

PART **C**

Life!

THE STRAITS TIMES
THURSDAY, MARCH 1 2012

Beauty and illness

Artist Donna Ong's fragile world

C7



Life! Theatre Awards

Best Costume Design nominees

C8

Theatre smoking ban lifted

Exception made for award-winning director

C10



Lasalle's distinguished alumni include (from left) visual artist Shubigi Rao, fashion designer Nicholas Wong, theatre director Natalie Hennedige, advertising agency artistic director Lim Si Ping and film-maker Boo Junfeng.

Full steam ahead

Once struggling Lasalle College of the Arts and the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts have transformed themselves by tying up with Europe's top arts institutions and gaining international recognition. CLARISSA OON reports. **C4**



Lasalle College of the Arts dance students practicing Kalaripayattu, a traditional Indian martial arts. ST PHOTOS: MUGILAN RAJASEGERAN



Lasalle fine art students get creative in their studio space (above) while Ms Huang Chung (right), 21, a third-year diploma student in the department of 3D design, works in a jewellery studio in Nafa.



PHOTO: JOSEPH NAIR FOR THE STRAITS TIMES

ARTS 101

NANYANG ACADEMY OF FINE ARTS

Founded: 1938, by China-born artist and art teacher Lim Hak Tai
Headed by: Mr Choo Thiam Siew, former chief executive of the National Arts Council, since 2003
Courses: 31 diploma and 10 bachelor's with honours degrees in arts management and education, 3D design, dance, design and media, fashion studies, fine art, music and theatre
Number of students: 2,400, with 40 per cent from countries such as Indonesia, China and India
Number of teachers: 389, 99 of whom are full-time. 34 per cent hold postgraduate degrees

LASALLE COLLEGE OF THE ARTS

Founded: 1984, by Ireland-born educator and sculptor Brother Joseph McNally
Headed by: Professor Steve Dixon, former pro-vice chancellor of London's Brunel University, since last month
Courses: 12 diploma, 14 Bachelor of Arts (Honours) and four master's programmes in animation art, art therapy, arts management, Asian art histories, audio production, broadcast media, dance, design communication, fashion, fine arts, film, interior design, product design, music, musical theatre, technical and production management and theatre
Number of students: 2,414, with 40 per cent from countries such as Indonesia, China, India and Malaysia
Number of teachers: 193, 85 of whom are full-time. 64 per cent hold postgraduate degrees



clarissa oon
senior writer

COLLEGE CREDITS

With recent tie-ups with prestigious international arts institutions and prominent campuses in Singapore's downtown arts triangle, things have never looked better for the two home-grown arts colleges, Lasalle College of the Arts and the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (Nafa).

It is a far cry from the state of affairs 18 years ago, when Yugoslav-born, Bucharest-trained artist Milenko Prvacki came to teach at Lasalle, and had to convince disapproving parents to let their precious 18-year-olds study art.

At that time, there was no art museum and few galleries. Lasalle and Nafa were passionate but struggling private arts colleges.

"I asked Lasalle for a syllabus, they didn't have anything, any kind of structure," recalls Mr Prvacki, now 60 and a Singapore citizen. He was formerly Lasalle's dean of fine arts and is now senior fellow.

Indeed, the college lacked a single campus and was operating out of three far-flung locations – a main building at Goodman Road for fine arts and music, a former primary school in Telok Kurau for its design classes and the basement of Kallang Theatre for its performing arts department.

Today, not only does the college occupy a snazzy, glass-fronted 35,000 sq m city campus with seven galleries and three fully equipped theatres, recognition for the quality of its education is at a high.

It announced yesterday that its 14 undergraduate and four master's degrees will be validated from August for the next five years by the University of London's well-known Goldsmiths College, whose alumni includes top contemporary artists such as Tracy Emin and the late portrait painter Lucian Freud. Graduates will receive a Goldsmiths degree equivalent to graduates from the London campus, one of Europe's top creative arts and humanities universities.

Lasalle has developed the formalised curriculum of these degree programmes over the last 10 years, drawing on its 1990s experiences offering franchise degrees from Australian universities, and from 2004 to early this year, getting Britain's Open University to ensure the quality of these programmes.

Singapore's Ministry of Education also said yesterday it will fund all of Lasalle's bachelor degree courses. This comes a year after it agreed to subsidise Nafa's music degrees following the latter's five-year tie-up with the renowned Royal College of Music in London.

Before this, the ministry funded only diploma programmes at Lasalle and Nafa. This polytechnic-level funding was awarded in 1999. Back then, both institutions were already offering degrees accredited by overseas partners, but the ministry had yet to be convinced of the quality of these programmes.

Now, there are no longer any doubts. A high-level committee charting the future development of the arts has even recently recommended that both colleges work towards becoming full-fledged arts, media and design universities.

Needless to say, Mr Prvacki no longer has to sell tertiary arts education to sceptical parents, and considers the rate of growth nothing short of spectacular.

"Lasalle has developed at a speed I can't compare with any other institution, certainly not in Europe," he marvels.

Since the 1990s, Nafa has also experienced the same kind of warp-speed development. As its president since 2003, former National Arts Council chief Choo Thiam Siew, puts it: "Whoever would have thought before 1999 that the Government would fund us at diploma level, and then give us a piece of land to build our campus? Unthinkable."

Lasalle College of the Arts and Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts are coming into their own, with tie-ups with prestigious institutions

Since taking over the reins of the college, Mr Choo says he has been "knocking on MOE's door and saying, 'Please consider funding our degrees too.'"

