

# Review: Isaac Tan on Don't Call Him Mr Mari Kita by Julian Wong (W!LD RICE)

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July 21, 2022



*By Isaac Tan*

If you are a theatre-goer who likes to gamble, the one bet you would want to place money on would be Julian Wong being the composer or musical director of the latest local musical.

Having encountered Wong's artistry through the conduit of other artists over the years, it is a treat to finally watch him take centre stage.

The revue, *Don't Call Him Mr Mari Kita: The Zubir Said Songbook*, is Wong's exploration of the life and musical legacy of Zubir Said, a prodigious composer from Indonesia who sought a musical career in Singapore. He is said to have composed more than a thousand pieces, but only a handful of those survived.

Wong's meticulous research uncovers a few more pieces, and some of them require him to come up with the accompaniment. In the course of the show, we not only find out about the difficulties that Pak Zubir faced, but also his thoughts and inclinations through his music.

Nature is often featured in his music. In songs such as “Cantik Menghijau (Beautiful Greenery)”, and “Anggerik Singapura (The Orchids of Singapore)”, we get lush music that matches the beauty of the nature he is describing.

Having been in Singapore in the 1920s till his death in 1987, one can reasonably say that Pak Zubir matured together with Singapore. In “Ulang Tahun Negara Singapura (Singapore’s Birthday)” and our national anthem, “Majulah Singapura (Onward Singapore)”, we get his earnest wish for peace (sentosa) and success (berjaya) for his adopted country and home.

In fact, Wong tells us that according to Pak Zubir’s daughter, the national anthem is his little prayer for Singapore.

The third theme to emerge from the music is the romance and sentimentality of Pak Zubir. Apart from romantic music for movies such as “Bintang Hati (Star of My Heart)”, there is also the “Suhanna”, which was composed for his granddaughter. The simple but heartfelt song ends with, “I hope to live long enough / to see you in your prime.”

In the same vein, Wong also regales us with an anecdote told to him by his music teacher, Iskandar Ismail, who was a student of Zubir Said. Pak Zubir was known to be a very stern teacher, but he cared for his students. He encouraged Iskandar to go abroad to pursue further studies in music, and Iskandar did the same for Wong despite the latter’s disapproving parents.

Thus, this tribute is not merely due to a musician’s curiosity, but an acknowledgement of one’s musical lineage. In an act of paying it forward, Wong has four of his former students (three singers and a guitarist) performing with him.

Under Ivan Heng’s direction and set design, the revue has all the trappings of old world glamour, reminiscent of the Big Band era, complete with a four-piece band (Din Safari, Leonard Mikhail, Riduan Zalani, Ryan Sim). This is enhanced by Frederick Lee’s costumes. From kebayas to gowns to Wong’s well-cut dinner jacket, it is a stunning fashion show that spans cultures and eras.

As a counterpoint to all the visual glitz, the presentation is understated. In both his arrangements and story-telling, Wong seems intent on letting Pak Zubir’s voice come through.

In the musical arrangements, the melody takes precedence and Wong simply gets up from his piano and stands centre stage to tell us more about Pak Zubir’s life with occasional assistance from multimedia projections.

Perhaps it is a testament to how little we know about Pak Zubir that such a straightforward presentation is a revelation to most of us.



*Photo credit: W!LD RICE*

The other three singers complement their former teacher very well. The concoction of Rohaniah Sa'id's crystalline vocals, Hannah Nordin's smoky timbre, and Macolm Lim's youthful and bright sound brings about lush harmonies that lull you into a reverie, or compel you to tap your feet along with the jaunty tunes.

As the last notes of "Semogia Bahagia (May You Be Happy and Blessed)"—a song that every student had to learn for Children's Day—are played, I have a newfound appreciation for the songs I have been mumbling begrudgingly throughout my schooling days.

Why have we allowed generations of students to simply bumble their way through songs that are not only affecting, but it contains the advice from and hopes of the previous generation?

What *Don't Call Him Mr Mari Kita* proves is that the government should let artists look into consolidating The Singapore Songbook and perform them in all schools to show the fullest potential of our national music.

Readers who are curious about the soundtrack can access the music via [Spotify](#). Lyrics and the English translations are available via the [W!LD RICE website](#).

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## **Writer's Statement**

*Each response published on Critics Circle Blog is paired with a statement from the writer where their politic, entry point, purpose, and intended audience is made clear.*

Isaac Tan is a performer, writer, and educator who has been writing about the arts since 2011. He believes that every performance is an act of communication. His reviews are reflections of what he got as a receiver of this communication.

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*Don't Call Him Mr Mari Kita: The Zubir Said Songbook*

Venue: The Ngee Ann Kongsi Theatre @ W!LD RICE

Performed: 7- 26 July, 2022

Producing Company: W!LD RICE

Writer, Music Director, Arranger: Julian Wong

Director & Set Designer: Ivan Heng

Cast: Julian Wong, Hannah Nordin, Malcolm Lim, Rohaniah Sa'id

Musicians: Din Safari, Leonard Mikhail, Riduan Zalani, Ryan Sim

Dramaturg: Alfian Sa'at

Lighting Designer: Alberta Wileo

Sound Designer: Lim Cheng Yi

Choreographer: Hafeez Hassan

Multimedia Designer: He Shuming

Costume Designer: Frederick Lee

Hair Designer: Ashley Lim

Make-up Designer: Bobby Ng

Stage Manager: Victoria Anna Wong

Assistant Stage Manager: Sheryl Woo