

Joe Sidek

Festival Director

George Town Festival, Penang, Malaysia

Joe Sidek is a prolific businessman and is the Managing Director of Joe Sidek Productions Sdn Bhd. A cultural advocate, he has been the Festival Director of Penang's George Town Festival since its inception in 2010. He established Joe Sidek Productions Sdn Bhd in January, 2012 as an event management company as well as the management arm for George Town Festival. He started the Rainforest Fringe Festival in 2017, and was appointed the Managing Director of Tropfest South East Asia in 2013.

Joe also sits on the Cultural Economy Development Agency (CENDANA) Industry Advisory Panel which was initiated by Malaysian Prime Minister, Dato' Sri Mohd Najib Tun Abdul Razak and formed on 1 June 2017.

Reviving and Revitalising a UNESCO World Heritage City

Since receiving its UNESCO World Heritage Site status in 2008, the multicultural George Town, Penang has seen a rise in the number of cultural events and festivals take place in this charming city. An ideal canvas for celebrations and festivities, the internationally-acclaimed George Town Festival has made optimal use of the cityscape due to its ability to hold high calibre shows in unique spaces that transform into dynamic performance venues.

The success of George Town Festival's events at these remarkable locations is due to its canny ability to engage a majority of the city's colourful population from George Town's diverse ethnic neighbourhoods. This is accomplished by making a large portion of the festival's programming public and free, thus attracting people from various economic, racial and social backgrounds. In its eight years, there have been a significant number of internationally acclaimed programmes held at extraordinary locations in George Town.

Exceptional examples include Shaun Parker & Company's athletic *Trolleys* at Armenian Park in 2014, Theo Jansen's inspirational *Strandbeest* exhibited at the Esplanade Padang Kota Lama in 2016, Aida Redza's powerful *Moved by Padi* at Macallum Street, also in 2016, and Taiyuan Puppet Theatre Company's *Potehi: Elegance and Explosions* from Taiwan displayed at the historic Leong San Tong Khoo Kongsi this year. The unparalleled beauty of these spaces are brilliantly demonstrated through these shows that skilfully utilise these venues as secondary, yet significant characters in their productions.

In its ninth year in 2018, the cultural juggernaut that is George Town Festival will continue to revive and revitalise George Town and its spaces through arts and culture to serve, engage, educate and entertain the wider public.

REVIVING AND REVITALISING A UNESCO WORLD HERITAGE CITY

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The Start

On the 7th July 2008, two Malaysian cities of Malacca (in the state of Malacca) and George Town (in the state of Penang) were jointly inscribed as UNESCO World Heritage Sites, which recognised the Outstanding Universal Value of both places as the "Historic Cities of the Straits of Malacca". Described by UNESCO as "remarkable examples of historic colonial towns ... both towns bear testimony to the living multi-cultural heritage and tradition of Asia, where the many religions and cultures met and coexisted. They reflect a coming together of cultural elements from the Malay Archipelago, India and China with those of Europe, to create a unique architecture, culture and townscape" (UNESCO, 2008).

The Beginning of George Town Festival – Given a Low Budget and Short Notice

Penangites (as people living in Penang are known affectionately) were delighted to see the history and diversity of their town recognised on an international level (as a UNESCO World Heritage Site). Encouraged by the success of the one-day celebrations both in 2008 and 2009 (organised by the municipal council of Penang), a longer, month-long festival was mooted in 2010 by George Town World Heritage Incorporated

(GTWHI), a state agency tasked with monitoring and promoting the city's heritage.

I accepted the challenge of organising a festival that was due in 6 weeks! For both my team and myself, this turned out to be the beginning of a decade-long journey that was both challenging but greatly rewarding, for what was meant initially to be a one-off event, became a defining festival for Penang and saw its 8th year in 2017 (to be followed by its 9th edition in August 2018).

George Town Festival, also known as GTF, started its 2010 inaugural year on a shoestring budget, a state funding of 400,000 Malaysian ringgit (equivalent to an approximate US\$120,000 at the time). We had high hopes for George Town as a space for arts and culture, but with a tight budget, it became clear we would have to think outside of the box when it came to staging and marketing.

