

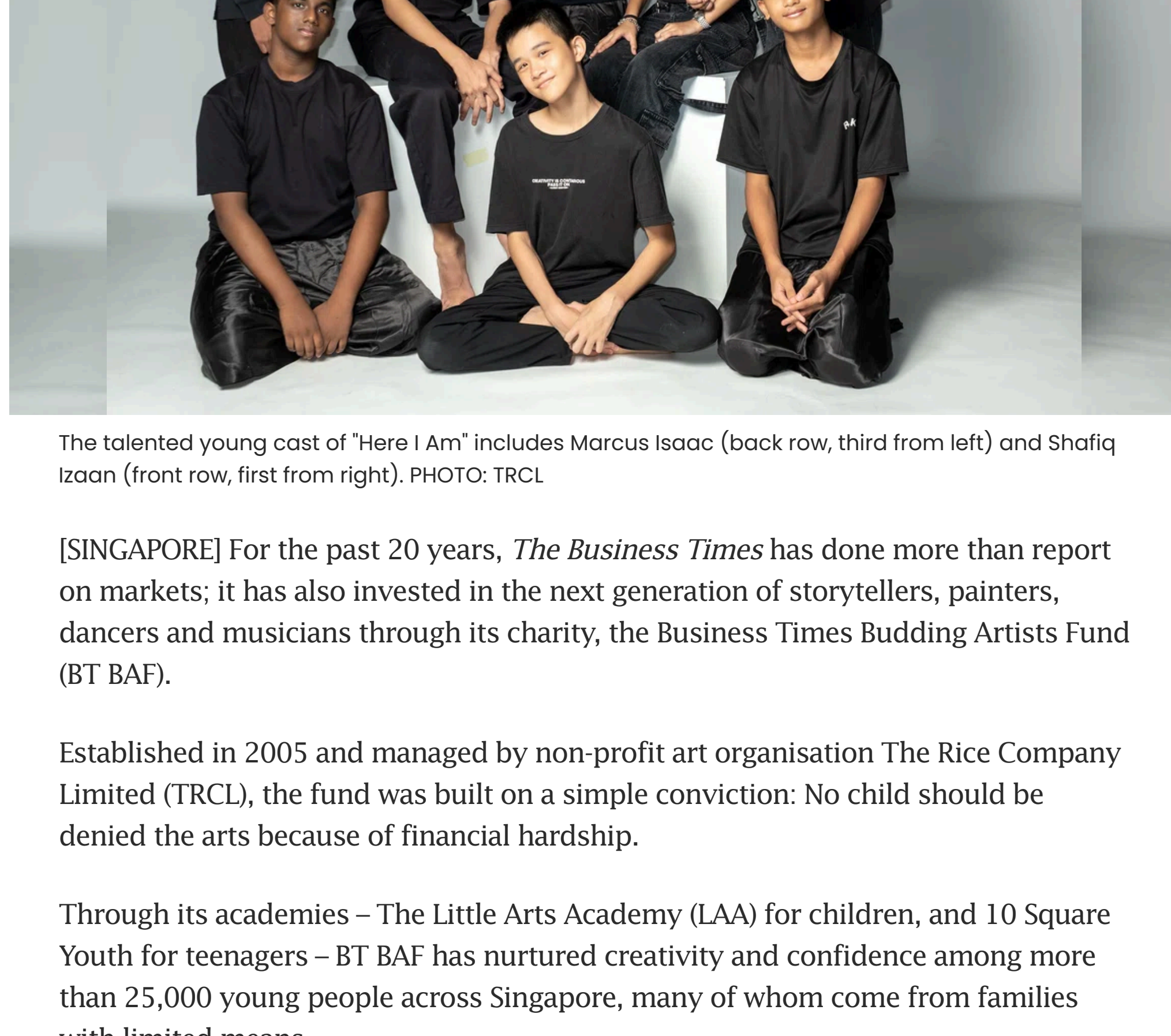
BT marks 20 years of nurturing youth with a musical drama

Alumni of The Business Times' charity, the Budding Artists Fund, come together to stage Here I Am

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Helmi Yusof Published Wed, Oct 1, 2025 - 09:00 PM

