

# Set a new stage

Architect's many talents extend to theatre and set designing for a play

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**Y**ou can call architect Tan Kay Ngee a kind of renaissance man. Besides being the founder of local architecture firm Kay Ngee Tan Architects, the 52-year-old writes on arts and culture in Chinese for several publications, has a photography gallery in his office and judged the UOB Painting Of The Year competition this year.

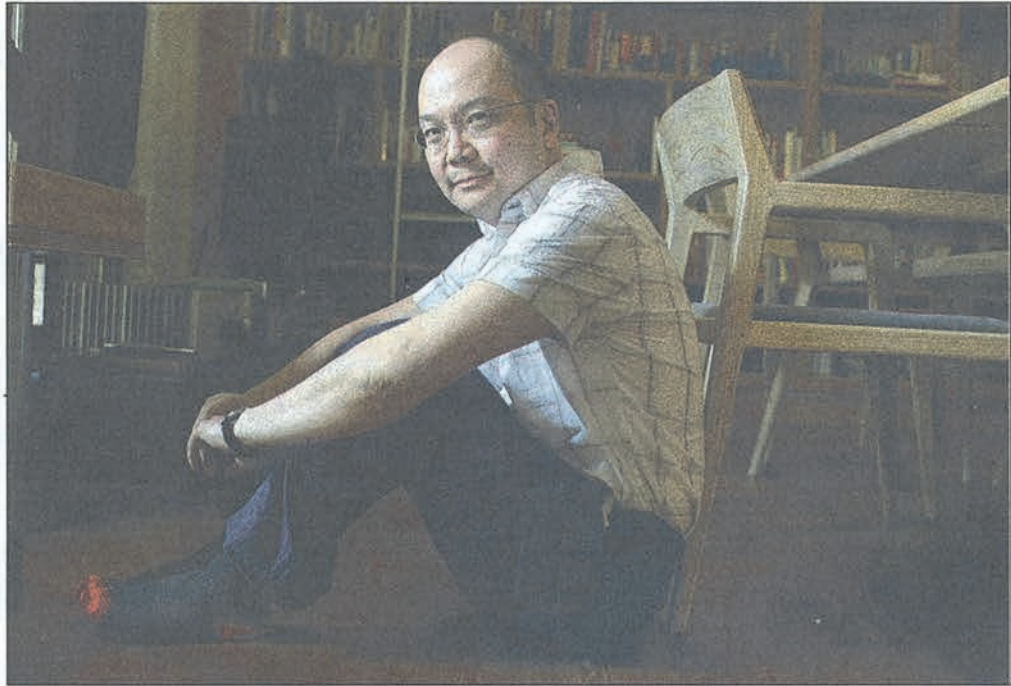
Now the man of letters is designing the set for an upcoming comedy, *David The Best!*, by local Chinese theatre group Drama Box. It takes the format of a talkshow and features the stage debut of Radio 100.3 deejay Huang Wenhong.

Featuring several characters giving talks on being small in a world that favours the big, the 105-minute play opens at the Drama Centre on Wednesday.

For the production, Tan has created a flexible series of screens that can be rearranged to match the rapid-fire scene and mood changes in the script.

In one scene, the structures take the form of gigantic, open books; in another, they form a circle; and they can also be lined up to form a vanishing point of perspective.

The soft-spoken architect, who designs Kinokuniya's bookstores and has worked on several restaurants in the Les Amis group, says: "The play is very fast-moving. It's happy one moment, then suddenly very sad. Then time comes to a standstill. The change of emotions is illustrated by how the set is arranged."



Stage work comes naturally for regular theatre-goer Tan. ST PHOTO: LIM WUI LIANG

Dipping his toe into set design is a natural progression for this regular theatre-goer.

In 1992, when he was based in London as an architect and a design lecturer at the University College of London, he designed the set for a play by the prominent Hong Kong director, Edward Lam. The latter was an artist-in-residence at The Place, a British venue for experimental theatre.

In 2000, he returned to Singapore for good after his firm won the large contract of designing the Singapore Management University.

Here, he designed the set for Kuo Pao Kun's *Descendants Of The Eunuch Admiral* by The Theatre Practice in 2004. It was nominated for Best Set in the Life! Theatre Awards but did not win.

Earlier this year, his old friend, Drama Box's artistic director Kok Heng Leun, approached him to design the set for *David The Best!*.

Tan agreed. The bachelor says: "I don't see myself as a set designer, but an appreciator of theatre. There is a link between architecture and theatre, both are about the description of mood and time."

"Writing, designing sets - all these things help me to think out of the box. I enjoy working with theatre people because

they are very creative. I like the way they look at things, and this widens my perspective and vocabulary for architecture."

Drama Box's Kok says he was inspired by the animated, irreverent talkshows in Hong Kong and Chinese cross talk.

He wrote the play with his friend Huang, known for his razor-sharp wit and tongue, in mind.

Kok, 42, says: "The play takes the form of a talkshow, which deals with contemporary issues. Wenhong's programmes are also very educational. His purpose is to challenge the listener."

It is the first time that Huang is acting onstage, but he had acted in some Channel U sitcoms.

Juggling several roles in the play, he plays a pimp from Geylang, a photographer who has to sell out by shooting for a private detective, a B-list television star and himself, the deejay-host for the evening.

The 37-year old admits that he was initially quite stressed out. "We had a dry run the other day with some people in the audience. They stared at me and watched me die."

"It's very different from when I'm hosting a live event, where I can establish a rapport with them very quickly."

But he hopes to break the ice during the show within the first five to 10 minutes. He says: "The show will be very similar to the style of my radio show. It's very easily understood and funny."

Many of his listeners and deejay friends will also be attending the performance.

He adds: "Whichever celebrity is there will be teased."

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## book it

### DAVID THE BEST!

**Where:** Drama Centre Theatre  
**When:** Wednesday to Saturday, 8pm, with 3pm matinee on Saturday  
**Admission:** \$28 to \$58 from Sistic  
(www.sistic.com.sg, tel: 6348-5555)