

THE STRAITS TIMES

FOR SUBSCRIBERS

Support Local: Arts

The arts gives life depth

Arts involvement will round out corners, shaping children into more complete humans



Paige Parker

PUBLISHED AUG 4, 2019, 5:00 AM SGT

As a child, I wanted to be a ballerina. After school nearly every day, I rode my bicycle 3km to the dance studio.

At the beginning of each class, with one hand holding the barre and the other extended gracefully over my head, I folded forward, arching my body to the floor in a port de bras.

Twice a month, an ongoing battle ensued between my friend Sarah Mullen and me over who would claim first-chair flute position for the middle school's band.

Piano and voice classes, coupled with countless oratorical contests, and plenty of acting in school and church (playing Nancy in Oliver Twist by far was my favourite role and playing Virgin Mary a close second) meant I was a pretty artsy child, eager to express myself through words, music and movement.

My dedication to ballet, music and academics helped prepare me for adulthood, where attention to detail and dedication to a task is paramount.

Both of my daughters - Bee, 11, and Happy, 16 - have dipped their toes into classes such as piano, voice, dance, acting and visual arts. Alas, they have not cherished all of these experiences. Yet, I believe, exposure is key.

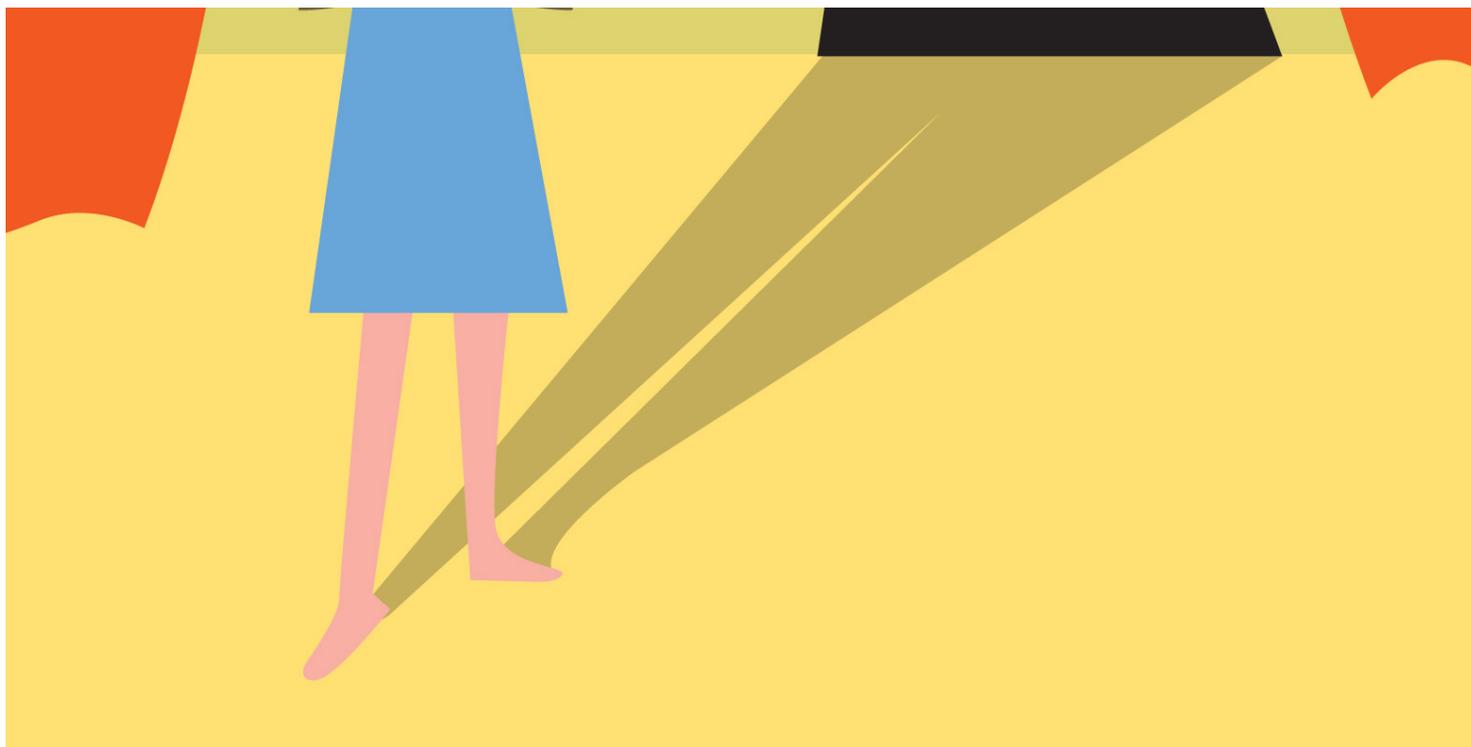
As a family, we attend the ballet, symphony, museum exhibitions, theatrical and comedic shows throughout the year, sometimes with less enthusiasm from my daughters than I would like.