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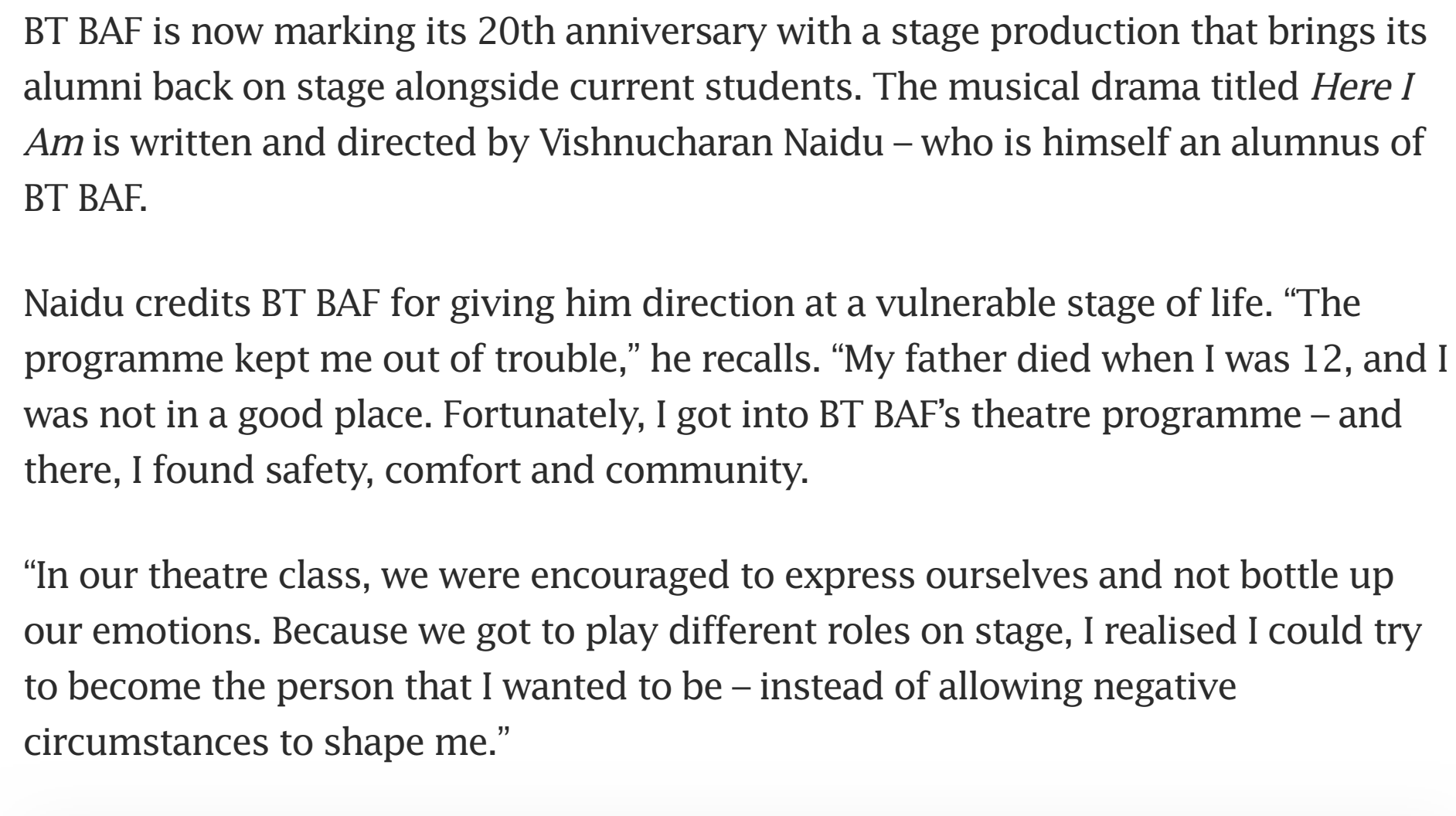


The talented young cast of 'Here I Am' includes Marcus Isaac (back row, third from left) and Shafiq Izaan (front row, first from right). PHOTO: TRCL

[SINGAPORE] For the past 20 years, *The Business Times* has done more than report on markets; it has also invested in the next generation of storytellers, painters, dancers and musicians through its charity, the Business Times Budding Artists Fund (BT BAF).

Established in 2005 and managed by non-profit art organisation The Rice Company Limited (TRCL), the fund was built on a simple conviction: No child should be denied the arts because of financial hardship.

Through its academies – The Little Arts Academy (LAA) for children, and 10 Square Youth for teenagers – BT BAF has nurtured creativity and confidence among more than 25,000 young people across Singapore, many of whom come from families with limited means.



