Best Lighting Design nominations for the Life! Theatre Awards for his work on 'Julius Caesar' (2018), 'The LKY Musical' (2016) and 'The Jade Bangle' (2012).

He is best known for his lighting designs for Singapore Repertory Theatre's (SRT) Shakespeare in the Park series, namely 'Julius Caesar' (2018), 'Romeo and Juliet' (2016), and 'The Tempest' (2015). He also enjoys developing theatre for young audiences with his designs for SRT's The Little Company productions and Esplanade's PLAYtime! series.

Since 2012, Gabriel has been lighting Frontier Danceland's main seasons, which feature an array of international choreographers. Most recently, Gabriel was invited to design for two European dance commissions in summer 2019: 'Ballroom' for the Festspielhaus St Pölten in Austria and 'Dancing Mahler in the 21st Century' for Opéra National du Rhin in France.

In the music scene, he has worked extensively with Siong Leng Musical Association for more than a decade. He has designed such shows as 'Soul Journey, Ten Years' (2018) and 'Soul Journey, Nine Songs' (2015), works widely acclaimed for presenting Nanyin, an ancient music style which is on UNESCO's list of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, in a more accessible and contemporary manner.

In 2017 and 2018, Gabriel was also lighting designer for Singapore's National Day Parade, which he views as a significant milestone in his lighting design journey. Nevertheless, regardless of scale, he approaches every project on its own terms. He aims to create bespoke quality designs for every project while capturing the performances in their raw energy.



In technical rehearsals.
Photo courtesy of Singapore Repertory Theatre





A CONVERSATION WITH GABRIEL CHAN

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

My earliest memories were from my days in junior college, when I first stepped into the old Victoria Theatre to watch a play. I remember being captivated by how a scene – which I saw being rehearsed in the studio – magically transformed under theatre lighting. I realised this was something I could enjoy doing for a long time.

As for key influences, Dawn Chiang and Rick Fisher have been instrumental in my growth as a lighting designer. Based on either side of the Atlantic, both of them exposed me to the international lighting design worlds of Broadway and the West End. More importantly, they demonstrate that even at the highest level, lighting design starts with the same fundamentals plus a healthy dose of imagination.

What were some of the biggest challenges you faced when designing lights, and how did you overcome them?

My design philosophy: to create signature looks for every show – distinct from each other – such that they do not seem to originate from the same person. To remain chameleonic – that is the greatest challenge.

Creating bespoke designs is tricky, as it is always easier to dip into the same bag of tricks. To overcome the challenge, I strive to understand what the show is about. Reading the script; having deep, thorough creative discussions with the director and the choreographer; attending rehearsals; and being present at all stages of the production – these all help inform my design choices in creating something unique.

What do you want the audience to experience through your works?

Whatever production I design lighting for, I hope that my work helps to bring out its essence. The beauty of the performing arts is its ephemeral nature – the act of having an audience congregate in the same space with performers to experience a play, a dance, or a concert, there is something very poetic about it.

To create a visual signature, a moment in time, a thing of beauty and inspiration, something for the audience to take away after watching the performance, and reminisce – that is something I strive for in my works.

What are your vision and hopes for Singapore's technical theatre scene?

Having worked on several productions abroad, I am proud to say there is a decent level of proficiency in our technical theatre scene. I hope we continue to raise the bar.

Still, I hope we dare to dream bigger. Singaporeans are in general a very practical bunch, and we tend to dismiss the fantastical as impossible. Imagining and then attempting the impossible, however, is the key to improving. Even if we fail to achieve the impossible the first time, at least we are one incorrect method closer to getting it right the next time.

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Lighting design of closing shot for National Day Parade at The Float @ Marina Bay, 2018.

Photo courtesy of Gabriel Chan



Blending lighting design with projection in 'Soul Journey, Nine Songs' by Siong Leng Musical Association, Esplanade Theatre Studio, 2015.

Photo courtesy of Siong Leng Musical Association



Lighting design integrating both projection and set design in 'The LKY Musical' by Metropolitan Productions, Marina Bay Sands Grand Theatre, 2015.

Photo courtesy of Takis

Please share what a typical day in your life as a Lighting Designer is like.

A typical day starts at 9am. I head into the theatre the same time as the technicians arrive. I am there for any questions that they might have regarding my lighting plot, or if I have any last minute changes to address.

We break for lunch at 1pm, and the team continues with the rig after. I run a final check to confirm the fixtures are all hung as they were drawn, and we trim the lighting bars to the required heights. There are usually two to three teams which I cycle through – I am giving instructions to the first team on how I need the lights to be focused and coloured while the other two teams are making their way to the next fixture or just standing-by waiting for instructions.

Dinner break is at 6pm, and thereafter the focus continues. If the progress is fast, or if the lighting rig is small, I get to start programming the lights on the console. This is where the artistry begins, and where I start painting the various scenes I have in mind after attending possibly a fortnight's worth of rehearsals.

The day ends at 11pm. We all pack up, take a good night's rest, before taking on the next day at 9am again.

How does receiving the Young Artist Award from the National Arts Council change things for you? Tell us more about how you intend to further grow and contribute to the arts scene.

This award is one of the biggest recognitions I have ever received. Hopefully this allows my work to gain more exposure. There are directors whose works I admire with whom I have yet to have a chance to collaborate.

I wish to continue creating lighting designs that are unique, stunning and inspiring for an even wider audience which extends beyond our shores. Looking up to both Dawn Chiang and Rick Fisher, my hope is to be able to put Singapore on the world map in the international lighting design world.



WORDS OF APPRECIATION

My most heartfelt gratitude to my parents, who have always supported me in their own quiet way. It takes courage and open-mindedness to endorse your son's decision to forego his Engineering degree to pursue the arts as a career.

To my dear sister, thank you for taking care of the family when I could not be around.

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To my fellow designers, creatives, production managers, stage managers, collaborators and peers, thank you for being part of my design journey.

To every technician I have worked with, thank you for putting up with my obsessive precision and uncompromising requests.

Last but not least, to Tennie, my love, thank you for always being there for me.