

LKY

The MUSICAL

What began as a “crazy idea,” according to the people behind it, is today Singapore’s most successful homegrown musical—one that tells the story of the country’s founding and its founder. Brunswick’s **BEN FRY** reports.

VERSIONS OF THIS IDEA CAN BE FOUND throughout literature and human history: When people tell you you’re crazy, you just might be on to something. And as Tan Choon Hiong tossed around concepts for what would eventually become *The LKY Musical*, “pretty much everyone we spoke to about this project said to us, ‘are you sure you want to make Mr. Lee [Lee Kuan Yew, Singapore’s founding father] sing and dance on stage?’”

Yet bold ideas have a way of attracting the kind of people capable of bringing them to life. “I was immediately intrigued by the idea and also the gutsiness of the producers who were fearless in tackling the subject matter,” said Dick Lee, the musical’s composer.

At face value, *The LKY Musical* is the story of how Singapore achieved independence from Britain, Japan and Malaysia, and then, against the odds, succeeded as a nation. But at its heart, the musical is



Adrian Pang, left, as Lee Kuan Yew. He described the musical as “not simply about the man ... but the story of Singapore.”

the love story of Lee Kuan Yew and Kwa Geok Choo, Mr. Lee’s wife—the only female role in the production—and an accomplished lawyer in her own right. Performed in English with Chinese subtitles, *The LKY Musical* had its first run in 2015, the same year another musical debuted profiling an unlikely historical figure: Alexander Hamilton. 2015 was also the year Singapore celebrated the 50th anniversary of its independence—and it was sadly the year Lee Kuan Yew passed away.

By any number of metrics—longevity, viewership, international coverage—*The LKY Musical* is not only Singapore’s most successful musical, but one of its most successful shows of any kind. In 2022, as the effects of the pandemic waned, the show returned to the stage at the iconic Marina Bay Sands.

In a recent conversation with Brunswick, Tan Choon Hiong discussed the delicacy and creativity that went into producing the musical. Tan and his wife, Bianca Cheo, are both Directors of Aiwei, the company which co-produced the musical with the Singapore Repertory Theatre (SRT). In 2023, the SRT celebrated its 30th anniversary, having commissioned and produced over 250 local and international plays and musicals. They were the first Singaporean theater company on Broadway in 1998 as Associate Producer on *Golden Child*, which went on to earn three Tony Award nominations.

SRT was also a co-commissioning partner on the Bridge Project—a three-year, Sam Mendes-directed collaboration between The Old Vic in London and Brooklyn Academy of Music in New York, which *The New York Times* described as the “revival of a nearly dead form: expansive, classical, repertory theater.”

All this made SRT an ideal partner to undertake this venture with Aiwei.

Asked about the show’s success, Tan pointed to a combination of factors: “There’s the subject matter itself, how we were very deliberate in wanting to gather the best talent in Singapore for this project, the incredible music and staging,” he said.

After a pause, Tan added, “and, of course, it’s about Mr. Lee.”

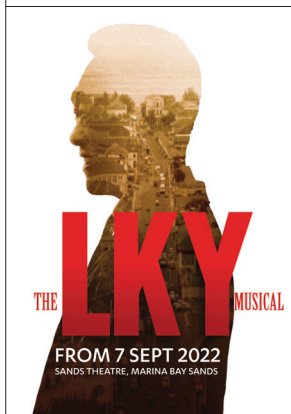
Why did you decide to set Lee Kuan Yew’s story to a musical?

When we looked at theater, and particularly musicals, there was nothing out there that told the Singapore story. We thought it was time to have one that speaks to Singapore.

So it started with the simple premise, but setting the story of Singapore’s founder to music was a bit of a crazy idea. While we all know how passionate Mr.