A Festival for the People

One thing was clear to all of us from the start - our objective, was to make art accessible, and our aim was (and consistently has been) to make at least 80% of our events free so that everyone can enjoy arts and culture freely and happily through this festival. We believe that a fun-filled, enriching, artistic experience should not just

be exclusively for culture vultures, it should be accessible to all.

As importantly, we wanted to inspire local creative practitioners by bringing in international acts that will nudge them to say 'I can do that too'.

For us, the locals must feel that the festival belongs to them and they should take ownership of it. The festival should not be inaccessible or swarm their city with tourists – I strongly believe that the arts and GTF should serve the people first, and tourists second. Culture has become very, very expensive all over the world, and the experience is not something you can put a value on. We have many free shows and performances but what about the ticketed events? To how many of the international shows can an average wage earner in Malaysia bring his family? How then can we facilitate access to as much as the festival showcases?

In 2012, we started the 'student & community tickets' project, calling on private companies and individuals to sponsor tickets for some of the less privileged, providing access to some of the international performances we showcased. I was reminded of an emotional episode - one of the boys from a charitable home who attended *Manganiyar Seduction* under this project, came out of the show, smiling, then reached into his pocket, and taking out all of the little money he had, put it all into our donation box. He told me that his teacher had said that the festival had no money and he wanted to help – this brought tears to my eyes – it weakened me and yet at the same time gave me strength to continue in our works for the past 8 years.

Another personal highlight for me is a project we did in 2016 at the Macallum Street Flat Complex. This was a low cost housing estate where around 8,000 people lived. We turned a small plot of land in the area into a paddy field for our artists to perform. [This site was identified for development into the Penang Art District (PAD). I hope that our gentle introduction of the arts to the residents will help

prepare them to enjoy the programmes coming to their doorsteps soon].

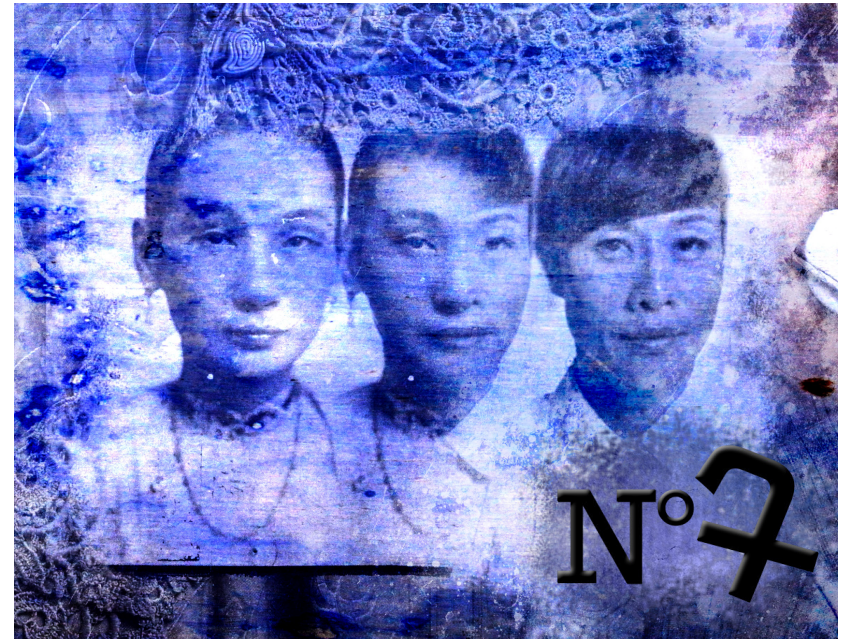
After seeing the residents coming out to watch the performances, I thought to myself, "this is our VIP audience". I wanted them to have a taste of art, culture and performance that they might otherwise have never been able to see, or never knew it was available to them.

Using George Town as the Canvas

Perhaps it is crippled by low budget and a lack of performing spaces. Yet George Town opens itself to me as a huge stage. Alongside some of the more familiar venues like Dewan Sri Pinang and Municipal Town Hall, we began looking for unusual venues around the city, including historic mansions, landmark streets, abandoned warehouses and interesting private spaces such as shops, cafes, boutique and heritage hotels.

Site-Specific Performances at Historical Spaces

Several highlights and festival commissioned shows have been held at some of the many historical buildings dotted around George Town.