Supported by The Business Times, The Little Arts Academy helps nurture talented kids from less privileged homes in various creative fields. PHOTO: TRCL

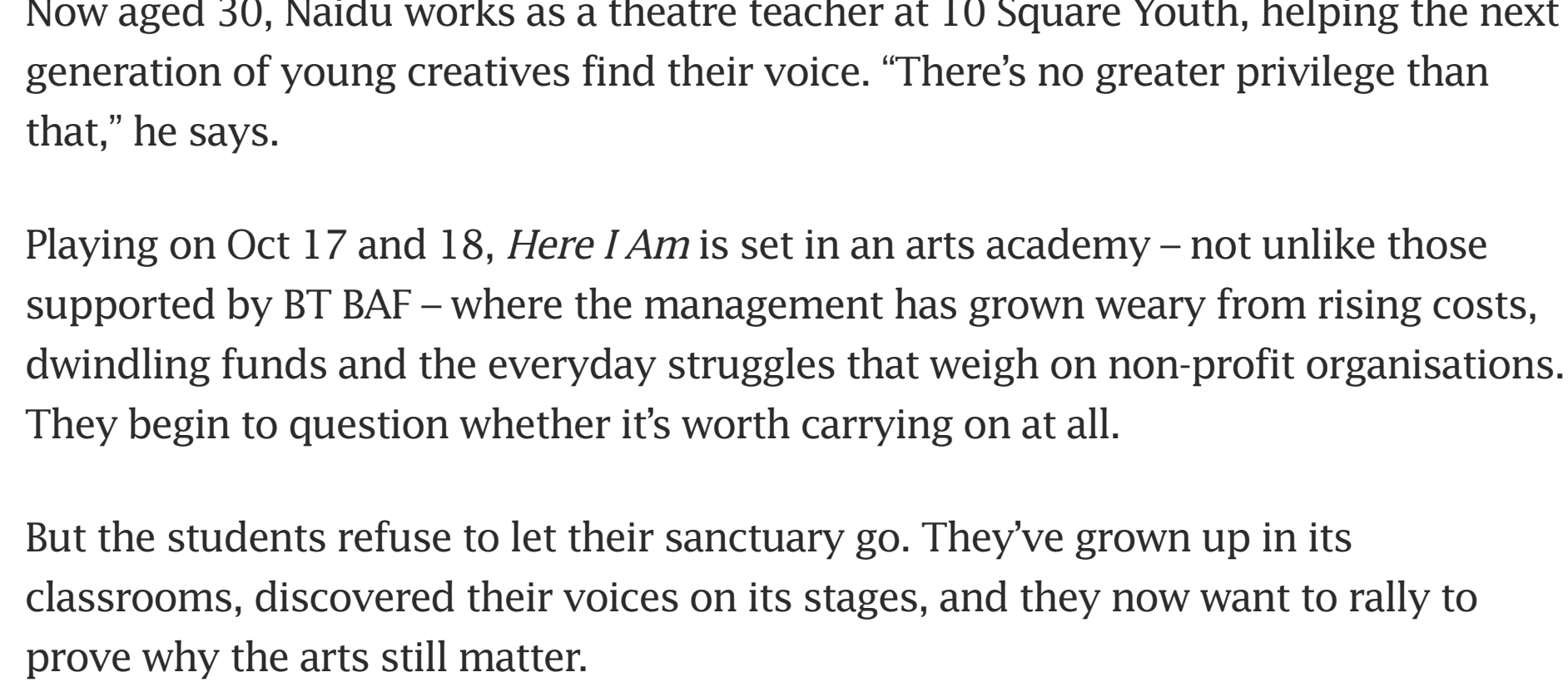
BT BAF is now marking its 20th anniversary with a stage production that brings its alumni back on stage alongside current students. The musical drama titled *Here I Am* is written and directed by Vishnucharan Naidu – who is himself an alumnus of BT BAF.

Naidu credits BT BAF for giving him direction at a vulnerable stage of life. "The programme kept me out of trouble," he recalls. "My father died when I was 12, and I was not in a good place. Fortunately, I got into BT BAF's theatre programme – and there, I found safety, comfort and community."

"In our theatre class, we were encouraged to express ourselves and not bottle up our emotions. Because we got to play different roles on stage, I realised I could try to become the person that I wanted to be – instead of allowing negative circumstances to shape me."

