

Life!

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Rebel with a twist

Singapore drama group puts a local spin on British playwright Joe Orton's naughty farce

tara tan
arts reporter

The late British playwright Joe Orton met with a violent end, bludgeoned to death by a jealous lover when he was only 34.

But the bad boy of British theatre would probably be tickled to know that his scandalous black comedies continue to wreak havoc and assault delicate sensibilities 42 years after his death.

They have even drifted all the way to conservative Singapore.

Next month, Singaporean director Loretta Chen, 32, will stage Orton's last play, *What The Butler Saw*, which the playwright never got to see staged.

New theatre company Zebra Crossing will perform it at the Drama Centre Theatre at the National Library Building from Feb 7 to 22.

Chen will set the British farce, about a London psychiatrist in the 1960s who is trying to seduce his secretary when his wife walks in, in 1960s riot-stricken Singapore.

She tells *Life!* that she fully intends to carry on the playwright's sly digs and scathing social satire.

In one scene, for example, violence is done to a statue of Sir Stamford Raffles.

Asked why she is setting the play in 1960s Singapore, she says: "It was a tumultuous time both in Singapore and London. London was going through a cultural revolution of liberation. It was a time for



Expect cheeky humour in *What The Butler Saw*, says director Loretta Chen (centre).
ST PHOTO: SHAHRIYA YAHAYA

social experimentation. Locally, we were forging independence and experiencing some of the worst racial riots of our time."

The production will star veteran actor Gerald Chew, newcomer Elizabeth Tan and radio DJ Vernetta Lopez, who last acted on stage 14 years ago.

Chen, whose previous directorial outings include *The Vagina Monologues* and *251*, the latter about porn-star Annabel Chong, says: "Orton is a cheeky one, and says things you think of but never dare say. He loved toying with authority and often mocked English high society in his works."

The notorious playwright, whose short but prolific career started only three years before his death, was once jailed for six months for defacing library books.

He made subtle and unsavoury alterations to the cover art, drawings and poetry in the books, which ironically have become the most valued collection in London's Islington Library.

Chen says: "Despite that, he was able to laugh at it all, to recognise the ironies, pain and injustices in life."

The term "Ortonesque" was even coined for his off-beat and cynical sense of humour. It is used to describe things that are outrageously macabre.

Chen adds that she can find parallels between the play and the economic crisis the world is now in.

"Since we are in it for the long haul, we should come to terms with it and look for the positives," she says.

"To be able to find a shred of silver lining and laugh despite the worst of circumstances is the gift Orton left behind."

taratan@sph.com.sg

book it

WHAT THE BUTLER SAW

Who: Zebra Crossing
Where: Drama Centre Theatre
When: Feb 7 to 22, 8pm (except Sundays and Mondays). Matinees on Saturday and Sunday at 3pm
Admission: \$34 to \$60 from Sistic (log on to www.sistic.com.sg or call 6348-5555)