2011 - No. 7 At Cheong Fatt Tze Mansion2. Image courtesy of George Town Festival.



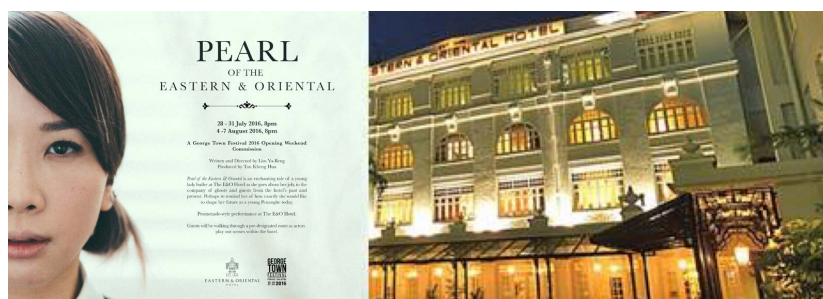
2012 - Silat: Our Heritage for The World at Fort Cornwallis. Image courtesy of George Town Festival. Photography by Darren Koay Dong Yew.



2014 - 2 Houses at Soonstead Mansion. Image courtesy of George Town Festival.
Photography on left by Mark Law, on right by Yew Kok Hong.



2014 - Hai Ki Xin Lor at Khoo Kongsi. Poster design by Azzad Mahdzir for Real Films for the George Town Festival production.



2016 - Pearl at The E&O Hotel. Image courtesy of George Town Festival.
Photography (left) by Mark Law.

Public Art

Art displays within galleries or private exhibitions are usually seen and appreciated by those who already like art or who have been previously exposed to it. We want the man on the street to have the chance to enjoy it and be inspired by it, because art should not be restricted to the educated, cultured or the rich.

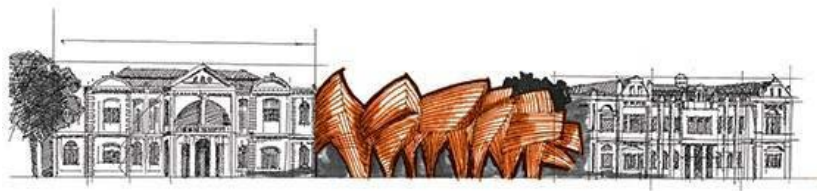
All our exhibitions are free to attend but we really wanted to (physically) bring art to the people - so what about art on the streets? We found the best way of doing it way back in 2012 - we accepted a proposal by the then relatively unknown Lithuanian artist, Ernest Zacharevic, to paint a series of murals on the walls of George Town. We had to be very careful though, not to

damage the already fragile walls within the inner city. Under the project name *Mirrors George Town*, only lime wash paint was used; This allowed the old walls 'to breathe'. The paintings also had to be sympathetic to the surroundings. Then followed the weeks of 'fighting council offices' to get our license!

Today, these murals have become one of George Town's most iconic draws. After six years, you still see lines of people waiting to photograph the murals. Everywhere in the city you see the images printed on postcards, bags, mugs and a range of other products sold by local street vendors everywhere. Somehow, photographs of them are also seen across the world.



Some of the murals by Ernest Zacharevic. Image courtesy of George Town Festival.



Theatre of ships by Joko Avianto 2013 Artist Impression. Image courtesy of Joko Avianto for the project.

The project has inspired a whole range of artists to add their own artwork to the walls, to show off the city as a space for beautiful street art but the question arises: were we overdoing it? This remains a question.

The following year saw the installation of the *Theatre of Ships* by Indonesian artist Joko Dwi Avianto using 3000 pieces of bamboo. Resembling the bows of ships, the installation covered the façade and rooftop of the Penang Municipal Council's one-stop payment centre nestled between two buildings. It became one of the most photographed art pieces of the festival that year but due to decay of the natural material (which was expected), we had to remove the installation after one year.

