

**SPEECH BY MR LAWRENCE WONG, MINISTER FOR  
CULTURE, COMMUNITY AND YOUTH, AT THE  
SCHOOL OF THE ARTS AWARDS DAY 2015, FRIDAY,  
15 MAY 2015, 1.00PM AT THE SOTA CONCERT HALL**

Ms Lim Geok Cheng,  
Principal, School of the Arts (SOTA)

Board Members of SOTA

Teachers and staff

Parents and students

Distinguished guests

1. Let me first acknowledge all our award winners here today. Congratulations and well done to all of you.

2. And special thanks to your teachers, your parents and all those who provided you with steadfast encouragement, mentorship and support over these many years.

**SOTA's Achievements**

3. I'm very proud of what SOTA has achieved in a relatively short period of time – 7 years since it was

formed in 2008. In all aspects of a quality education – artistic excellence, academic achievement and social consciousness – SOTA has done exceedingly well.

4. The achievements are reflected not just in the statistics, but more importantly, in overall perceptions of the school. Many people I meet speak highly of SOTA – they say this to me spontaneously, even without my prompting. I know many parents with young children are very keen to have them pursue an education here – one that's infused with the arts, and provides a much richer exposure and training in the arts than in a mainstream school.

5. The artistic accomplishments of SOTA's students speak for themselves. For example, one of your alumni Koh Cheng Jin has become the first Singaporean to pursue music composition studies at Juilliard. At a young age, she has already written a full orchestra work, and this

piece of music was recently selected and performed by the SSO.

6. Last year, I visited the UK and met the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport Sajid Javid to discuss ways to strengthen cultural cooperation between our two countries. As a gift, I presented to him a lovely artwork from a SOTA student Ivan Tan. He was so taken by the gift that he wrote to Ivan, thanking him personally for the artwork. And this piece now sits in the office of the UK Department of Culture, alongside other masterpieces by well-known English artists like Bridget Riley and Rowland Hilder.

7. Besides artistic excellence, I'm glad that SOTA students have shown the value of an arts education in encouraging empathy and concern for your fellow citizens.

8. Earlier in February, SOTA students held interactive activities like therapeutic art classes with elderly patients

at Tan Tock Seng Hospital, to help ease the duration of their hospital stay. In the past, the students have similarly conducted ceramic workshops and classes for persons with special needs, as well as primary school students from less privileged backgrounds.

9. I encourage all of you to continue with these community service projects, both in SOTA and beyond your time here. When you serve, you meet people in circumstances different from your own; you develop greater empathy and learn what it means to walk in the shoes of others. This builds us. It makes us a stronger and more cohesive community.

10. I'm also very proud that as a student body, you have demonstrated hard work and determination, often in the face of daunting odds.

11. One example which struck me was that of Gillian Rubiyanto Chen En, a Year 5 Visual Arts student. In 2010,

she was diagnosed with a rare form of bone cancer. She had to stop school for a year to undergo chemotherapy. Yet she has never given up on her dreams.

12. I understand SOTA has provided her with lots of support and encouragement, which has encouraged her to push her boundaries in expressing herself through art. She has stayed optimistic, and treated her cancer as nothing more than a setback. Today, she will join us on stage as a recipient of the David Marshall Scholarship for Young Artist. I congratulate her on this tremendous achievement.

### **Partnerships**

13. The school and its students would not have been able to produce such sterling results without the continual support of SOTA's partners. Organisations and arts groups like the National Gallery Singapore, the Orchestra of Music Makers (OMM) and the Human Expression

(T.H.E.) Dance Company have been staunch partners of SOTA.

14. These partnerships enhance the SOTA education by giving students exposure to authentic environments beyond the school context, through internships, competitions and platforms to showcase their works.

15. SOTA has also benefitted from the support of corporate organisations like Ngee Ann Kongsi, Temasek Education Foundation and JP Morgan. They have contributed generously through scholarships and bursaries. Amongst the 2014 cohort, more than one in 10 SOTA graduates received some form of financial assistance. Enabled by this assistance, the students have all done well in their IB Diploma.

16. With strong support from both the government and our partners, a quality arts education at SOTA will always be accessible to every young Singaporean, regardless of

background or family circumstances. A SOTA education may not be a good fit for everyone. And there are many other specialized institutions that cater to the different abilities and talents of our students. But so long as you have the aptitude and the commitment to take this path in SOTA, I assure that we will do whatever we can to provide you with the support to complete your education here.

### **Role of SOTA in Culture and Artistic Identity**

17. With these strong foundations, I'm confident that SOTA will continue to play an important role in nurturing our next generation of artists, creative professionals and arts advocates in Singapore.

18. All of you in SOTA are the artistic talents of your generation. All of you will play leading roles in contributing to Singapore's cultural repertoire. In doing so, I hope you will also think hard about how our Singaporean and Southeast Asian cultures and identities are reflected in the art you create.

19. Many of you would be exposed to Western art forms and traditions in the course of your arts education. For example, if you are into classical music, you would be familiar with all the European composers; and if you are doing English literature or theatre, you would know all the classics from Shakespeare to Gatsby. This is only natural since for more than a hundred years, the map of music and theatre-making has been dominated by the West. But surely a fuller appreciation of the arts must involve embracing a diversity of other cultural resources.

20. Or take a more contemporary example. Some of you may have read recently how the annotated manuscript for the popular hit song “American Pie” was auctioned and sold for more than a million dollars. Why would people be interested in something like this? It’s a nice, catchy tune. But what made the words and music so special is that they evoked memories of American history in a way that resonated strongly with its people. Now, any Singaporean



band can play covers of the same song. But it will never have the same resonance or meaning.

21. So what is it that sets you apart as an artist from Singapore? I think an important distinction must be that we are situated here in Southeast Asia, in multi-cultural Singapore, and so our art must reflect a sense of where we came from.

22. There is plenty of inspiration to be found in our traditional culture and heritage. And SOTA students can make use of it.

23. Let me give an example. This year's SOTA-Ngee Ann Kongsi Outstanding Young Artist Award will be presented to Almira Bte Farid. Almira has used her affinity for music and her studies in anthropology to explore her cultural roots, applying traditional Indonesian and Malay elements in her music compositions. She has been

accepted to study ethnomusicology at the School of Oriental and African Studies, at the University of London.

24. So I wish Almira all the best as she does her part to keep our traditions and cultural roots alive and relevant in the contemporary world. And I hope her experience will inspire all of you to learn more about our roots, and discover for yourself, how our Singaporean and Southeast Asian identities can be better reflected in the artworks that you create.

### **Concluding Remarks**

25. Finally, let me conclude by thanking each and every one of you for playing your part in bringing SOTA this far: teachers, staff, parents, partners – and of course, the entire student body.

26. Through the arts, we can express ourselves and develop a rich and distinctive Singapore culture. We can raise up iconic arts and heritage institutions that make us

proud to be Singaporeans. And we can continue to nurture young talents in the arts, while providing the best possible environment for them to excel as artists, as lifelong learners, and as members of this community.

27. I am excited about what we will achieve together in the years ahead, and I wish all SOTA graduates the very best in your future endeavours.