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Four nominated for award to honour Singapore heroes

Para-athlete, film-maker, cartoonist and conductor in first batch of shortlisted finalists

Toh Wen Li

A para-athlete, a film-maker, a graphic novelist and a conductor are the first four nominees for The Straits Times Singaporean of the Year 2017 award.

Now in its third year and supported by the bank UBS Singapore, the award seeks to recognise Singa-

poreans whose extraordinary acts of goodwill have improved their community and the lives of others.

Singaporean individuals or groups can be nominated for the award until the end of the year. Other shortlisted candidates will be unveiled in two more batches during this month and next.

This will be followed by two weeks of public voting, and the out-

come will be used as a reference by the 15 judges when they are making their final decision.

The shortlisted finalists are navy serviceman and para-athlete Jason Chee, who won a gold medal for table tennis at the Asean Para Games five years after a horrific accident; film-maker Kirsten Tan, whose debut feature *Pop Aye* has been selected as Singapore's submission for the Foreign Language Film category at the 90th Academy Awards; cartoonist Sonny Liew, whose graphic novel *The Art Of Charlie Chan* Hock Chye won three Eisner

awards; and conductor Wong Kah Chun, who won the Gustav Mahler Conducting Competition.

The Singaporean of the Year will receive \$20,000 and a trophy, while the other nine finalists will each get \$5,000.

The prize money will be sponsored by UBS. Besides editors from the ST newsroom, the judging panel includes chef and restaurateur Willin Low, and social entrepreneur and activist for children and women Saleemah Ismail.

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MORE INFORMATION

To nominate someone or find out more about The Straits Times Singaporean of the Year award, go to str.sg/soty17nominate



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SCAN TO WATCH

Jason Chee's journey to becoming a table tennis para-athlete. <http://str.sg/jasonchee>



Navy serviceman Jason Chee says he hopes to inspire others. ST PHOTO: KEVIN LIM

Jason Chee

Accident, cancer – nothing can keep para-athlete down

Every now and then, Jason Chee, 34, gets asked: "Just how do you do it?"

"A lot of people ask, why are you so determined, despite losing so many things?" said Chee, who lost both his legs, left arm and three fingers on his right hand, after a horrific naval accident in 2012 when he was caught between a motorised winch and a berthing rope. "I just tell them, we only live once. We have to fight on."

The navy serviceman and national para-athlete has spent the past five years soldiering on in the face of major setbacks.

After the accident, he spent 14 months in rehabilitation and about

a year learning to stand and walk.

He not only returned to work within 18 months of the accident, but also set himself the goal of representing Singapore in para-sports.

Picking up table tennis, Chee made his Singapore debut in the Asean Para Games (APG) in 2015, and won a silver.

He was training for this year's APG when he was diagnosed with cancer of the right eye and was told that he had to have surgery to remove it.

Just four months later in September, he was crowned champion in the men's singles Class 2 at the Kuala Lumpur games.

He said: "Things happened to

me that I can't change, but life still goes on."

Chee, an only child, shares a three-room flat in Shunfu with his 75-year-old father and a domestic helper. He gets around on a motorised wheelchair, and uses prosthetic legs for shorter distances.

He trains twice a week, has a desk job as a training specialist at Changi Naval Base, and juggles work with night classes at the Singapore University of Social Sciences where he is pursuing a mathematics degree.

He credits his late mother for teaching him to be an "upright, positive person", and also looks to motivational speaker Nick Vujicic, who was born with no arms or legs, as well as paralympic swimmers Theresa Goh and Yip Pin Xiu as sources of inspiration.

He hopes to inspire people with his life story, so that "regardless of their age, gender or disability, (they will) come out from the dark and live life happily".

Toh Wen Li



Film-maker Kirsten Tan's debut feature *Pop Aye* has won global acclaim. ST PHOTO: JAMIE KOH

Kirsten Tan

Film-maker on the road to put Singapore on the map

Film-maker Kirsten Tan, who spent several years in her 20s living a nomadic life in Thailand, said: "I feel, deep down, there's a wanderer in me."

The 36-year-old's debut feature *Pop Aye* – born from wanderlust and real-life vignettes – was recently picked as Singapore's submission to the 90th Academy Awards in the Foreign Language Film category. The road movie, about a disillusioned Thai architect and his elephant friend, won prizes at the Sundance and Rotterdam film festivals, both firsts for a Singaporean.

While she acknowledged that the movie has done very well, she said: "I am a super-perfectionist.

When I watch the film, I often only see the flaws and errors."

Tan was speaking to The Straits Times over the phone from Japan, where she was attending the Tokyo International Film Festival.

With multiple award-winning short films and documentaries under her belt, she also makes a living doing commercial work for the likes of Giorgio Armani and Heineken. Minutes before the interview, she was editing a commissioned short film for a Singapore luxury hotel.

