

▶ WHATEVER HAPPENED TO...

Margaret Chan, 64

BEST KNOWN AS... the local stage doyenne and former journalist/food critic who became a TV icon playing villainous matriarchs in Ch 5's first English soap *Masters of the Sea* and the Ch 8 blockbuster *The Golden Pillow*, starring Zoe Tay, Fann Wong and Alex Man. In 1996, she and her family moved to England when her husband, an oil company executive, was posted there. She took up post-graduate studies at the University of London before returning to Singapore in 2000. **WHAT'S SHE UP TO NOW:** The grandmother of four is now the Associate Professor of Theatre/Performance Studies at the Singapore Management University. She still finds time to act — in February, she starts rehearsing for Wild Rice's *The House of Bernarda Alba*, a play about seven women living under the same roof controlled by a domineering matriarch.

The theatre pioneer-turned-teacher on being a pop culture relic, Pornsak, and uttering that famous line from *Masters of the Sea*.

8 DAYS: When I told my colleagues that I was meeting you, their first response was, "I will ker-rush you like a cockroach!" Your line from *Masters of the Sea* has become an iconic phrase in local pop culture. Was that scripted?

MARGARET CHAN: It was scripted. And when I read that, I said, "Oh, okay." Very often you would read the script and go, "Oh, don't make me say that..." The director wanted the scene to be big, as if I would spit out venom right down the barrel of the camera. She also wanted me turn around and bang my walking stick



Back in the day: Margaret Chan with her TV family in 1994's *Masters of the Sea*.



on this box she placed on the floor to create a loud thud. **Was it a one-take scene?** Oh, no, it took several takes. She wanted more. She said I wasn't venomous enough. The funny thing was, the fake gems glued onto the stick fell off each time I did it.

THEN

NOW

Do people quote that line back at you today 20 years after the show aired?

Till this day whenever I step into a shopping centre, I would be confronted by someone who finds my voice or my face familiar. The line has become so iconic that even my students [at SMU] know about it — they may not have seen the show, but their parents did! They would say, "That woman is your professor?"

How does that make you feel?

I am an official relic of Singapore theatre and TV history: I was featured in the Peranakan Museum's *Emily of Emerald Hill* exhibition, and now I am on the

'Wall of Fame' at the National Museum's 50 Years of Television exhibition. Life is ephemeral, but the instinct to survive is fierce, and lonely, and you are bloody grateful for the chance to be immortalised.

Masters of the Sea had mixed reviews when it first aired.

Oh yeah, it was actually a good show, but it was killed by its format. It was a weekly half-hour soap, or 22 minutes if you exclude the advertisements. So before you could move the story forward by an inch or two, it was over. And nobody could remember what happened before when they tune in the following week. The show was big in Indonesia, though, where it was shown daily. When Kenny Rogers Roasters opened there, a few of the cast members, myself included, were invited to the grand opening. It was honestly quite embarrassing for me because I was so not used to being called 'a star'.

Did you have a good time making it?

One of the great advantages of acting as the oldest fart in the cast was knowing that in almost every scene, if there was just one chair, then that would be your chair. At photo shoots, it was super. There would often be just one chair. I just headed straight for the chair, walking cane in hand, sat down and waited for the stylist to fussily arrange other members of the cast around me. It was less about

Golden era: Margaret with Xie Shaoguang in 1995's *The Golden Pillow*. Margaret wasn't surprised that Shaoguang quit showbiz to become a monk. "I remember quiet talks with him on the set [which] often took a meditative, even metaphysical turn. He spoke always with a quiet intensity, not about plans, but philosophy."



Required reading: In 2006, Margaret published *Ritual is Theatre, Theatre is Ritual* — Tang-ki: Chinese Spirit Medium Worship, a study about Chinese spirit mediums. Says Margaret: "I chose this as my PhD topic because, No.1, I'm Hokkien, and I'm very curious about them because I was baptised as a baby into Catholicism, and didn't know these [Hokkien] people whom I called my brothers, and No. 2, it allowed me to return to Singapore and spend more time here."

feeling like a queen than being allowed to be serenely spaced-out. This is still a happy memory today. **You were also the first Ch 5 actor to cross over to Ch 8 in *The Golden Pillow*.** I was the 'newbie' in that one. I played a marvellous villain, one my favourite characters. I'm now much better with the Chinese language, but back then I struggled so hard to learn Mandarin for the show. I remember doing one scene where the Hongkong director said to me, "I don't want you to think in Chinese." "Why?" I asked. "Because you're thinking about the lines and not being there." Well, he was absolutely spot on. So I did my lines in English and my lines were



later dubbed over, [and they] did a better job than I could.

You were Chen Shucheng's wife in that show.

Did you know Chen Shucheng is a joker? We got along like wildfire. There was one scene where his character was pushed into an emergency room on a gurney and I had to follow him and act distraught. As we were shooting, he faked an erection by lifting his finger under the blanket! (Laughs). That bloody bums***! I had to act distraught and he purposely did that to me. After that, I hantam him. Awful man!

You started teaching in 2003 and Pornsak was one of your students at SMU. What kind of student was he back then?

He was a bum! He was the most laid-back, easy-going guy — and he never studied. A bunch of students and I sat him down and made him study. He didn't even own a pair of shoes. He worked in a programme run by my department and one of the requirements is that you report to work with shoes — and he had no shoes! He wore only sandals. So he went off and bought the ugliest pair of shoes.

He has you to thank for breaking him into showbiz.

I was running the convocation for the first time and he came into my room and said, "I want to be the compere." I remember my heart saying, "Oh, no!" At the same, I had this big smile on my face and said, "Okay!" Because I never believed he could do it, but I knew I could beat it out of him if I had to. He is a joy, as a friend and as a student. What more can a teacher ask than to know that she has contributed in some way to a student's career. I can say that I directed him on his first stage performance as emcee. ■

