

Emily comes full circle

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'We really have this shortcut and this language that we share, because it's in our blood' Glenn Goei (above) on his friendship and shared Peranakan heritage with Ivan Heng, which has made rehearsals much smoother -- PHOTO: TC CAPITAL

For two theatre stalwarts behind an upcoming production of *Emily Of Emerald Hill*, the play is not merely a landmark Singapore work. It is a reminder to Ivan Heng and Glen Goei of their own beginnings in theatre, and the leaps of faith they have taken over the years.

The new production, opening at the Esplanade next month, will mark the season finale of *Wild Rice*'s 10th-anniversary celebrations.

Actor-director Heng, 47, will reprise the role of iconic Peranakan matriarch Emily - one that led him to set up theatre group *Wild Rice* 10 years ago.

He first saw Emily performed by Malaysian actress Pearly Chua in 1998.

'When I saw it, I knew I had to perform her,' he recalls, 'During the interval, I said: 'I am going to play Emily,' and my friends all around me went: 'What?!''

Donning the kebaya, he became the first man to play Emily in 1999. That first performance in Kuala Lumpur, along with subsequent restagings in Hong Kong and Singapore in 2001, earned him a windfall of \$95,000.

He used all the money to launch *Wild Rice*.

It is the universality of the play's themes - family, motherhood and love - that he believes has led to its longevity. He says: 'I think everyone can see Emily in themselves.'

Directing Heng as Emily is Goei, whose first en-

counter with Emily was in 1985, while he was still an undergraduate. Then, she had been performed at the Drama Centre by Margaret Chan, arguably the most recognisable incarnation of the fictional matriarch.

Now 48, Goei, who is also the associate artistic director of *Wild Rice*, says watching that production of Emily convinced him to move into theatre.

He says: 'That production moved me so deeply and stirred up those deepest, darkest passions that I had. I felt that I had to give that a go.'

The one-woman (or one-man) play by Stella Kon traces the life of Emily Gan, an abandoned child who rises to become the matriarch of a distinguished household and dominates her family - but at a cost.

Budgeted at \$800,000, the production spent part of the cost to extend the stage of the Esplanade Theatre seven rows into the audience for a more intimate feel.

The revival will also feature new multimedia projections by artist Brian Gothong Tan. Set designer Christopher Chua has created a new stage setting, and musician Darren Ng takes charge of the sound.

The physical cost, on Heng's part, has been 9kg - the weight he lost in nine months, in order to fit into the svelte kebayas specially tailored for him.

Part of the reason for shedding weight is practical, so that he will feel lighter for the marathon two-hour performance.

After 15 minutes of a dress rehearsal in *Wild Rice*'s rehearsal studio, Heng, in full Emily garb, was already shining with sweat in his role as a feisty matron.

Says the cross-dressing star: 'Emily's very weight-conscious. She has this line in the play: 'Ladies, if you're watching your weight, you just rata rata' - which translates roughly to 'just eat the dishes and don't worry about the rice'.'

To this, Goei chimes in: 'She was way ahead of the Atkins diet.'

The duo - who are both Peranakan and have been friends for more than 30 years - even took to wearing corsets over Chinese New Year to get into character. The director, in a show of solidarity, did it to understand how his leading (wo)man would feel. Both men gamely lift their shirts to point out the lines etched into their torsos from the experience.

Their deeply rooted heritage, coupled with their long friendship, says Goei, has made directing and

rehearsals much smoother. He adds: 'We really have this shortcut and this language that we share, because it's in our blood.'

It helps, too, that the director is also a family friend of Kon, the playwright behind the enduring script.

And even though Heng has revisited the role in 98 performances, Goei feels that he still brings something unique to the stage.

He says: 'Ivan is 10 years older since his last performance, and he brings a different maturity and understanding and appreciation of humanity to it. I think that is the freshness of this production.'

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