

Poetry Festival Singapore 2019: Looking Back to Move Forward

Singapore – 21 June 2019

POETRY Festival Singapore (PFS) 2019, centred around the theme of 'Metamorphosis', will celebrate the transformative power of poetry and showcase the diversity of Singapore's linguistic traditions and poetic forms. In keeping with the island's ongoing bicentennial commemorations, the festival will take stock of how far Singapore poetry has come, while also providing a stage for new voices to explore exciting new territory. PFS will take place from July 19 to 21 at The Arts House.

The five-year-old literary fest will offer critical surveys of published verse and spoken word in all the island's official languages. It will also look ahead by giving a platform to rising poetic stars and migrant worker poets. A highlight this year is a workshop on yoga and poetry conducted by yoga master and writer Vicky Chong.

The festival will officially open on 19 July 2019 with Senior Minister of State Chee Hong Tat as Guest-of-Honor. Prof. Arun Mahizhnan from the Institute of Policy Studies will then deliver a keynote address on the metamorphosis of Tamil poetry in Singapore.

The address will be followed by one of the highlights of the festival: the premiere of *PALINDROMES*, a poetic play with music starring Giovanni Ortega and Zora Imani Smith. The play follows two strangers, seemingly worlds apart, struggling to find their roots and discovering just how in tune they are with each other. Notably, the play features songs penned by Ortega and scored by José Promis, as well as classics from regional music icons Saloma and Sudirman. As writer and actor Ortega affirms, "Songs are poetry"; and the music of the play promises to, in his words, "take you to a different world". The play will be performed throughout the festival.

Perennial festival fare such as open mic poetry will be on hand. PFS 2019 will also see other art forms and traditions - from film to even yoga - merged with poetry. Finally, in keeping with the theme, there will be an Instagram marathon reading of poems depicting the island's various historical periods in the *Contour* anthology. In addition, eight haunting short films inspired by classic Singapore poems will be screened throughout the festival, with the filmmakers from LASALLE College of the Arts in attendance for a Q&A session on 20 July.

One of the festival's key aims is to nurture the next generation of poets. In keeping with this, a slew of events on 21 July will be aimed at youth. Students from the 2018-2019 batch of the Creative Arts Programme will be showcasing their original poems, while "Singapore's Emerging Poetic Voices" - moderated by Crispin Rodrigues - will see recently published poets Marylyn Tan, Natalie Wang and Andrea Yew, as well as spoken word artist Max Pasakorn reading their recent works and discussing the meaning of "millennial poetry". Students from all secondary schools in Singapore are also invited to participate in the "SG Poetry By Heart" competition on

21 July, where participants will memorize and perform selected local poems; the best oratorical interpretations stand to win attractive prizes.

The festival will also shine a spotlight on the poetic voices of women. In “Sisters Are Doing It for Themselves II”, poets from Sanrakshan and the Writing Enthusiasts’ Club of the Indian Women’s Association Singapore will pour out their feelings in verse. The session will not only feature poems in English but also in the poets’ Mother Tongues.

Many other events are aimed at celebrating linguistic diversity as well, including a panel discussion on translation, a Chinese-language keynote, and a Tamil poetry reading. In particular, “Sanggam: The Confluence of Beauty” on 20 July will feature poetry readings in Malay and Tamil, followed by a forum on how each of Singapore’s main literary traditions engage, in their own ways, with deeply human concerns. The forum, moderated by Dr. Azhar Ibrahim, will feature four panellists - Sithuraj Ponraj, Muhammad Andi Zulkepli, Dr. Fan Jinghua and Dr. Loh Chin Ee - each representing one of Singapore’s major literary traditions.

The work of migrant poets, a key feature of last year’s festival, will also make a return this year in the “Carnival of Poetry” concert on 21 July. With poetry readings as well as song and dance performances by the Migrant Writers of Singapore, this event promises to be a joyous affair for all.

In view of Singapore’s bicentennial commemorations, 2019 is also a time for reflection on how far we have come. Accordingly, in “Exploring History through Poetry” on 21 July, Poet Desmond Kon Zhicheng-Mingdé will facilitate an illuminating discussion on the influence of history on poetry - and vice versa - with distinguished authors Christine Chia, Gwee Li Sui, and Robert Yeo. In addition, a *CONTOUR* Marathon Reading will commence from 12 July and last throughout the festival. The reading consists of videos of poets reciting their poems from the anthology, *CONTOUR: A Lyric Cartography of Singapore*, to be featured on PFS’s Instagram page. The poems, which speak to various episodes in Singapore’s 700-odd years of history, are a testament to our metamorphosis as a nation - but more importantly, what it took to get to where we are now.

Poetry Festival Singapore (FPS) was a recipient of the National Arts Council’s Seed Grant from 1 April 2016 to 31 March 2019. It received the NAC’s presentation grant for the July festival. PFS promotes poetry in all the island’s official languages and other art forms through programmes such as public readings, keynote addresses, craft workshops, panel discussions and literary anthologies. Its primary aim is to promote literary excellence in a multilingual, multicultural, multi-generational setting.

This project is shared with strategic partners, the National Arts Council, the National Library Board, the National Gallery Singapore, the Singapore Botanic Gardens, LASALLE College of the Arts as well as the National University of Singapore’s Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences,

with which it organizes events as well as conferences. The festival also co-organizes workshops with various private partners such as the Haque Centre of Acting & Creativity.

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