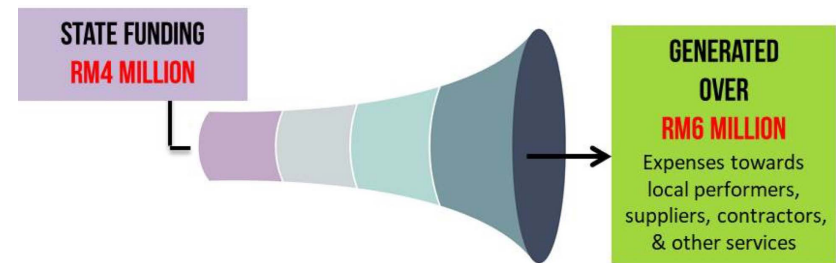
Working with Local Businesses and Return to Local Economy

We usually work out partnerships with private owners so that all of us benefit. Many events have been held at private spaces such as cafes, shops and boutique and heritage hotels which help highlight these spaces – they become a part of the festival, benefitting from it either directly or indirectly.

With over 100 events showcased throughout the month, the festival engages local contractors, suppliers and the travel industry to supply the necessary services. Working with partners and sponsors, a calculation of total expenses on event production and related expenses in 2017, showed a festival spending of over RM6 million for local services.

Street Events

Over the years, GTF has produced several public street events which were not just food or street-act events. These events came with public performances and installations which span a whole range of genres including film, opera, dance, and traditional performances. We want everyone to be able to experience art without boundaries or fear. The public should be able to feel, touch and interact with the performances.



Total expenses on event production and related expenses in 2017.
Image courtesy of Joe Sidek Productions Sdn Bhd.



Theo Jansen's Strandbeest at George Town Festival. Image courtesy of George Town Festival.
Photography by Yew Kok Hong.

In developing local talent, we saw success in a collaboration with Aida Redza, internationally known choreographer-dancer who is based in Penang. Known to fans of theatre and dance as a fearless performer, Aida choreographed and led one of the first local street dance performance *Bridges and Kaki Lima* at our Victoria Street Project which showcased scheduled performances, exhibitions and interactive street games in 2013. She created another crowd puller *Cross Waves & Moving Jetties* for the 2015 inaugural Butterworth Fringe Festival.

Engaging with Penangites and Malaysians

Our people need to own the festival, be proud of it and also be a part of it.

Other than local acts from across the country, we sought participation in programmes with international collaborations. Penangites shared the hard work and pride in showcasing:

100% Penang

Presented in 2015 (as part of Rimini Protokoll's 100% City project) - 100 people representing Penang – according to gender, ethnicity, age, place of residence, income bracket, and a whole slew of other categories – were put on stage, spontaneously performing their responses to questions and queries on almost anything and everything (Rimini Protokoll, 2015).

GALA by Jerome Bel

Two years later, French Choreographer Jérôme Bel brought together a group of ordinary Penangites from diverse backgrounds – professional dancers to amateurs, young to old, the disabled and the special communities – to dance. This group of unique and exclusive hand-picked individuals took turns in executing different styles and genre of dances; allowing the audience to be a part of the imaginative world the performers would slip into whilst on stage (Mackrell, 2016).

Inspiring Malaysians with International Acts

We did not forget the importance of inspiring the locals, showing them what's out there in the rest of the world, inspiring them to think "we can do it too!"

Over the years, we have showcased over 20 Asian premieres, many of which had local flavour or had contemporised Asian art & culture, fit for international consumption.

My top picks for examples would be Manganiyar Seduction and Sutra - I am working at developing Malaysian shows to bring them on tours outside Malaysia.

George Town Festival Ferries its Celebrations to Butterworth – Why?

I have always resisted expanding the festival to areas outside of George Town. It was the cosy, compact feel that I wanted, where festival goers can have access to different events in a smallish area, by foot if possible.

Butterworth, although only a 20-minute ferry ride away and shared many of the same characteristics as George Town, was 'begging to be awakened'. I was asked to see what I could do by the then mayor of Seberang Perai Dato' Maimunah Mohd Sharif, who had in her masterplan to jointly create with Think City, what is now being termed 'Butterworth Baru'. They felt that having a festival would fit right into the plans. I was walking down this charming street in Butterworth, and was transported back to 1965 Malaya. It has an old Indian temple and a few old buildings. It was so charming and I had to say yes.

This was a free, public festival held on the streets, with shows, comedy, and acrobatic wonders open to all over one weekend during the George Town Festival. It was not just another event but was termed a fringe and plans for the town council to eventually take ownership of it and run it themselves.

