

Singapore's finest actresses in one 'House'

The House of Bernarda Alba

CATFIGHT! Catfight! Watch three generations of Singapore actresses howl and tear at each other in Wild Rice's production of *The House of Bernarda Alba*, the classic drama by legendary Spanish playwright and poet Federico Garcia Lorca (1898-1936).

Helmed by Glen Goei, the production relocates the story of the domineering matriarch and her daughters from a rural Spanish village to a Singapore Peranakan household.

The huge all-women cast of 50 – yes, 50 – is a veritable dream team: Claire Wong, Neo Swee Lin, Jo Kukathas, Serene Chen, Noorlinah Mohamed and Karen Tan are among the headliners.

But the one name that's gotten theatre-lovers dizzy with excitement is Margaret Chan. The veteran actress returns to top-tier theatre after a long absence. Goei jokes: "She's come out of the woodwork, make way for her."

Chan, 64, ruled the stage from the 1970s and 1980s with her commanding performances, most notably as the matriarch in *Emily of Emerald Hill*. She made rare appearances in the new millennium and now teaches drama full-time at the Singapore Management University.

Says Goei: "We've assembled three generations of the best Singapore actresses – from legends like

Margaret, right up to bright young stars like Glory Ngim and Sharda Harrison. On stage, they'll be fighting and scratching each other's eyes out – how could you miss that?"

The House of Bernarda Alba tells the story of beautiful matriarch Bernarda (played by Wong) who is grieving the death of her husband. Perhaps scared of her own loneliness, she orders that her five daughters be locked up in the house for eight years, forbidding them from going anywhere except to church.

The daughters' emotional and sexual frustrations mount and simmer – until the arrival of a male suitor for one of the daughters rips the family apart.

Control, oppression and freedom are themes central to the drama – Lorca's last and finest work before he was gunned down in 1936 by the Nationalist forces during the Spanish Civil War. Some critics see the play as a harbinger of General Franco's military rule that started three years after Lorca's death.

Though many translations of the play abound, the text that Goei is using is by Chay Yew – another beloved name among theatre fans. Yew is a Singapore-born playwright who left the country more than 20 years ago and became an acclaimed theatre practitioner in the US. In 1989, his play *As If He Hears* was banned by the Singapore government because of its sympathetic portrayal of a gay man.

After winning acclaim in the West for works such as *Porcelain* and *A Language of Their Own*, Yew staged *The House of Bernarda Alba* in New York in 2000 and again in 2007. It drew rave reviews, with *The New York Times* calling it "a visual and aural knockout".

Goei says he chose Yew's translation over five other versions because of its "lyricism and economy" – hallmarks of Yew's style. Replying from New York to *The Business Times* via e-mail, Yew admits: "There's definitely a correlation (between the themes of the play and the socio-political situation in Singapore)."

But he chose not to expand on this point, saying that the play's message is "for Singapore audiences to discern themselves."

"Isn't that the function of art? How do we read and interpret metaphors and find meaning? How we see our real lives reflected in the plays and what we need to do to address change?"

Though half a world away, Yew says he still thinks a lot about the country he was born in. He says: "I'm busy directing in the US. But I hope to return home soon. Many of the stories in my head still revolve around Singapore."

Wild Rice's The House of Bernarda Alba will be staged at the Drama Centre from March 12 to 29 at 8pm, as well as 3pm on weekends. Tickets from \$40 to \$75 at Sistic



PHOTO: WILD RICE



'On stage, they'll be fighting and scratching each other's eyes out – how could you miss that?'

– Glen Goei, director of *House of Alba's* all-women cast (left) of 50 women including Margaret Chan. The play was translated by Chay Yew (below) who is now directing in the US