He got his wish last April with government funding of Nafa's music degrees. He is now looking for more reputable partners for the college's other degree programmes so that the Ministry of Education will agree to subsidise these too.

Present partners include the University of Essex for its theatre and creative industry management degrees and the University of East London for its fashion degrees.

Nafa is Singapore's oldest arts school, founded way back in 1938 to teach fine arts. Early teachers included pioneer visual artists Chen Wen Hsi, Georgette Chen and Lai Foong Moi. But in the 1970s, it nearly collapsed due to financial difficulties and falling enrolment.

Alumni rallied around the college and in the 1980s, design, dance and music departments were added. In the late 1990s, it started offering drama as well as degree programmes in collaboration with Australian universities, but operated out of three somewhat rundown buildings at Middle Road, Short Street and Wilkie Road.

In 2004, it made the big move into a 36,000 sq m,

\$110-million white-and-pastel campus at Bencoolen Street in the Bras Basah area. Five years later, Lasalle became its neighbour when its own \$138-million campus at nearby McNally Street was completed, forming a kind of arts triangle in the area along with the Singapore Art Museum at Bras Basah Road.

Lasalle and Nafa have together produced some of Singapore's most accomplished artists, designers and musicians, who once had to go overseas to realise their dreams of a tertiary arts education.

Distinguished Lasalle alumni include visual artist Amanda Heng, a Cultural Medallion recipient, and the young award-winning film-maker Boo Junfeng. Nafa also has its share of Cultural Medallists such as visual artist Thomas Yeo, as well as rising talents such as Dr Zechariah Goh Toh Chai, a composer.

While outsiders think of the two colleges as competitors, Mr Choo says they have a friendly relationship as arts institutions, with many of his alumni going on to teach at Lasalle, and many of his own teaching staff being Lasalle graduates.

Both colleges also have very distinct strengths. Lasalle is known for its focus on contemporary arts, while Nafa is seen as more classically oriented, and also bicultural and bilingual from its historical roots in the Chinese community.

In Mr Choo's view, "our main competitor is not

Lasalle but the five polytechnics – Nanyang, Ngee Ann, Republic, Temasek and Singapore Poly – which are fully under the education ministry and offer some of the programmes that we have, such as design and multimedia. The polytechnics' school fees are half ours – even with our MOE subsidies".

Current diploma tuition fees for Singaporeans at Lasalle and Nafa are about \$4,000 to \$5,000 a year for three years.

But what will set both institutions apart from the competition is if they become arts, media and design universities. He and his Lasalle counterpart, with its new president Steve Dixon, are ready for that challenge laid down by the latest Arts and Culture Strategic Review.

Says Professor Dixon, who took office last month: "Our founder, Brother Joseph McNally, envisioned Lasalle having its own degree-awarding powers and becoming a university, and that of course remains our ambition. We hope the partnership with Goldsmiths will help guide Lasalle in its next stage of development."

Industry practitioners agree conferring their own degrees is the logical next step for Lasalle and Nafa. Singapore Chinese Orchestra general manager Terence Ho thinks, for example, that Nafa's five-year partnership with the Royal College of Music "is not a long-term solution as Nafa has no complete say in customising its syllabus to meet the needs of Singapore students".

Nafa's degrees are franchise programmes from partner universities, unlike Lasalle which holds proprietary rights to its degrees.

High on the agenda of both colleges is trying to net better students here and internationally, as well as hiring better-qualified staff, with the latter important when eyeing university status.

Prof Dixon says that job specifications for new academic staff posts will indicate that a PhD qualification is preferred. He also says Lasalle is now committed to "undertaking leading-edge research into contemporary arts and Asian arts practices".

As for Nafa, it intends to build on its strengths in Nanyang (South-east Asian) visual and performing arts. It set up the Institute of Southeast Asian Arts two years ago to organise workshops and conduct research with regional partners.

However, both colleges must also ensure their teaching and research remain relevant to industry needs. The Government has singled out two areas where there will be a crop of arts-related jobs in the coming years – at the theatres and museums in the Integrated Resorts, and at the National Art Gallery of Singapore, slated to open in 2015.

In the last five years, up to 92.8 per cent of Lasalle graduates and 80 per cent of Nafa graduates received employment in their related field of studies. All departments and faculties at both colleges involve practitioners in shaping curricula and identifying industry needs.

But practitioners say the success of these efforts varies from sector to sector. For example, the theatre programmes of both colleges are seen as quite closely connected to the home-grown theatre scene, but the dance programmes are found lacking in this respect.

Veteran choreographer Angela Liong, who is artistic director of the Arts Fission Company, feels "there is definitely not enough meaningful interaction for both colleges with the local professional dance companies other than the occasional student group attendance of performances".

Overall though, the outlook is upbeat for these two colleges, and the alumni are particularly gratified by their progress.

Says composer Goh, a Nafa alumnus who now lectures at the college: "We have overcome the most difficult times of not having a permanent campus until recently. I am proud of Nafa, which has survived many difficult times and still moved on."

clare@sph.com.sg



Posing with a statue of Lim Hak Tai, the founding principal of Nafa, are alumni (top row, from left) dancer Xu Lei Ting, fashion designer Max Tan, (bottom row, from left) artist Tay Bak Chiang, interior decorator Dannie Seow and composer and conductor Zechariah Goh Toh Chai.

PHOTO: JOSEPH NAIR FOR THE STRAITS TIMES