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Kids at The Little Arts Academy are exposed to digital arts, among other disciplines. PHOTO: BT FILE

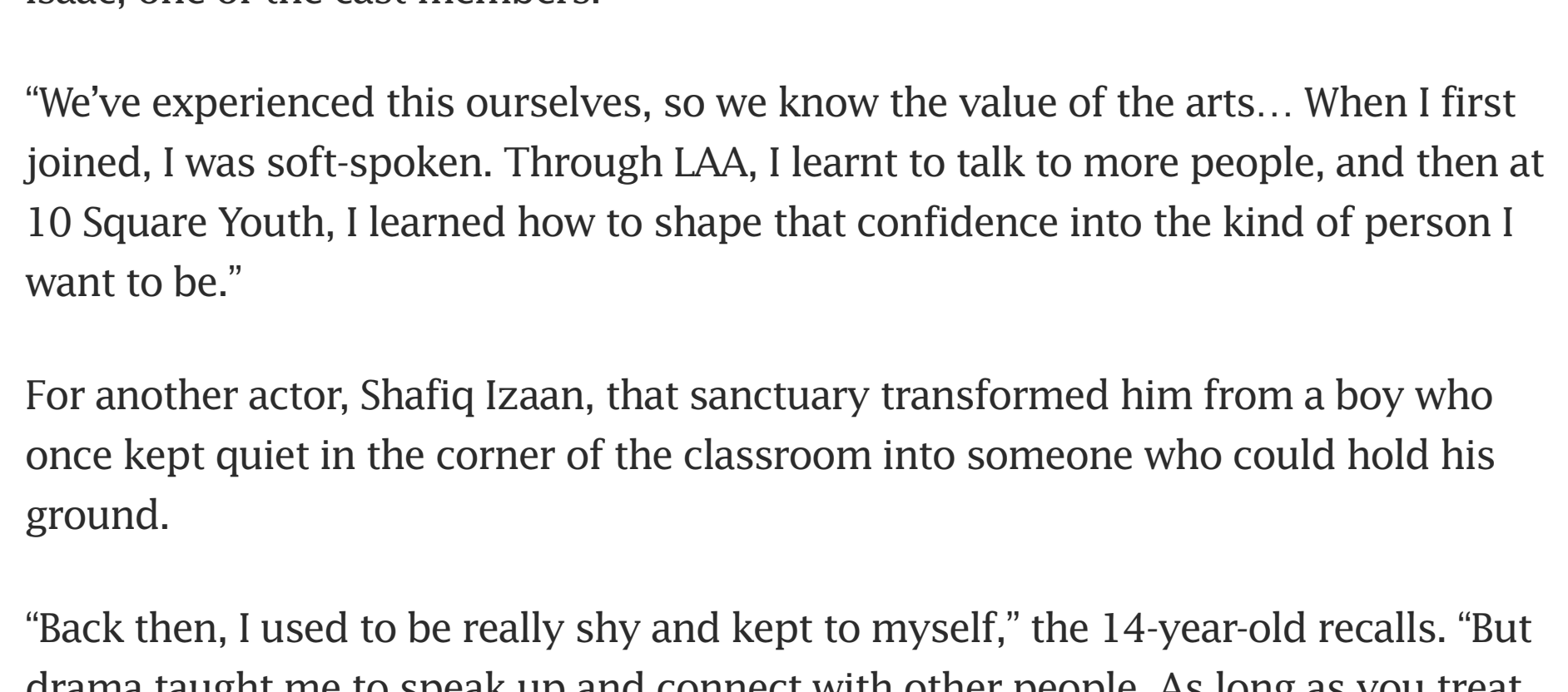
Now aged 30, Naidu works as a theatre teacher at 10 Square Youth, helping the next generation of young creatives find their voice. "There's no greater privilege than that," he says.

Playing on Oct 17 and 18, *Here I Am* is set in an arts academy – not unlike those supported by BT BAF – where the management has grown weary from rising costs, dwindling funds and the everyday struggles that weigh on non-profit organisations. They begin to question whether it's worth carrying on at all.

But the students refuse to let their sanctuary go. They've grown up in its classrooms, discovered their voices on its stages, and they now want to rally to prove why the arts still matter.

