

Welcome to Armenian Street

Margaret Chan in 'Emily of Emerald Hill' at the Peranakan Museum

By Maria Khoo Joseph

On 6 and 7 July 2012, acclaimed actress and Singapore Management University lecturer, Dr Margaret Chan, made history with her performance of *Emily of Emerald Hill* at the Peranakan Museum. She became the first person to perform a play within a museum gallery space in Singapore. The performance was part of the exhibition *Emily of Emerald Hill: Singaporean Identity on Stage*, Singapore's first exhibition on theatre. Chan was the first Singaporean to take on the role in 1985 and the first to perform *Emily* at an international arts festival, the Edinburgh Festival Fringe in 1986. Chan herself grew up with a Peranakan mother and was able to tap into her upbringing when manifesting the character on stage. *Emily of Emerald Hill*, by Stella Kon,



Margaret Chan on stage

is an award-winning play which tells the story of Emily Gan, a young orphan bride who became the powerful matriarch of a wealthy household in the Peranakan district of Emerald Hill. *Emily* has become Singapore's most staged play, with over 300 productions performed in the 30 years since it was written in 1982. It has garnered international praise in Scotland, Canada, Hong Kong, Malaysia, the US and Australia.

The exhibition examines the background of the play, the Peranakan origins of the narrative and the life of the playwright. It also situates the play within the context of the historical development of the local theatre scene, emphasising its importance as a key element in Singapore's artistic heritage. A small theatre was built in the gallery as a venue to show clips of historical videos of *Emily of Emerald Hill* being performed by several different actors. The space was also created for live performances, to allow for the play to be appreciated as both exhibition and live theatre.

It was on this stage that Chan was invited to reprise her

iconic performance in front of a small, intimate audience over two nights (about 100 people attended each night). She was directed by Jeremiah Choy – actor, director and head of Orangedot Productions. Choy very enthusiastically agreed to direct, viewing it as an opportunity to study how staging the play at this venue would, as he explained, turn *Emily* “from performance into real artefact”.

When asked to share her thoughts about her performance and the exhibition as a whole, Chan replied that the very idea of creating an exhibition about the ephemeral established a new paradigm. “Theatre is only in its moment of making. The performance would be of *Emily*, by me as an actress at the age of 62, plus so many months, days and hours. It is of the audience at that particular showing of *Emily* as written by Stella, of the ‘mistakes’, ‘improvisations’ of that particular performance and so on”, Chan explained. Chan's interpretation adapts the script to ensure a more dramatic end, a decision made by her first director, Cultural Medallion winner Dr Max Le Blond. Another change Chan made was the insertion of the song *Mexicali Rose*, a favourite of her father's, to replace another in the script.

When asked about directing the play within the context of an exhibition and how this differed from performances at larger venues, such as the one he directed at the Victoria Theatre in 2010, Choy revealed that the museum setting allowed the play to be “alive and more vivid, as the memories of *Emily* (through the exhibits) were not fragments of her own imagination, but were shared by the audience in a very intimate setting”. The small stage presented several challenges to the director and adaptations had to be made to the museum gallery. Because of the low light necessary in the museum to protect the art, additional lights had to be mounted for the performances. Each time Chan performs *Emily*, she uses the same telephone and her late mother's purse. These two special props are part of the display in the



Margaret Chan, Jeremiah Choy and Stella Kon

exhibition and had to be removed from their mounts to be used in the performances. This was yet another example of how exhibition and performance intertwined in this very special event. Choy also talked about how easy it was to direct Margaret Chan, who was extremely well-prepared for the role: she had the script memorised on the first day of rehearsal and was able to fully embody the character of Emily by drawing from her own life experiences.

Playwright Kon was one of those privileged to view Chan's performances at the museum. Kon has seen numerous versions of *Emily* over the 28 years since it was first staged in 1984. Yet this performance was refreshing and new for her; something which she attributed to the venue. She felt that there were many levels of nuance and subtlety to this performance and that the change was a result of the actor's growth in life experience and maturity. Having also worked on the exhibition with the museum's curators, Kon commented that "the performance gained much emotional resonance by being played out in the annexe, as it were, of the reconstructed living-room of my childhood home, Oberon, the house ruled by my grandmother, Mrs Polly Tan, on whom the character of Emily was based".

Other members of the audience were equally delighted and intrigued by the performances. Gretchen Liu, author of *Singapore: A Pictorial History*, greatly appreciated the performance in the gallery. She said that the "theatrical experience was akin to an intimate conversation between



Oberon section of exhibition, featuring Stella Kon's grandmother's sarong kebaya

the matriarch and the audience". The close proximity of the actress to her audience resulted in a performance in which every emotion and expression could be intensely felt and seen. When asked how it compared to other stagings of *Emily* that she had seen, Liu remarked that "viewing it whilst surrounded by exquisite Peranakan objects, once used and now cherished cultural artefacts, definitely added a certain poignancy to the evening". Liu concluded that the presentation of this play at the museum "reaffirmed *Emily's* status as a true Singapore classic". Similarly, Jeanne Tai, another member of the audience, commented that staging the play within an exhibition space rooted *Emily* more

firmly in its historical context and that the setting of the museum reminded her constantly of how this *Emily* was but one iteration of a highly successful, seminal play in Singapore theatre history. Many others spoke of how Chan's portrayal of a Peranakan woman appealed to them despite their different backgrounds; *Emily* reminded them of family members in their own lives.



A curtain call to great applause

The play was performed to sold-out audiences on both evenings and there were demands for more performances. Staging the play in the museum as part of this historic exhibition allowed the audience and visitors to understand performance as an element of art and of the historical legacy of Singapore.

Emily of Emerald Hill: Singapore Identity on Stage
(at TPM through 17 February 2013)

Maria Khoo Joseph is assistant curator at the Peranakan Museum. Maria has been with the museum for two years, and co-curated the current exhibition on *Emily of Emerald Hill*.

Photos courtesy of the Peranakan Museum



Margaret Chan on stage at the Peranakan Museum