GRANDMOTHER TONGUE

14 – 31 JANUARY 2021
THE Ngee Ann Kongsi Theatre @ WILD RICE
In a Singapore where dialects have been losing relevance for generations, *Grandmother Tongue* traces a young man’s struggle to connect with his 84-year-old Teochew-speaking grandmother.

He teaches her to use a mobile phone. He helps her buy her favourite brand of soya sauce. He visits her in hospital after a fall. Along the way, he begins to understand just what it means to spend decades in linguistic and cultural exile.

Back by popular demand after two sell-out runs, Thomas Lim’s funny, insightful play examines the social costs of our mother-tongue language policy and the erasure of dialects in today’s Singapore.

In ways both humorous and heartbreaking, *Grandmother Tongue* explores how our identities are bound up with the languages that we use and the ones that we lose.

方言在新加坡社会逐渐失去意义。《祖母语》讲述一名孙子如何与只懂潮州话的八十四岁奶奶沟通。

他教她如何用手机、帮她买她喜爱品牌的酱油、到医院探访跌倒后的她, 并开始意识语言和文化的重要性。

经过两次售罄, 叫好又叫做的《祖母语》将再度上演。林汀文以细腻有趣的手法探讨母语政策及方言被擦除的代价。此剧也说名了语言 - 无论是日常运用或是早已遗失 - 都与我们个人息息相关。

IMDA Advisory: 16 (Some Mature Content and Coarse Language)
MESSAGE FROM Ngee Ann Development

WITH SPECIAL THANKS TO Ngee Ann Development

Ngee Ann Development has always believed in the vital importance of improving public access to the arts. Over the years, we have made it one of our key missions to enable and encourage Singaporeans to experience the arts for themselves.

To this end, we have worked hard to contribute to Singapore’s growth as one of the world’s leading cultural hubs. In line with the objectives of our parent organisation, The Ngee Ann Kongsi, we have continuously shown support to aspiring and inspiring artists and arts events.

We are very proud to once again support Wild Rice as it brings this beautifully reimagined production of Grandmother Tongue to its own home in Funan. Thomas Lim’s insightful play is a remarkable look at language, love and loss. It serves as a powerful reminder of how the arts allow us to preserve and appreciate our heritage and our history, and is a wonderful opportunity to share the Teochew culture with a wider audience.

We hope you enjoy the show!

MR. RICHARD LEE
Chairman, Ngee Ann Development

Wild Rice is grateful for the ongoing support of our Naming Partner, Ngee Ann Development, in enabling us to reach out to the wider community and make theatre accessible to more people from all walks of life.
MESSAGE FROM THE FOUNDING ARTISTIC DIRECTOR

In 1988, I was privileged to have been in the audience for the original production of *Mama Looking For Her Cat*. Kuo Pao Kun’s multi-lingual masterpiece broke new ground in its examination of Singapore society and the ways in which we communicate with whatever words we have at our disposal. It was a canny look at the effect Singapore’s bilingual policy (first instituted in 1959) has had on the population, as an earlier generation began to lose the ability to speak more languages than English and one’s own ‘mother tongue’.

More than 30 years later, Thomas Lim’s *Grandmother Tongue* reflects on how this problem persists today – indeed, how it has been exacerbated across several generations. These days, many children can barely communicate with their grandparents in their own dialects. Members of our so-called Pioneer Generation are increasingly isolated in a world of computers and technology – yet another new ‘language’ that alienates them from the mainstream.

Our sense of sympathy for the grandmother and grandson in this tender, touching play is acute. We understand what their losses mean – whether it’s a loss in communication, identity or culture – because we suffer those losses ourselves. Like the best of new Singaporean writing, *Grandmother Tongue* helps us make sense and art of the world and society in which we live.

We are deeply grateful to Ngee Ann Development, which has generously supported Wild Rice and the development of *Grandmother Tongue* over the years. We are thrilled that this production, inspired by and dedicated to Singapore’s Teochew community, has finally found its home at The Ngee Ann Kongsi Theatre.

Thank you, too, for joining us for this performance, which kicks off Wild Rice’s 2021 season. Whilst the long tail of the pandemic continues to impact all our lives, we are convinced now more than ever of theatre’s power to uplift, inspire and comfort. We are determined to press on, and your presence and support means the world to us.