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Dancers from The Little Arts Academy and 10 Square Youth rehearse for a performance. PHOTO: TRCL

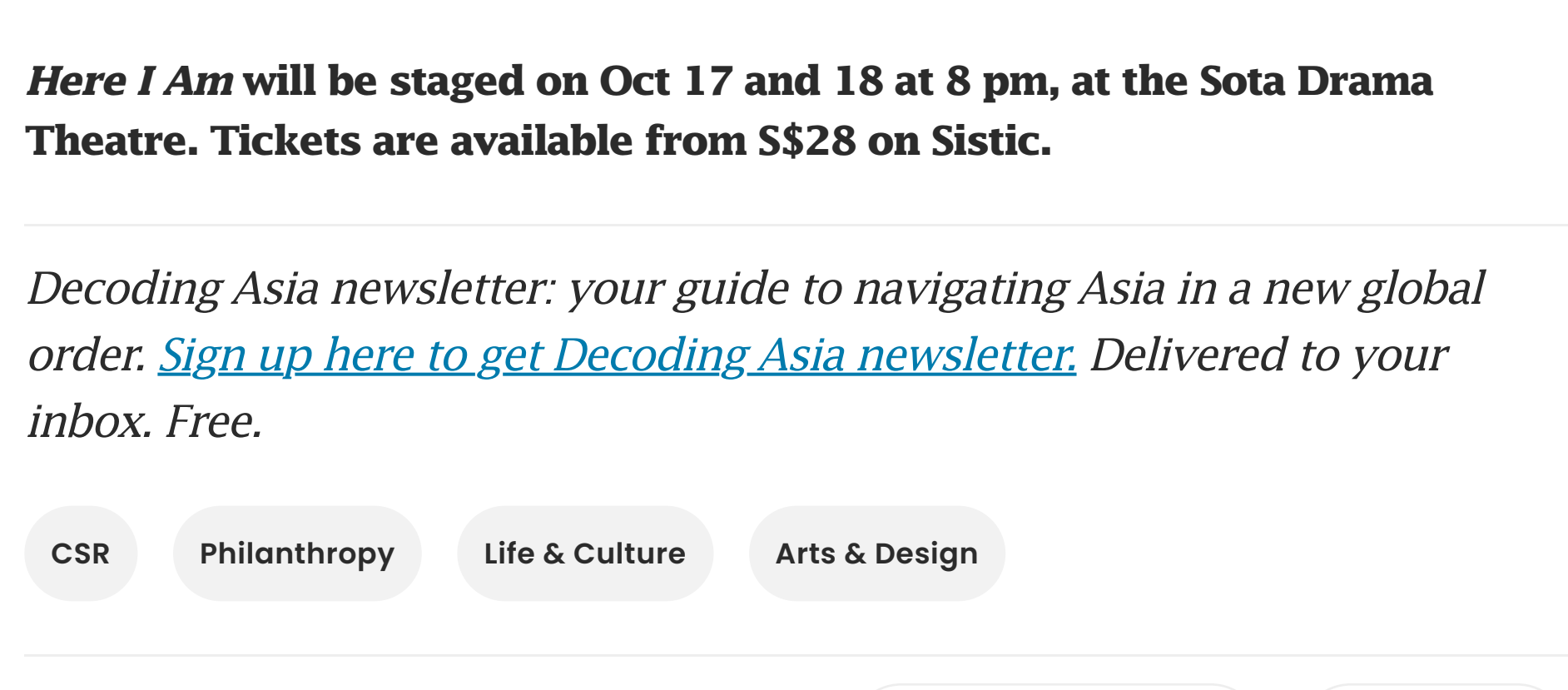
"But this isn't just a made-up scenario for the stage," insists 16-year-old Marcus Isaac, one of the cast members.

"We've experienced this ourselves, so we know the value of the arts... When I first joined, I was soft-spoken. Through LAA, I learnt to talk to more people, and then at 10 Square Youth, I learned how to shape that confidence into the kind of person I want to be."

For another actor, Shafiq Izaan, that sanctuary transformed him from a boy who once kept quiet in the corner of the classroom into someone who could hold his ground.

"Back then, I used to be really shy and kept to myself," the 14-year-old recalls. "But drama taught me to speak up and connect with other people. As long as you treat them right, they'll treat you right. That's what I carry with me now."

The production also brings its alumni behind the scenes. Former students of LAA and 10 Square Youth have returned as costume designers, stage managers, choreographers and sound designers, contributing their craft to the very stage that once nurtured them.



Even backstage, the crew of *Here I Am* is made up of several BT BAF alumni, including Nur Amirah Rohizad (second from left). PHOTO: TRCL

Assistant stage manager Nur Amirah Rohizad, 22, says: "As a teenager, I trained in music here... So it feels like a full-circle moment, reconnecting with people I've known for years, and giving back to the programme that once gave me so much."

BT's 20-year investment in the arts appears to be paying off.

***Here I Am* will be staged on Oct 17 and 18 at 8 pm, at the Sota Drama Theatre. Tickets are available from S\$28 on Sistic.**

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