Festival **fever**

Ang Mo Kio Secondary School turned retro for two nights. **Sujith Kumar** has the details

PHOTOS: ANG MO KIO SECONDARY SCHOOL

It was a fun time for the students of Ang Mo Kio Secondary School (above, left and below) who performed at its Nomad (Night of Music and Dance) festival held on July 4 and 5.

Style, music and drama launched audiences back through time, to 1964.

Ang Mo Kio Secondary School students' Nomad – Night of Music and Dance – was an immaculate reconstruction of that era, a significant time in Singapore's history.

The journey began months go, late last year, as students trawled the Ang Mo Kio area in search of stories and information on how its geography had evolved.

Research for their biennial festival also called for interviews with residents, which were then worked into scripts for the fringe festival in May, and for the main shows on July 4 and 5.

Muhammad Faiz Muhammad Segai, 14, a Secondary 2 student, recalled walking around the neighbourhood, jotting down 10 to 15 problems faced by people.

"We got to know what people at that time were like, and the troubles they lived with," said Muhammad, who acted in a play adapted from a 1964 film called Tiga Abdul, about a con man who has the tables turned on him.

That legwork showed.

An audience of 1,716 over two days was treated to fashion shows, orchestra pieces, dance, drama, old stories, even cuisine from

the 1960s. It was the largest such show in the school's 29-year history, and its grandest festival since its first in 2001.

All told, it took more than 400 students – about half the school's population – to bring back 1964.

They worked with renowned actor Noorlinah Mohamed and dancer-choreographer Gani Abdul Karim, who directed and mentored young performers.

The production cost about $85,000 – from a combination of sponsorships, the National Arts Council's Tote Board Arts Fund and ticket sales – far more than the typical $15,000 to $60,000 most other schools spend on the arts.

Students paid $15 per ticket, and the public, $20.

An impressed Nicholas Thin, 14, a Secondary 2 student who attended the event, said: "I'm so honoured to be in this school. The guys put in a lot of hard work and it showed."

"Great!" was the word used by 60-year-old James Chen, the father of one performer. Not only did they learn without school books, but also "it really allowed every student the chance to showcase their talent".

The theme was the brainchild of Mr Ng Tian Hui, the school's subject head for aesthetics

and the festival's creative director.

Inspired by the cultural explosion and challenges of the 1960s, he composed emotive, invigorating music for the drama, before developing the rest of the show with collaborators.

The final scale of the project, along with the way it engaged the community, earned the school the support of the National Youth Council, the Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports, the Central Singapore Community Development Council, the Lee Foundation and the Tan Ean Kiam Foundation.

The project was great for its participants, too.

Students bonded with peers, made new friends, became more confident.

When it was all over, Secondary 3 student Felicia Ng said she will miss everything about it.

The 15-year-old, who played a middle-aged bookseller in the Night Market, said: "It took lots of commitment, but it was worth it."

Mr Ng, the project's proud father, said: "After Nomad, the school always experiences a 'wow' moment...This has been life-changing for some of our students."