*Joi sia,* 多謝 and enjoy the show!

**IVAN HENG**
Founding Artistic Director
Wild Rice
MESSAGE FROM THE PLAYWRIGHT/DIRECTOR

One of the most defining periods of my life was the two years I got to live with my paternal grandmother in my twenties. It was two years of full immersion in Teochew, a language that, prior to this time, I knew but rarely spoke. Over the course of hundreds of meals we shared, she told me her story – her dreams, her struggles, her aches and her love. I wrote Grandmother Tongue in 2016 as a way of capturing and preserving her stories and our shared experience in those two years.

Since the passing of my grandmother just over two years ago, I have had less contact with the Teochew language. Stepping into rehearsals for this play once again, I found the words didn’t roll off my tongue quite as smoothly at first. But, unlike picking up Mandarin again after not speaking it for some time, Teochew came back to me quickly, through the memory and emotional connection I have with the language. It is, after all, my real mother tongue.

I am forever grateful to have with me my Grandmother Tongue family, most of whom have journeyed with me through all three stagings: the actors, Jalyn, Shou Chen and Rei; our dramaturg, Alfian; our Teochew coach, 仰忠老师; stage managers Pamela and Alethea; the creative team, Ching Kai, Petrina, Jing, Ashley, Bobbie and Theresa; the indefatigable production team and the Wild Rice team.

To you in the audience, thank you for being here with us.

THOMAS LIM
The Language Of Loss: Singapore's Bilingual Policy

Can you speak your Grandmother Tongue? If you answered "no", you're in a growing majority of Chinese Singaporeans who have lost touch with their dialects in the decades since the bilingual policy was first implemented in Singapore.

By Shawne Wang

One of Singapore’s most endearing features is its multi-lingual landscape. We have four official languages: English, Chinese, Malay and Tamil. Most of the time, we communicate in Singlish: a charming patchwork of words borrowed from languages we may not speak ourselves.

But Singapore today is very far removed from the Tower of Babel it once was. The myriad Chinese dialects that were once widespread – from Hokkien and Cantonese to Teochew, Hakka and more – have largely disappeared from the mainstream. These days, it wouldn’t be unusual for lines of communication to break down, even within a single family. After all, many younger Singaporeans can no longer speak the languages of their own grandparents.

Most of the time, it can be difficult to identify precisely why languages decline in use and popularity. But it’s easy to see why so many Chinese dialects have lost currency in Singapore.
Since coming to power in 1959, the People’s Action Party (PAP) has advocated a policy of bilingualism. Specifically, the policy emphasises the use of English as Singapore’s working language, while students from the three main ethnic groups are required to study their mother-tongue languages – Mandarin for the Chinese, Malay for the Malays and Tamil for the Indians.

Lee Kuan Yew, the late founding Prime Minister of Singapore, was a firm believer in the importance of bilingualism. Throughout his life, he defended the policy as necessary to ensure that Singaporeans can keep up with the times. He told The Straits Times in 1978: “Bilingualism gives a more balanced and rounded view of the world... If we are to modernise and industrialise, we must be bilingual.”

When Singapore gained independence in 1965, English, Malay, Mandarin and Tamil were formally installed as Singapore’s four official languages under Article 153A of the Singapore Constitution.

The bilingual policy has been largely implemented via the country’s education system. Throughout the 1960s, the PAP-led government pushed through various initiatives to promote bilingualism.

Studying a second language was made compulsory in primary schools in 1960 and in secondary schools in 1966. These languages then become compulsory examinable subjects in the Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE) in 1966, and in the equivalent of the Cambridge General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) O-Levels in 1969.

However, it became clear after close to two decades that the bilingual policy had not been “universally effective”. This was the conclusion drawn in 1978 by then Deputy Prime Minister Goh Keng Swee’s study team, which had been formed to review and revamp the education system.

The statistics spoke for themselves: from 1975 to 1977, 60% of students who sat for the PSLE and O-Level examinations failed either one or both of the languages they studied. For Chinese students, this was attributed to the fact that 85% of students still spoke dialects at home.
**THE SPEAK ONLY MANDARIN CAMPAIGN**

The government concluded that the bilingual policy could not succeed through education policies alone.