A few weeks ago, Bee was initially reluctant to attend the Singapore Dance Theatre's Ballet Under The Stars in Fort Canning because of a heavy homework load. I insisted she come along. Under the pale stars and plump clouds, as a soft breeze moved tendrils of hair across her face, I watched as the dancers' contemporary moves mesmerised her.

"Mummy, that was awesome. Just the right way to end my crazy week," she said with a yawn as we rode home, her weary head resting on my shoulder. And, yes, she finished the homework.

It was Picasso who said: "It took me four years to paint like Raphael, but a lifetime to paint like a child."





ST ILLUSTRATION: MIEL

The purity in our children, unaffected by cultural and societal norms learnt throughout life, allows them to dream in an unabashed way. It takes little time before they begin to desire perfection - colouring within the lines, and their dreams turn into expected, predictable ones.

For better or worse, Bee wants to be an actress when she grows up. She dreams of being the first Caucasian Mandarin-speaking star in a Chinese blockbuster.

When her father and I remind her that most aspiring actors spend more time waiting on tables or driving for Grab than on stage or behind a camera, she retorts: "I shall persevere. You will see."

The fierce competition she will inevitably face makes her dream a long shot. Yet, when she insists she is happiest performing, I encourage her, knowing full well that as she matures and discovers life's complexities, she may well tweak her dreams to something more practical and perhaps more lucrative.

Both locals and expatriates have asked if I worry my girls will become too square or grade-driven in the local school system.

Truth is, I am not. My husband Jim and I encourage each daughter to read broadly, work hard and follow her passions.

My premise is having my daughters involved in the arts from an early age will round out any corners, making them whole and human. In all likelihood, they will not be artists when they become adults, but they have been shaped into more complete people as a result of the arts.

If a child aspires to enter the arts, my hope is we, as parents, would agree not to decree: "You cannot be a dancer, singer, actor, artist, musician, playwright."

What if we allow them to dream and be driven to do what makes them content and fully charged?

I can already hear some people whispering: "Content? That does not pay the rent."

But if our children are thriving, their lives might be more meaningful than receiving an enormous pay cheque from a job that makes them miserable.

When Jim and I moved to Singapore, we made a conscious decision to support education, which changes lives; and the arts, which gives life depth.

Although local and international non-profit bodies and causes are just as important, we discovered many here consider the arts to be luxuries for the wealthy and elite.

Nothing can be farther from the truth.

Studies show that being involved in the arts - performing, literary and visual - leads children to become smarter and happier, improving their cognitive and communicative skills and increasing their creativity. This applies across the board on every socio-economic level.

Arts have positive social impact as well. Research from the University of Pennsylvania shows that cities with a high degree of the arts lead to more civic engagement, social cohesion, better child welfare and even less poverty.

The arts are part of a comprehensive education which every Singaporean values.

In a world where artificial intelligence and apps are the way forward, the arts will be even more important for our triple science and mathematics majors. We need the arts to foster creativity and joy, while strengthening the community, both socially and economically.

Singapore is fortunate to have the National Arts Council, which aspires to use the arts to inspire people to create, present and appreciate art, as well as to connect communities.

Quite noble indeed, but we, the people, must offer a hand by filling more seats at concerts and performances (check out the free concerts at the Esplanade and the Shaw Foundation Symphony Stage in the Botanic Gardens; and many national museums offer free entry or discounted rates to seniors and students). And volunteering or donating to causes that resonate with us, if we have that option. It does not have to be a major gift nor a massive commitment of volunteer hours. When we are generous with our time and resources, the more we receive in return; and the more we receive in return, the more generous we are. Win, win.

At a concert earlier this year to mark the 40th anniversary of the Singapore Symphony Orchestra, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's message in the programme read: "While it is important that we put bread on the table, man does not live by bread alone. Our nation would be soulless without an appreciation of arts and culture."

After more than 12 years here, I can attest to this nation being far from soulless. This is a country of enthusiastic young people and older ones like me, who want progression and growth in this culture-rich Little Red Dot.

If we bring more arts into our homes to foster a love and greater appreciation in our children; give our time, means and encouragement to the growing number of deserving artists, companies and organisations here; and encourage the Ministry of Education to increase arts offerings in schools, then we will continue to build a passion for learning, coupled with a stronger affinity for the arts, enabling our children to go forward, prepared for the fullest lives possible.

Join ST's Telegram channel here and get the latest breaking news delivered to you.