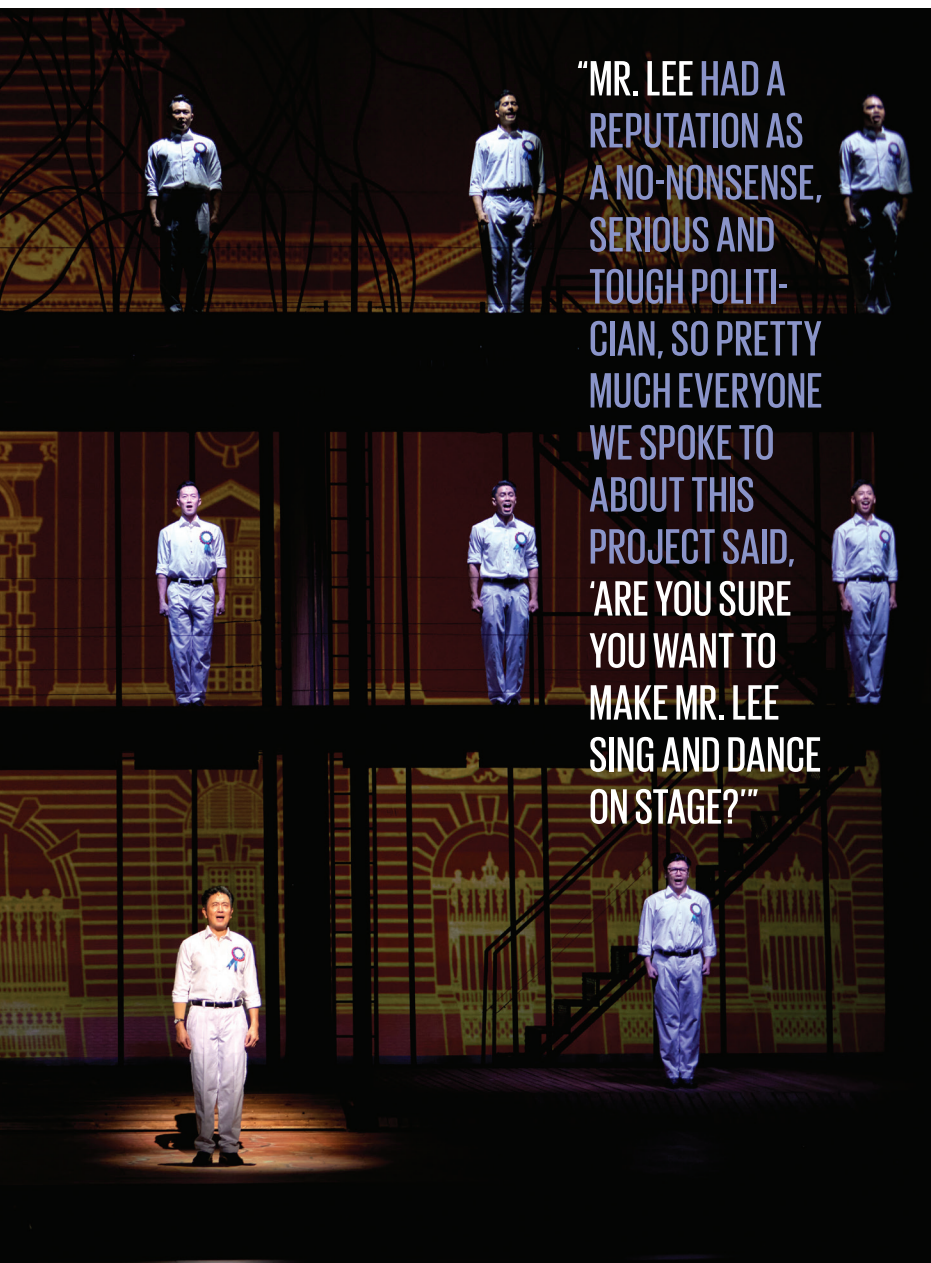


In 2022, the musical returned to the stage seven years after its opening. Below, the cover for the show’s program; above, a glimpse of the show’s three-story set.



Lee was about his work, we also wanted to tell the fantastic love story that stood behind his story. We thought: What if we can match the historical development, and weave that into this incredible story of love—and then why not set all of this as a musical?

After that, the question became the period of the history we base the story in, and how we bring that to life. Two people were key to this: Dick Lee, Associate Artistic Director of the Singapore Repertory Theatre and one of Singapore’s most iconic composers, was immediately fascinated by the project; and Meira Chand, who a few years earlier had published *A Different Sky*, a novel following the lives of three ethnically different families in the years leading up to Singapore’s independence. Given the importance of this period to Mr. Lee’s story, we managed to get her to come onboard to write the story. That’s how it all came together.



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How controversial or risky was it to set this to music—especially given Mr. Lee once said that “poetry is a luxury we can’t afford”? Were you worried about what this would do to his legacy?

That comment was made many decades earlier, in a very specific setting and in a very different period of economic development for Singapore. That said, the idea was met with a lot of skepticism, and it was risky, partly because we came at this with no background in theater—though I think that actually helped us.

Mr. Lee had a reputation as a no-nonsense, serious and tough politician, so pretty much everyone we spoke to about this project said, “are you sure you want to make Mr. Lee sing and dance on stage?” That was perhaps the biggest challenge we had to get around. We essentially had to take a leap of faith, believe that it could be achieved.

I actually think that it being a musical helped to

BEN FRY, a Partner based in Singapore, specializes in helping businesses articulate their vision, strategy and value to society.

engage a younger audience. Older generations lived through this time, but the young have only read about it in textbooks. We heard lots of stories about how the musical sparked conversations between children, parents and grandparents on Singapore’s history—children struggled to believe that this was the same country they grew up in.

When it comes to staging a play inspired by historical events—especially ones so close to Singaporean hearts—how do you balance fact versus fiction to tell a compelling story?

This is why working so closely with Meira Chand was important. She spent such a long time researching her novel that we felt really confident in the historical elements of the story. We were not trying to be controversial, but to tell a story that resonated with Singaporeans and spoke to Singapore. In other markets, they tend to try to push the envelope, actively seeking to be anti-establishment. But for us, we were careful to make sure it was factually correct and a true representation of how Singapore came to be independent. I also think that by presenting this as a musical, we had more freedom and leeway with the dialogue.

We have to trust that the audience will be able to understand the difference between real life and dramatic license, that they’ll understand that the dialogue or song lyrics they hear—those people didn’t actually say or sing that. That is a challenge that the whole creative team had to grapple with, but it’s the same challenge faced by every book I’ve ever read.

Many countries are currently struggling to reconcile colonial pasts. How did you approach this, and how important was it for you to directly address these periods in Singapore’s history?

We knew we had to approach it with sensitivity. The arc of the story covered the Japanese occupation, the return to British colonial rule, the merger with Malaysia, through to establishing an independent Singapore. We all know that we went through this history, but that is the beauty of a stage production, because when you actually see this visually, through the four national flags, it really brings it all to life.

I think showing the journey and challenges we went through struck a chord. Not just the colonial past, but how relatable it is to today. We are going into our fourth generation of leadership, so we are all exploring what it means to be Singaporean, and that requires us to look back at history as well. Without that strong understanding of your heritage, I think it’s challenging to look forward. ♦