In September 1979, Lee Kuan Yew launched the Speak Mandarin Campaign to encourage Chinese Singaporeans to use Mandarin in place of dialects. Parents were urged to speak Mandarin with their children. Chinese taxi drivers could only renew their licences if they passed an oral Mandarin test. Most importantly, the use of dialects was completely phased out on national television, in the cinema and over the radio.

Over time, the Speak Mandarin Campaign – which is still in existence today – has had its intended effect. According to the Department of Statistics, dialect use among Singapore’s Chinese population has fallen from 81.4% in 1980 to 12.2% in 2015.

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**TONGUE-TIED**

As a result, a majority of Singaporeans who grew up in or after the 1980s have become – effectively – tongue-tied. For the most part, they are unable to converse with their grandparents or parents in their own dialects.

But the problem goes beyond an inability to communicate. The loss of a language is the loss of a culture – the words we speak tie us to our heritage and history. Losing those words and languages means losing sight of the people who came before us.

Our hope is that we can tell some of their stories with shows like *Grandmother Tongue*.

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**SHAWNEE WANG** puts ideas, dreams and art into words for Wild Rice. A product of Singapore’s bilingual policy, she’s Hainanese but can’t speak Hainanese. She’s fortunate that her grandmother learnt Mandarin (and a little English) to be able to communicate with the ‘bilingual’ younger generation.
REI POH

Rei is a committed participatory theatre practitioner, director and game designer who believes in the power of theatre to transform. He is a proud graduate of the Victorian College of the Arts’ Master of Directing for Performance programme. Rei has created thought-provoking participatory and forum theatre works like ATTEMPTS:SG, ATTEMPTS:MEL and 《莎莎》 Girl In the White Sand Box. Rei’s recent projects include the showcase of DATING SIM (beta) – a participatory piece experimenting with video game-style narratives that premiered as part of Centre 42’s Late-Night Texting showcase in 2019.

OUR CAST

JALYN HAN

Jalyn is a theatre practitioner who started her career with the SAF Music & Drama Company (1979 – 1998). She was a protégé of Kuo Pao Kun in acting and directing (1989 - 1991), and has been involved in many landmark theatre productions in Singapore.

Jalyn is also actively involved in creating multi-disciplinary and inter-generational works with people from all walks of life.

View her work at www.inarts.com.sg.

REI POH

Jalyn is a theatre practitioner who started her career with the SAF Music & Drama Company (1979 – 1998). She was a protégé of Kuo Pao Kun in acting and directing (1989 - 1991), and has been involved in many landmark theatre productions in Singapore.

Jalyn is also actively involved in creating multi-disciplinary and inter-generational works with people from all walks of life.

View her work at www.inarts.com.sg.
Shou Chen is a recognised theatre-maker. Selected stage acting credits: Liao Zhai Rocks! (The Theatre Practice, Shanghai, 2019); The Reunification of the Two Koreas (TheatreWorks and Centre Dramatique National de Tours), Molière’s The Hypochondriac (Young & Wild, Wild Rice); ‘Tung Chih’ in Forbidden City: Portrait of an Empress, Twelfth Night (Singapore Repertory Theatre); Eugène Ionesco’s Rhinoceros (Esplanade Studios); Charged (Teater Ekamatra); Framed by Hitler (The Finger Players); Asian Boys Vol. 1 and 2 (Wild Rice); The Last Bull (Checkpoint Theatre); and Glass Anatomy (Toy Factory). Shou Chen has also performed main roles in a number of TV programmes for MediaCorp. He is also a director, voice-over artist and educator.

www.shouchen.net
IG: @shouchentan
OUR TEAM

**THOMAS LIM**  
Playwright/ Director

Thomas made his professional debut as a playwright and director with *Grandmother Tongue*, which is performed in Teochew, English and Mandarin. His sophomore work, *Supervision*, won Best Original Script at the 2019 Straits Times Life! Theatre Awards. He has worked as a drama educator in secondary schools and junior colleges across Singapore, and is currently the Associate Artistic Director for Youth and Education at Wild Rice.

