

ENTERTAINMENT

THEATRE REVIEW:
EMILY OF EMERALD HILL

(Wo)man on top

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AT THE end of it all, Emily of Emerald Hill may have lost everything but she seems to have found the perfect new home in the Esplanade Theatre.

She looked completely settled down, teaching the front row audiences how to make quilts, giving a crash course on cooking sumptuous buah keluak, playing the perfect host in a lavish party, chiding latecomers who couldn't find a parking spot in time. That sort of thing.

And it all boiled down to Ivan Heng's one-man tour de force performance in Stella Kon's iconic monologue.

Indeed, what better way for W!ld Rice to wrap up a decade of success than to revive their classic piece in (more or less) exactly the same way by the same person — on a bigger scale, no less to show how far they've come.

We are familiar with the rise and fall of Emily Gan, the archetypal Peranakan matriarch of post-War 1950s, whose life is stalked by tragedy at every turn — a son's death, a philandering husband, society and



Photos: Albert Lim KS

circumstance forcing themselves upon her.

Compared to last year's dramatic, heartstrings-tugging version performed by the "original" Emily, Margaret Chan, this staging went beyond a moving performance.

"Be the very devil of a wife and mother," goes one of Emily's lines. And she does. Or rather, Heng did — heightened by the fact that of course, you've got a man playing the role of a woman. And in the process he became the very devil of an actor.

Heng authoritatively broke down Emily and made her his own, reminding us that when he's not being a good

director, he's also an excellent thespian. We relished his turn as Lady Bracknell in 2009's *The Importance of Being Earnest* but as Emily, Heng was unstoppable. Kick-ass dramatic monologue? Funny impersonations? Showcasing your skills in British and Singlish accents? Swift costume changes? Holding the audience in the palm of his hands with his sheer presence? Check, check and check. While all of this might be "too much" for some, we thoroughly enjoyed the stamp of occasional flamboyance he imbued in the character.

Heng's no-holds-barred performance stood in wonderful contrast to director Glen Goei's measured approach of pulling back and making the show as intimate as possible. The stage extended over the orchestra pit, for example, and the deceptively clean and predominantly white set gave the one-man show a crisp, glossiness, occasionally punctuated by the well-thought use of video and lighting.

When it first came out, Heng's performance of Emily of Emerald Hill offered a groundbreaking, gender-bending take. Ten years later, the novelty has worn off. But in its place, we've got something else. A damn good piece of theatre.

Emily Of Emerald Hill runs until March 12, 8pm, Esplanade Theatre. With 3pm weekend matinees. Tickets at \$34 to \$99 from Sistic.



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