

Emily jazzed up

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Stellar performance: Ivan Heng offers a fresh take on Wild Rice's Emily Of Emerald Hill. -- PHOTO: ALBERT LIM KS

review theatre

EMILY OF EMERALD HILL

Wild Rice

Esplanade Theatre

Last Saturday

Emily Gan - fearsome Peranakan matriarch, glittering social butterfly, chef extraordinaire, domineering mother, dutiful wife, Singapore theatrical icon and more. So how does this many-faceted old dame age? Beautifully, in this Wild Rice production starring Ivan Heng, who once again dons the kebaya for a reprisal of his career-making role more than 10 years ago.

Superlatives have been thrown at Heng's performances as Emily before. His has been called the Emily of the new millennium. His audience interaction breaks down the fourth wall and his cross-dressing brings into sharp focus the gender politics inherent in Stella Kon's play.

With this re-staging, it is time to bring out the superlatives again. You have to see what the hype was about and why this show, which chronicles the rise of Emily from a poor orphan girl to the head of a prosperous Peranakan family, ran for 98 shows from 1999 to 2002 - and people never got tired of it.

Except for a slip-up with a character's name, Heng,

the only actor on stage, is a force of nature. It was no problem for him turning the dial up to a burning, white-hot level as he flits through different characters and accents, and all the way down to the quietest, most tender moment when her trembling hand pats her son goodbye.

The last Emily Of Emerald Hill starring Margaret Chan was staged less than a year ago and that version featured a more naturalistic performance with minimal directorial interference. Despite the solid acting, that production sagged and creaked in places because of the heavy exposition.

Under Glen Goei's inventive staging and editing, the play moves along at a brisk trot. It also has a more playful, knowing and rock 'n' roll attitude, playing fast and loose with different tempos. In a scene showing Emily's mastery of the household, Goei fast-forwards it with Heng speaking at breakneck speed. Languid scenes are suffused with gorgeously melancholic jazz tunes.

The production also looks great. Set designer Christopher Chua creates a frame within a frame within a frame, which gives the impression of receding into an inner sanctum, an apt metaphor for the audience's journey with Emily through her life.

The white frames also act as blank canvasses for multimedia designer Brian Gothong Tan to project different images, an elegant way to signal different settings and time periods. Most memorable is a breathtakingly beautiful and desolate snow scene in Salisbury, England, where Emily races off to arm-twist her son out of working in a horse stable.

Finally, there are the costumes by Frederick Lee - the glorious phoenix kebaya, the sexy black ball gown and the Russian-influenced, over-the-top fur-trimmed hat for a visit to England - nothing is too much for larger-than-life Emily.

Larger than life. Therein lies the crux of her problem. In many ways, Emily has been the victim of her own success. Played by different performers in various shows, the character is a Singapore landmark, a blueprint for other Nyonya matriarchs on stage and screen, and, dare I say it, a cliché. You feel like you have known her even before you have met her.

But this production brings to life a potentially tired franchise. It is brimming over with the variety of her joys, her tragedies and her contradictions. ?

At the start of the play, Emily enters, a glamourpuss slow-dancing onto the stage. She leaves

the same way at the end, but a little stooped, a little battered, and very much older. It is a bittersweet goodbye, but this time, you hope to see her again.

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book it

EMILY OF EMERALD HILL

Where: Esplanade Theatre

When: Today to Saturday, 8pm, with 3pm week-end matinees

Admission: \$34 to \$99 from Sistic. (call 6348-5555 or go to www.sistic.com.sg)