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Life!

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May 6, 2010

Wild about Rice

In just 10 years, Wild Rice has turned into a theatre company known for its adventurous repertoire
 By [adeline chia](#)



Theatre-makers Ivan Heng and Glen Goei are reaping their harvest of their success. -- ST PHOTO: DESMOND WEE

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Ten years ago, a Singapore actor put on a play in Kuala Lumpur called Emily Of Emerald Hill, playing Stella Kon's iconic Peranakan heroine in drag.

The role, which Malaysian actress Pearly Chua and Singapore thespian Margaret Chan had also tackled, was a runaway success and was restaged in Hong Kong and Singapore, earning him a windfall of \$95,000.

Ivan Heng, then 37, used all the money to launch a new theatre company. He named it Wild Rice, because he believed that theatre, like rice, should be a staple in people's lives.

'I didn't think about it so much. I was sure this was the way to go forward,' says Heng, now 47.

Ten years later, the company is one of Singapore's most successful and dynamic English-language theatre groups, staging works which are sometimes commercial, sometimes political, sometimes risque and sometimes all of the above.

The productions are lapped up by a loyal following, especially those who like their political satire served with laughs.

Some of these include Eleanor Wong's The Campaign To Confer The Public Service Star On JBJ (2006), about a student who tries to launch a campaign to honour an environmentalist named JBJ, as well as about a conflicted civil servant.

Over the years, it also staged the Asian Boys trilogy of plays by Alfian Sa'at, which explores Singapore gay identity.

Its popular biennial OCBC Singapore Theatre Festival, which premieres new Singapore works, has drawn more than 10,000 people for each edition.

Wild Rice's re-interpretations of classics, such as Animal Farm (2002) and an all-male version of The Importance Of Being Earnest (2009), have landed the troupe awards and invitations to tour abroad.

The actor with the big dreams is now easily one of the most recognised and flamboyant theatre-makers in Singapore.

Heng tells Life! at the company's headquarters in Kerbau Road: 'Wild Rice is a celebration of Singapore theatre talents, of which there is so much. We needed to feel proud of work with a distinctive Singaporean voice.'

He is joined in the interview by Glen Goei, 46, associate artistic director of the company. He joined Wild Rice one year after it was set up. Friends for more than 35 years, the two were schoolmates at Anglo-Chinese School.

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Both had acting careers in London before returning here to work in the arts scene. Tellingly and as a mark of how far they have come, both have also directed different editions of the National Day Parade, one of the biggest undertakings of any theatre director's career.

Goei, who rose to fame playing M Butterfly opposite Anthony Hopkins in 1989 at London's West End, says he has always been interested in making Western theatre classics contemporary and local.

'It can be seen in the language, not necessarily using Singlish but rather a Singaporean way of speaking. It sounds like an easy thing but it's not.'

The theatre company celebrates its 10th anniversary this year with a season of four classic Wild Rice works.

The season started with *Animal Farm*, a kinetic interpretation of the George Orwell satire. It will run at the Drama Centre until Saturday.

In August, there will be *Boeing Boeing*, the sexy farce by French playwright Marc Camoletti, of a playboy with three air stewardess girlfriends.

Cinderel-LAH!, the group's first pantomime staged in 2003, will be staged in December. The protagonist is a girl called Cindy who lives in a crowded HDB flat with her evil mahjong-obsessed stepmother and two ugly step-sisters.

Then comes the centrepiece of the season. Heng will don a kebaya and play the formidable Emily Gan in *Emily Of Emerald Hill* at the Esplanade Theatre in March next year.

Heng says he has lost about 4kg for the role, but needs to shed some more to look svelte in the kebaya. He says: 'In the play, Emily says: 'You makan the rice a little bit, but the other dishes you rata (Peranakan Malay for snack)'.

'See? Even in our mothers' days, they knew about the Atkins diet.'

Explosions of uncontrollable laughter are commonplace in any interview with the wisecracking duo and they say they are unapologetic about using laughter as a tool in their works.

Heng says: 'We do comedies like *Boeing Boeing*. Why not? Laughter is a very important medicine, especially in Singapore.'

'I feel like I've given people therapy. I remind them that they are alive. They laugh, they breathe and they take oxygen into their bodies.'

Some critics call Wild Rice productions commercial and lightweight. It is hard to deny that Wild Rice has a slick, high-gloss appeal and friends in high places. Its annual fundraiser, the Rice Ball, is a key event on the socialite calendar and is supported by the business elite. It raises more than \$300,000 annually.

Asked if their works rely on mass appeal, Goei says: 'Mass' is the Mamma Mia! crowd, 60,000 people go to watch the show. We average about 15,000 per show. The 15,000 who keep coming to our shows are well-read, sophisticated audience members who know what these plays are about.'

Heng says their productions serve another function, that of being 'a forum for public thought and platform for public gathering'.

'We reach out and penetrate and capture people's imaginations. We don't dumb down and play to the gallery.'

Indeed, Wild Rice is one of the most overtly political theatre companies here.

The OCBC Singapore Theatre Festival stages new plays, sometimes by first-time playwrights. Some have touched on issues such as race, religion, censorship, homosexuality and media regulation.

All the plays have been passed uncut.

Given their vocal support for political theatre, have they ever thought of entering politics - trying for a seat in Parliament?

Goei, who read history in Cambridge, says: 'They can't just take one of us, they must take us both. We are a team.'

Heng, a law graduate from the National University of Singapore, says: 'If we go to Parliament, can you imagine? We'll just be worried about what to wear.'

Turning serious, Goei says: 'When I have an opinion, I'm already in politics. We are involved with the community, we represent people's opinions, people's views and people's voices. We believe there is space for an alternative view.'