**CK CHIA**  
Set Designer


www.chingkai.co
Petrina graduated with a Masters in Collaborative Theatre Production and Design from London’s Guildhall School of Music and Drama. She practises Scenography (Lighting and Set) and has conceptualised a range of projects, including circus acts, music festivals and installations with the element of audience participation. She recently won the Best Set Design award for *The Truth* (Singapore Repertory Theatre) at the 2020 Straits Times Life! Theatre Awards. She was also nominated in 2017 for Best Lighting for her work on *Manifesto* (The Necessary Stage & Drama Box). Her design work for *Recalling Mother* (Checkpoint Theatre) has been seen internationally, from Singapore to Brisbane and Adelaide.

www.petrinadawntan.com

A recipient of the National Arts Council Scholarship, Jing graduated with first-class honours from Rose Bruford College (UK), specialising in Performance Sound. Jing focuses on the sonic experience for the audience – what, why and how you listen through a live performance. His work in *Dragonflies* (Pangdemonium) was nominated for Best Sound Design at the 2018 Straits Times Life! Theatre Awards.
ASHLEY LIM
Hair Designer

Ashley started his hairstyling career in 1986. In 1999, he set up Ashley Salon to further pursue his dedication towards the art of hairdressing, especially for the theatre. He has worked on over 300 productions locally and abroad, and recently took home the Lifetime Achievement Award for Theatre, presented by Mediacorp.

BOBBIE NG
Make-Up Designer

Bobbie, co-founder of The Make Up Room, has been passionately involved in designing make-up for local theatre productions for the past 20 years. She first collaborated with Wild Rice on Blithe Spirit in 2001. Since then, she has fostered great friendships with many of Singapore’s best theatre-makers.
PAMELA LAI
Stage Manager

Pamela graduated with a BA(Hons) Arts Management from LASALLE College of the Arts and a Diploma in Technology & Arts Management from Republic Polytechnic. She never knows what to write in her bio, but she is very happy to be a part of Grandmother Tongue for the third time!
CREDITS

Cast/演员
Jalyn Han 韩雪卿
Rei Poh 傅正龙
Tan Shou Chen 陈寿臣

Creative Team/创作团队
Playwright/Director 编剧/导演
Thomas Lim 林汀文
Set Designer 舞台设计师
CK Chia 谢振凯
Lighting Designer 灯光设计师
Petrina Dawn Tan 陈雪薇
Sound Designer 声响设计师
Jing Ng 黄劲
Hair Designer 发型设计师
Ashley Lim 林忠华
Make-Up Designer 化妆设计师
Bobbie Ng 黄洲弥

Language Coach (Teochew) 语文老师 (潮州)
from The Make Up Room
Nigel Lim Ngian Tiong 林仰忠

Production Team/制作团队
Producer 制作人
Koh Bee Bee 许美美
Production Manager 制作经理
Melissa Teoh 张幼菁
Technical Manager 技术经理
David Sagaya
Production Co-ordinator 制作协调
Phua Yun Yun 潘筠筠
Production Assistant 制作助理
Angela Ee 余洁禛
Stage Manager 舞台监督
Pamela Lai 赖美娜
Assistant Stage Manager 助理舞台监督
Alethea Koh 许呈甄
Costume Consultant 服装顾问
Theresa Chan 曾丽莎
Wardrobe Manager 服装管理
Lim Zhiying 林芝盈
Dresser 服装助理
Tiffany Chai 蔡靖柔
Make-Up Assistant 化妆助理
Esther Goh 吴慧婷
Technicians 技术员
Ahmad Hafriz Bin Berkath
& Muhammad Azhar Bin Azman
Surtitle Operator 字幕操作
Marilyn Chew 趙潔恩
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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THANK YOU!

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ABOUT WILD RICE

Wild Rice was founded in 2000 by Ivan Heng, an internationally acclaimed and award-winning theatre practitioner, and is recognised today as one of Singapore's leading professional theatre companies.

Its mission is to provide an open forum for the shared experience of theatre: celebrating our diversity; reflecting on the problems and possibilities of our times; and presenting productions that inspire, challenge and entertain.

A commitment to the highest standards informs every aspect of Wild Rice’s creative work, which is first and foremost a celebration of Singapore’s theatrical talent. By producing and touring productions that are distinctively local in flavour and yet universal in vision and concerns, the company creates memorable experiences for audiences in Singapore and across the world.

