

School play makes it to the Esplanade

By TESSA WONG

BELIEVE is the story of the little musical that could.

What started off as encounters with troubled teens turned into inspiration for English teacher Alex Wang, who wrote and composed it with a message of hope and choice directed at youth.

Mr Wang's upcoming Esplanade offering charts the tumultuous young life of protagonist John, who is pushed to the edge by bullying and a fractious family background.

Its uplifting message evolved from the 29-year-old Mr Wang's relief teaching stint at Outram Secondary School earlier this year, when he dealt with at-risk youth.

John, a character composite of the youth Mr Wang counselled, is played by 20-year-old newcomer Muhd Nur Hadri. He faces battles, but not without the help he gets from his probation officer Teck Ann (played by Mr Wang) who also has his personal issues to deal with.

The teacher wanted to make this point: "At the end of the day, as long as someone can bet their last dollar on you, you can still make it. The whole idea of this musical is to show students and parents that there is no such

thing as having no choice in life."

He knows this from experience. Someone believed in his music, too.

Believe is Mr Wang's first theatre musical, and began with his independent English-language albums, *Someday*, in 2003, and *Veritas*, in 2005.

One of the directors of local musical producers Music Theatre Limited (MTL) happened to buy a copy of *Veritas* from the HMV music store. He then called Mr Wang and discovered he had staged a school production in April with Outram Secondary students.

So MTL, along with Sing Avenue Productions, decided to restage it, with support from the Esplanade's incubation programme, Five Foot Broadway.

That gave Believe an injection of \$30,000, an amateur cast of young people, and an eight-week rehearsal period to get it restaged for the Esplanade.

The new cast features young actors, national servicemen and tertiary students, who will take over from the original school actors, most of whom had never been on stage before.

National serviceman Rajiv Jayaraj, 20, who plays the show's bully, Bulldog, said he identified with his bad-tempered character, and playing him has



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GROWING PAINS: The musical *Believe* portrays the angst-ridden life of youths pushed to the edge by bullying and broken families. The actors are (from left) Mr Muhd Nur Hadri, 20, who plays John the protagonist; Mr Alex Wang, 29, who wrote the musical and plays the probation officer; and Mr Rajiv Jayaraj, 20, who plays the bully, Bulldog.

been cathartic. Like him, Mr Rajiv's anger issues had landed him in trouble with school authorities and his family in the past.

He said: "This role is helping me to leave my anger issues behind. Now I can channel everything into this role and not carry

the emotional baggage with me."

Mr Wang is planning to release a book based on the musical soon, also written by him.

Don't miss *Believe* at the Esplanade Recital Studio, Sept 22 and 23, at 7.30pm. Tickets at \$15 are available from Sistic.