Heng adds: 'Anyway, don't forget we've both done NDP. We're patriots.'

The company's image may be inextricably tied to the duo, but they admit they are looking for successors.

They say they may draw from their stable, such as resident playwright Alfian Sa'at and Jonathan Lim, artistic director of the youth division, young & Wild, or others may emerge in the future.

But Goei says there is a dearth of new arts talents. Without them, this rice padi may die. He says: 'We're worried about the situation. Ivan and I grew up in an education system that was less controlled and managed. Now, the talents are there but they are not allowed to emerge and flourish. The next generation of actors and directors, where are you?'

To this end, the company has been busy sowing new seeds, whether it is through young & Wild, which develops young theatre professionals, or First Stage, which nurtures young talents aged five to 16.

But currently, they are taking things a year at a time. Goei says with a smile: 'We are prepared, if no one comes to see our shows, we'll just close shop.'

That seems unlikely to happen - they are reaping what they have sown for the last 10 years and Rice, if not exactly a staple, is definitely a fixture in the Singapore theatre diet.

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NAC cuts funds to company

The National Arts Council (NAC) has cut the annual grant given to local theatre company Wild Rice even as it celebrates its 10th anniversary.

It will get \$170,000 this year, down from \$190,000 the year before. It is the smallest annual grant that the company has received from the council.

Artistic director Ivan Heng says the council told him funding was cut because its productions promoted alternative lifestyles, were critical of government policies and satirised political leaders.

In April last year, Wild Rice staged an all-male version of Oscar Wilde's *The Importance Of Being Earnest*, which had a sold-out two-week run at the Drama Centre. It was given an advisory of '16 years and above' by the Media Development Authority because of its all-male cast.

It also organises the OCBC Singapore Theatre Festival, a biennial festival showcasing local scripts, some of which take on political issues in a cheeky way.

Heng, 47, tells *Life!* he is disappointed with the council's decision. 'Shouldn't NAC be funding people's experience of theatre? What does support of the arts mean? What does moving into a more progressive society entail?'

He says he will continue to create works that are true to his beliefs. 'This is what artists do. We question how we live our lives in Singapore.'

In response to queries from *Life!* about the funding cut, the council's director of arts development, Ms Elaine Ng, says in a statement that 'all artists and arts groups are aware of NAC's funding guidelines for grant applications'.

'The guidelines clearly state that we will not fund projects which are incompatible with the core values promoted by the Government and society or disparage the Government.'

'In the past few years, NAC has had dialogue sessions with Wild Rice on funding matters. We informed Wild Rice that it will continue to receive funding for projects which meet the guidelines.'

'Funding of Wild Rice or any other arts companies will continue to be guided by our funding guidelines. NAC respects the choices made by the group regarding artistic direction and content and will help it according to our guidelines and policies.'

The \$20,000 cut is unlikely to affect Wild Rice's operating costs significantly. The costs are expected to run to \$4.67 million this year, because of its 10th anniversary celebrations. The company is mostly funded by its ticket sales.

The arts community is dismayed by the news. The Necessary Stage's artistic director, Alvin Tan, 47, says: 'It's disappointing to hear this, because we're supposed to go into the age of opening up, with the integrated resorts opening and so on.'

'NAC is sending a strong signal to what you can put on and what you cannot, what is favoured and what is not. It harms diversity, which is what the arts scene needs.'

TheatreWorks managing director Tay Tong, 47, finds the move regressive. He says: 'Over the last few years, there has been some acceptance of differences. Now this is a kind of U-turn, because funding is affected.'

'Is this current management, not only the NAC, but the ministry, becoming more conservative?'

Arts Nominated MP Audrey Wong, 41, agrees. She says: 'We have been getting mixed messages about the arts. We are trying to make Singapore a dynamic arts city to attract foreign talent and keep people rooted. Once you announce that you are opening up, it is hard to close the door and go back 20 years.'

She adds that 'satire has always been a part of the arts'.

'Throughout history, whether it's cartoons or Shakespeare, there is satire of society in all its forms,' she says.

HOW WILD RICE GREW

2000: Ivan Heng, educated at the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama, launches Wild Rice in Singapore with its first production, the Stella Kon play *Emily Of Emerald Hill* at Jubilee Hall.

The sold-out production has a 2½-week run.

The theatre company starts out with four people, including an office manager, marketing assistant and an ad hoc producer. Heng has served as the company's artistic director since.

2001: After returning from an acting and directing career in London, actor-director Glen Goei, who trained in London's Mountview Theatre School, joins Wild Rice as associate artistic director. His first production is the Noel Coward comedy, *Blithe Spirit*.

2003: Wild Rice presents its first pantomime, *Cinderel-LAH!*, written by Selena Tan, a lawyer-turned-actress who now runs Dream Academy Productions.

It is a localised fairy tale about a girl called Cindy who lives in a crowded HDB flat with her evil mahjong-obsessed stepmother and two ugly step-sisters.

2006: The first Singapore Theatre Festival (later renamed the OCBC Singapore Festival) is launched, staging nine plays, six of which are new works. The inaugural three-week festival draws 11,500 people and features hotly discussed works such as *The Campaign To Confer The Public Service Star On JBJ*.

2009: The group stages Oscar Wilde's *The Importance Of Being Earnest*, which has a sold-out two-week run. It is given an advisory of '16 years and above' by the Media Development Authority because of its all-male cast.

2010: The Importance Of Being Earnest wins the Production Of The Year, Best Supporting Actor and Best Costume Design awards at the Life! Theatre Awards. Wild Rice is the first Singapore theatre company to be invited to the Hong Kong Arts Festival with its production of Animal Farm. The play is part of the company's 10th-anniversary celebration, with a season of popular revivals.



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