

Sometimes they come back

Not all young Malaysians are making their way abroad in search of better pay and greener pastures. Some, who have carved a niche for themselves overseas, are instead making their way home. Why? **CHAI MEI LING** talks to two of them

SAN Weng Onn has composed film scores, written songs for international commercials and orchestrated musicals — all before turning 26 in July.

San, or Onn San as he's better known, was a student at the Tisch School of the Arts at the prestigious New York University (NYU) under the Dean's Full Scholarship Award.

He was one of only two Malaysians ever accepted into the programme in the school's 20-year history.

While in New York, the fresh-faced Kuala Lumpur-born had his works staged in theatres in the Big Apple and performed by well-known Broadway entertainers.

That his family was a musical one — his grandmother sings in Chinese operas and his father plays in a band — helped kindle San's love affair with music.

He tinkered with the piano in primary school and wrote a song when he was just 11 year old. He submitted his first song, *Malaysiaku*, to a patriotic song writing contest and made it to the semi-finals. This cemented his interest in song composition.

San, who plays mostly by ear, remembers all his compositions by heart.

"Music can speak to people. It goes straight to the heart. It can open up memories and wounds. I consider it a privilege to be able to compose music."

Piano lessons gave San a foundation in classical music, an area which he pursued at University College Sedaya International.

Even as a student, no project was too ambitious for the budding composer and orchestrator.

In 2002, the then 18-year-old



Composer and orchestrator San Weng Onn says the performing arts scene in Malaysia has a lot of opportunities to offer.

staged *Green Tea* with fellow students. It was a musical chronicling a family's struggles in Cameron Highlands in the post-Japanese Occupation era.

The production, which boasted a 100-strong crew, was the first student-initiated project of that magnitude. Rave reviews called for a second run the year after. San resumed the role of co-composer and director.

Soon, two more musicals followed — *Storm in a Teacup* (2005) and *Drunk Before Dawn, Season I, II* (2004, 2006). The latter also toured Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, making it the very first West-End-styled musical to be shown there.

Upon graduation in 2007, San applied for a place in NYU, one of the two established institutions in the world offering musical theatre composition.

"There were more than 50 experienced composers from Australia, Korea, Japan and from established schools like the Juilliard School at the audition."

"Each composer was paired with a lyricist and we had to come up with a song within an hour. Then, we performed on stage before a panel of judges, like what you'd see in the movies. It was nerve-wracking."

San got accepted the very next day, one of the 15 who made the cut. It was a dream come true — more so when he was offered a full scholarship to cover the US\$176,000 (RM548,000) tuition fees, an award given out to just one student a year.

The programme was difficult. San had to write three songs a week.

"I felt like I was in *American Idol* every day. There were many criticisms. But because it was in New York, we got the best of Broadway.

The most incredible writers would come and give us classes. One of them was Elton John. That was really amazing."

To cover his living expenses, San wrote commercial tunes for Tiffany & Co, Guinness and Levi's, among others.

His musicals — *The Meatball* and *Eau Blanche!* — were staged in New York. Among the cast of *Eau Blanche!* were Broadway performers Dana Steingold (*Spelling Bee*) and Beth Kirkpatrick (*Sound of Music*).

He also orchestrated for *King David*, which ran for three months, and a regional production of Andrew Lloyd Webber's *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat* starring *American Idol* finalist Melinda Doolittle.

Having graduated in May with a Master's of Fine Art as a composer in musical theatre writing, San flew to

Los Angeles. He contacted scriptwriters and film producers hoping to work on film scores.

But family and the lure of opportunities in Malaysia soon drew him home. The Internet allows San to work at home, composing materials for both local and international projects.

"I want to be close to my family and do what I love at the same time. And, ultimately, I want to contribute to the local performing arts scene."

"We have the talents and there are a lot of opportunities to grow."

"A friend said he had never seen an explosion in the local scene in the last 20 years, but there's a sense that something's going to happen. It's about time."

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