

**SPEECH BY MS CHERI WEE,
PRIME MINISTER'S VALEDICTORIAN AWARDEE
SOTA AWARDS 2017
15 MAY 2017, MONDAY, 3.11PM
SOTA CONCERT HALL**

Ms Grace Fu, Minister of Culture, Community and Youth

Mr Baey Yam Keng, Parliamentary Secretary of Culture, Community and Youth

Ms Lim Geok Cheng, Principal of SOTA

SOTA Board Members

Teachers, Staff, Parents, Friends

Distinguished Guests

Good afternoon.

Six years ago, some of us chose SOTA because we wanted to become professional artists, or because we liked the sound of an “integrated curriculum”, or because we loved the enthusiasm of the Open House student helpers, or because the campus was along Orchard Road. But admit it or not, maybe some of us also came here for the long escalators leading up to Level 5.

Those escalators enthralled my 12-year-old self. You could complete a conversation, solve five quadratic equations or (for dancers) finish stretching your aching calf and quad muscles within the time it took to ascend to Level 5. But I usually just looked up into the sunlight glinting through the glass at the top, and pretended I was headed into another world. Then we reached Level 5 and I saw the spiral staircase winding up to Level 10. And we climbed to Level 10, and to the roof. There, I looked up to the blazing blue sky and 11 storeys up felt like 100 instead. For me, the escalators evoked a sense of endless awe and conviction that SOTA was where extraordinary things could happen. The same awe we felt when we first performed onstage or showcased our works, the same awe we felt when we pushed beyond our physical limits on our expeditions and found that extra something as a team. That's the power of SOTA, that sense of wonder and discovery permeating

the entire campus, where we embrace a world that extends far beyond just me, myself, my own ambitions.

I know we're not 12 anymore. As we grow older, most of us either take a nap as we ride the escalators up, or we sprint up because the clock shows 7:49 and we can't afford to be late for school. We even spent years waiting to become alumni just so we could take the lift instead. But you know what? Now that I've actually graduated, I kind of miss the escalators and the stairs. Rather than being in a hurry to grow up, I think it's important to be that young kid again once in a while, to look up to someone, something, some dream. Keep on finding things to be amazed by. To feel dwarfed by what's around us just means that there's more and more and more for us to discover.

Unfortunately, looking up constantly soon gives you a literal crick in the neck. And IB itself seemed just as endless as our school campus – we proceeded from literature presentations to science investigations to humanities projects to math reports to 4000-word EEs, while simultaneously working on art form showcases, before actually sitting for our final exams. And so there were those evenings when we trudged tiredly down the escalators. Sometimes we were hungry, especially if we had given up lunch to work in the art studios or rehearsal rooms instead. Sometimes we were moody, because we had run out of decent places to eat nearby after countless evenings of staying back.

But it's precisely when you're overwhelmed that you've got to switch from looking up to looking around you. And that's what happened one evening. We waved to a few teachers on the way out – teachers who turned consultations into counseling sessions when we most needed them, who sacrificed their weekends and holidays to accommodate our last-minute enquiries, who chased us back on track when we wandered off into nowhere. That night, there were also my friends and I, we massaged each other's aching shoulders, half-grimacing and half-chuckling. Even the fruit stall auntie took time to chat with us and offer us free brownies at 8pm in the evening. And my parents – my mom, patiently waiting in the car to pick me up at the Cathay

taxi stand that night, and my dad, all ready to pull an all-nighter and reduce me to tears in the best way possible with his detailed criticism of my essays. That evening, these little things became the biggest reminder that we never walk alone – we survived these ups and downs as part of a larger community. And so I've learnt to look around and notice the little things that truly matter.

And it was the same with the arts. I can't promise I'll remember the countless exercises, technical instructions or corrections. But we'll remember the video of Siu Yan dancing and improvising alongside a busker outside Cathay that eventually went kind of viral on Facebook. We'll remember "Intervention of a Knitted Hoop", the gigantic artwork that Cally strung up from the basketball hoop, which prevented basketballs from falling through and hence enabled the Year 6s to finally study in peace. We'll remember our schoolmates arranging the Level 8 rattan tables and chairs into what seemed like museum-worthy sculptures, and our classmates sketching photorealistic masterpieces on their math worksheets. These small quirks – the arts seeping into our daily lives – helped remind me of why I first fell in love with the arts. In SOTA, quirky is the new normal, and spontaneous ideas build and build and build on each other faster than anyone can imagine. Here, the arts are more than just an extra subject; they're an entire way of life that brings us together, staff, teachers and students alike. And that's why we look around us, because inspiration comes from anywhere, anyone and anything around us.

Despite these small joys, however, the world forces us to take a long hard look at where we are and where we're going. Some of us will make it big in the arts or arts-related fields, and I can't wait to hear about what you'll achieve. But all of us here know better than anyone that the path towards that final polished artwork is far from easy. For some, plans change along the way. I entered SOTA dreaming of becoming a world-renowned ballerina, but 6 long years of blood, sweat and tears and I've found that my place isn't as a dancer onstage. Things don't always work out the way we want them to.

But knowing that shouldn't stop us from taking that leap of faith and giving it our all. I remember one night when I was poking and prodding my dinner glumly, muttering about some bad school day and wondering what I had gotten myself into. And suddenly I noticed everyone at the table was silent. Just me grumbling away, while everyone else put their forks and spoons down and just stared at me. And then my parents gave me 4 words of wisdom – never try never know. You know, the kind of words that we already know in our heads but have yet to believe in our hearts. But it finally struck me hard. If I hadn't chosen SOTA, I'd never have gotten the opportunity to even try for that dream, or to experience all those other facets of what dance could be. I wouldn't trade that journey for anything. SOTA isn't supposed to be a momentous life-changing event or a glorious end in itself. It doesn't have to turn you into a complete package as an artist, lock you in or out of a certain career, or define your next decade. Instead, SOTA is just one step in our journey, where we try on a thousand pairs of shoes, where we learn to fall and get up, fall and get up, fall and sigh and get up once again. The point isn't to look back at what we've missed, up at what we won't achieve, around at others in envy, but rather to look forward to what lies ahead. Performing onstage, helping backstage, watching offstage, showcasing beyond the stage, or maybe even none of the above, that's up to you. I'll love dance in my own way. We've had 6 years to discover what wasn't for us, what we didn't mind and what we might grow to love. Now that journey just continues.

To the Class of 2016, thank you for sharing these 6 years with me, for experimenting, exploring and discovering things with me. I've learnt that it's okay to take two steps forward and one step back, to step from side-to-side, or to even dance around yourself in a circle. We don't always need to run ahead of everyone else. None of us have all the answers, but we are free to embrace the innumerable possibilities ahead. So just keep looking – look up, look around, look forward, and just keep looking. Not in the hope that you'll eventually find something worth looking at one day, but rather because we've already found a million things worth looking at today.

Thank you.