I recall a nice moment in 2016 at Butterworth Fringe Festival (BFF) when a family asked for a photograph to be taken with me (I felt like a rock star!) and told me they had come the previous year and enjoyed it so much and that they had brought the whole family along for the second edition of the festival. That was a significant moment for me, as it signified the impact of giving local people accessible exposure to arts and culture.

For me, art does not need to be overly intellectual, it is all about generating emotion and making people think or feel something different. It can be in the form of a grand spectacle or something very small and intimate, or hands-on. I hope that is what people take away from GTF.



A public street performance at Butterworth Fringe Festival 2016. Image courtesy of George Town Festival. Photography by Sherwynd Kessler.

George Town Festival at a Glance – Over the Years

	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
EVENTS	93	145	156	137	157	150
PROPOSALS RECEIVED	100	183	270	136	270	302
INTERNATIONAL EVENTS	17	18	53	40	52	47
FREE EVENTS	50	114	108	99	118	114
AUDIENCE (RM '000)	151.9	205.1	218.3	250.4	238.1K	2.01K
MEDIA COVERAGE (# ARTICLES)	233	238	334	395	532	506
FACEBOOK LIKES	n/a	14,110	35,255	42,868	50,311	56,791
PR VALUE (RM Millions)	n/a	n/a	11.3	16.1	20.1	33.6

Impact of George Town Festival and Its Role in Place-making

George Town is a large city by Malaysian standards but by world standards, it is small, with a little over 700,000 residents on the island itself. Compare that to some of the large cultural hubs of the world and people may wonder, “can George Town have the capacity and room to host a large scale arts festival?” But according to Charles Landry– *“for the first time in history, size and scale do not matter anymore. Large cities no longer have the automatic advantage ... in surveys of the world's best cities, (smaller) cities always come on top. Most are below 2 million inhabitants. They are walkable, accessible and networked.”* This very much applies to George Town as well – with its distinct charm and small scale, it is much easier to navigate for artists and art-lovers.

The community is small, and as a result, it is easy to bring together the best artists and finest talents to collaborate on programmes and projects. The joy of hosting a festival in George Town

is knowing how easy it is for our visitors to get around, to take in art exhibitions, shows, outdoor performances, workshops and more all in a day, even when they're scattered around town. Travel is an expense we can cut down on – the focus is on the art.

And for artists, it is a very interesting place to live and work. It is affordable, which is very important for artists, and I think it's a good sign for creative cities when young artists come and brave it and spend two, three years here, exchanging ideas with their peers around them. It's a good start for creativity.

Sometimes, people ask if GTF has transformed or defined Penang, I think it is just a piece of the puzzle that helps to paint the full picture of what Penang is and can be. I have lived in Penang for almost all of my life and loved its strong charm and merit. The UNESCO listing brought new meaning to the people of George Town. It turned a sleepy town to a cosmopolitan state thriving with arts and culture, at every turn one takes.

If GTF helps to draw people to Penang to experience that, then I feel like it is worth all the sacrifices my team and I have made and resources we have put in.

Project for Public Spaces (PPS, 2018), a non-profit organisation, describes place-making as something that “inspires people to collectively reimagine and reinvent public spaces as the heart of every community, strengthening the connection between people and the places they share.” In that sense, GTF has been a big part of place-making for Penang, inspiring residents to look at its historical buildings in a new light – no longer a stuffy, touristy building or a dilapidated wall that is always blended into the scenery, but now a stage, a canvas for a mural, a circus ring, an exhibition space. It is funny how we might have only focused on keeping our costs down by not hiring large and flashy venues, but have managed to make a big difference in place-making as a result by inspiring people to look at these public spaces in a new way.

The journey continues and I am honoured to have been a part of Penang's place-making. After eight years, turning Penang into a vibrant cultural and creative venue, we are ready to embark on our next phase – a focus on the ASEAN region overall. While Penang has long been an entrepot between the east and west for trading, let it now be the platform for the exchange of art and culture.

I describe my approach with the arts, and with GTF, as looking at the people who can't afford the arts, who have never been, who have been put off in the past because they don't understand it, and make them feel comfortable. Art will always be for the people, and if just one person walks away feeling inspired or excited by what they have seen, that is all I can ask for.

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