The company’s exciting and varied programming for the main stage includes:

+ New and original works
+ New productions of the Singapore repertoire
+ New interpretations of world classics

The company’s mission to build a theatre culture also extends to the wider community through the following divisions:

+ Wild Rice Academy and First Stage, which offer drama and training programmes to nurture young talents from the ages of 5 to 12
+ Singapore Youth Theatre, which develops and empowers young people aged 13 to 17 through theatre
+ Young & Wild, which identifies and develops Singapore’s young theatre professionals from the ages of 18 to 30

Wild Rice is committed to touring its shows internationally to raise the profile of Singapore theatre, to create an international awareness of its unique productions, and to engage its artists and collaborators in creative dialogues with the international arts community. Its distinctively Singaporean productions have won great acclaim in major international arts festivals in Australia, Canada, Hong Kong, Macau, Malaysia, New Zealand and Russia.

Wild Rice @ Funan is the company’s new home in the heart of Singapore’s civic and cultural district. This groundbreaking performing arts complex promises to be an iconic destination theatre for Singapore, one dedicated to creating and presenting the best of Singapore theatre, while nurturing the artists and audiences of tomorrow.
IVAN HENG
Founding Artistic Director

TONY TRICKETT
Executive Director

ARTISTIC
GLEN GOEI
Co-Artistic Director

ALFIAN SA’AT
Resident Playwright / Co-Artistic Director,
Singapore Theatre Festival

YOUTH & EDUCATION
THOMAS LIM
Associate Artistic Director, Youth & Education

EDITH PODESTA
Associate Artistic Director, Young & Wild

EZZAT ALKAFF
Youth & Education Manager

BENJAMIN LYE
Administrator, Young & Wild

SHALYN YONG
Programme Co-ordinator, Wild Rice Academy

PRIYANKA SABU
Youth & Education Intern

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LINDA TAN
Marketing Manager

SHAWNEE WANG
Editorial Consultant

NALIA RAHMAT
Marketing Intern

PRODUCTION
KOH BEE BEE
Producer

MELISSA TEOH
Production Manager

PHUA YUN YUN
Production Co-ordinator

ANGELA EE
Production Assistant

DEVELOPMENT
TERESA FU
Head, Development

STELLA LIM
Development Executive

ADMINISTRATION
KATHERINE KHOO
Head, Administration

JASMINE LIM
Accounts Manager

ROSS TOH
Administrative Executive

VENUE
KOH WEE GIAP
Venue Manager

MUHAMMAD FADLY BIN NANYAN
Assistant Venue Manager

DAVID SAGAYA
Technical Manager

AHMAD HAFRIZ BIN BERKATH
Technician

MUHAMMAD AZHAR BIN AZMAN
Technician
Thank You, Wild Rice Angels!

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Cheryl Heng
Shirley Heng
Michael Hemmingsen
Ho Jieying
Judit Hordai
We also wish to thank our new Angels whom, due to printing deadlines, we have not been able to include.
HELP US SECURE THE FUTURE OF SINGAPORE THEATRE

Please kindly consider being an Angel.

Wild Rice believes in the importance of telling Singaporean stories like Grandmother Tongue, because they nurture empathy while encouraging thoughtful conversations between and about people of all ages.

If you are in a position to do so, we would greatly appreciate your support. It will help us to survive the COVID-19 crisis, and also enable us to keep doing the work we do.

As a leading Singapore theatre company, Wild Rice has blazed the trail for over two decades in the relentless pursuit of excellence.

We have created and presented the best of Singapore theatre - reaching out to more than a million audience members here and around the world, whilst nurturing and developing the artists and audiences of tomorrow. As one of the largest employers in the Singapore theatre industry, we provide gainful employment to hundreds of people, on stage and off, every year.

Last, but certainly not least, our award-winning, independently-run venue has brought unprecedented visibility and prominence to Singapore theatre, while also creating a home for the performing arts where all are welcome.

If you share our belief in the power of theatre as a force for good and for change, please consider coming on board as a Wild Rice Angel. Your support will enable us to face the future with courage and confidence, and to achieve all that we set out to do.

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24 – 28 MARCH 2021