She studied English literature at the National University of Singapore before joining Ngee Ann Polytechnic's School of Film and Media Studies. Tan, who also has a mas-

ter's in film production from New York University (NYU), considers herself "super fortunate" in an industry where funding is hard to come by. "In NYU, we had about 45 students per batch. So far, only six of us got to do feature films."

Tan's 2014 short film *Dahdi* was inspired by Myanmar's Rohingya asylum seekers. "I definitely feel a certain social responsibility, (although) I don't think about specific social issues," she said. "I hope to push boundaries yet stay generous to the audience... and not pander to the most basic instincts."

Tan, who is exploring stories set in Singapore or New York for a new feature film, still remembers the difficulties she faced in her early days as a film-maker. "For the longest time, I was putting in my own money. The scary thing was not knowing whether my years of effort would amount to anything.

"You definitely need to be a bit nuts. You have to love your craft."

Toh Wen Li



Conductor Wong Kah Chun's Project InFINITY is aimed at helping children. PHOTO: NATIONAL ARTS COUNCIL

Wong Kah Chun

Conductor tunes in to lift children's spirits

Conductor Wong Kah Chun, 31, goes the extra mile to prepare for concerts, including observing orchestras incognito.

Wong, who won the first prize at the prestigious Gustav Mahler Conducting Competition in Germany last year, said: "I like to do research on the orchestras I am working with. If I have time, I fly to the city and listen to their concerts first."

Last month, he flew to France, where he will conduct the Orchestre National du Capitole de Toulouse on Nov 17 and 18. "No one knew I was there, I was a normal ticket-paying audience member."

Wong, who gained international attention after his win, is now on a

tour of 24 concerts in 20 cities.

From next September, he will be chief conductor of Germany's Nuremberg Symphony Orchestra, the first Asian in this role.

Wong, who won the Young Artist Award last month, is a self-professed "kiasu" Singaporean. He wakes up at 5am to prepare for a rehearsal that might begin at 10am, finds out about the orchestra's work culture, and uses language app Babbel to better connect with musicians in their native language.

He also solicits feedback from fellow musicians over beer. "People are usually very nice. But then, after a few more beers, I tell them to... just tell me how I can improve."

His fiancée, a Japanese musician, is his biggest critic.

He was speaking to The Straits Times over the phone the morning after an "exhilarating" debut with the Konzerthausorchester Berlin. It is his "one free day", and he has a cold. "My body has been running on adrenaline for the past few days." It can be daunting to conduct in a cultural capital such as Berlin.

Conducting the Singapore Symphony Orchestra, which he did in August, is hard for another reason. "A lot of them are my teachers," said Wong, who went to the Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music.

Last year, he co-founded Project InFINITY, a ground-up arts project for children, and had a successful pilot programme with the Enabling Village. He is now working with childcare agency Child at Street 11. "Cultural philanthropy is wonderful. Especially in a society that is quite capitalistic, it would be nice to set an example," he said.

Toh Wen Li



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SCAN TO WATCH

Sonny Liew on what inspired him to be draw comics. <http://str.sg/sonnyliew>



Sonny Liew won three Eisners for his graphic novel on Singapore's political history. ST PHOTO: JOYCE FANG

Sonny Liew

Capturing the comic world with *The Art Of Charlie Chan*

Cartoonist Sonny Liew, 43, came to Singapore from Seremban, Malaysia, when he was five and became a Singaporean about five years ago, when he was working on his acclaimed graphic novel, *The Art Of Charlie Chan* Hock Chye.

The defining moment was Singapore's 2011 General Election.

"It was the first election I really felt engaged in, partly because social media played a bigger role in that election," said Liew.

The first Singaporean to win an Eisner award, he scooped up three for *The Art Of Charlie Chan* Hock Chye at the coveted Will Eisner Comic Industry Awards in July.

The annual awards, named after

pioneering artist and writer Will Eisner, are considered the Oscars of the comic world and are voted on by professionals in the comic book industry.

Liew's graphic novel looks at Singapore's political history through the eyes of fictional artist Charlie Chan, focusing on the 1950s and 1960s when the People's Action Party rose to power.

He said: "One of Lee Kuan Yew's arguments about foreign media or foreign meddling in Singapore is that they don't have a stake in the country.

"I wanted to take on the challenge, and say, I'm willing to be a part of this country. I believe what I

do is not anti-Singapore... Singapore should explore its history more, look at more different narratives about its past."

Liew is working on a new graphic novel about capitalism, which he said might be set in Hong Kong in the 1980s. He is also doing the art for *Eternity Girl*, under DC's Young Animal imprint, as well as Boom! Studios' *Adventure Time* comic books.

He studied philosophy at Cambridge, and later received formal art training at the Rhode Island School of Design.

The artist, whose relationship with the National Arts Council (NAC) has been strained, said more dialogue between the NAC and art practitioners "can only be a good thing".

But he feels dialogue is also "often elusive" on the part of the NAC. "Instead of having to justify what they do in open debate, they can rely on bureaucratic systems to deliver the results they want."

Toh Wen Li