



Edmund Chen's kid sister has a PhD, is a lecturer and an actress. And now...

# She wants to change the world

By Faith Teo

**W**ANT to rule the world! "Er, make that CHANGE the world," declares Loretta Tan, banging the table with her fist.

The affable Loretta, the 27-year-old little sister of actor Edmund Chen, does a lot of table-banging, voice-raising and posture-changing to emphasise her pronouncements.

But her laughter is infectious, her words are sincere, and it's hard not to like this bubbly young lady who looks almost too young to hold a PhD.

Dr Loretta Tan doesn't just want to change the world, she has plans to form a suicide survivors' help group, support underprivileged women and children, and work to broaden the perspectives of Singapore women.

Then there's her ambition to set up a Department of Critical Theory at Singapore Polytechnic, where she has just started teaching in the Department of Language and Communications, "to question ideas of racism, sexism, class and so on".

She's also writing a critical paper on "George Bush's use of rhetoric, irony and contradiction".

It's obvious where she stands on the fighting in Iraq.

But a suicide survivors' help group? What was her inspiration for that?

"Two of my friends committed suicide and lots more have attempted it. Suicide is taboo in Singapore, so survivors find it difficult to get help and support," she said.

She also finds Singapore women "privileged and sheltered" and claims "they don't see a life outside of what they know".

If that sounds arrogant, Loretta explains that since she was young, her mother has actively encouraged her to be independent and step outside what she knows, and to follow her dreams.

Plus, her mother already has four grandchildren from Loretta's elder brothers — Edmund and 38-year-old Eric, who runs an events and exhibitions company — so the pressure is off as far as marriage and babies are concerned.

### [ ] ACTRESS, TOO

But these grand schemes are just the side orders to the main course we're really here for: To talk about her upcoming performance in *Jointly & Severably*, the third instalment of Eleanor Wong's trilogy of plays on the repercussions of being gay in Singapore.

Loretta is no dilettante actress. She majored in

theatre studies at NUS, topped her masters in theatre studies class at University of London's Holloway College, and returned recently from a University of California Los Angeles with a PhD in Critical Theory from its Department of Film, TV and Theatre — which she attended on a full scholarship.

She has performed in several plays such as *35@2000* by Action Theatre, *Walking Into Doors* by The Necessary Stage and Toy Factory Theatre Ensemble's *Mama Looking For Her Cat*.

### [ ] TOO PRACTICAL

Then why not make a career out of theatre?

Because Loretta has a practical side.

"It's not great in terms of pay and there's no job stability. In drama, you have to be rather competitive in terms of having to go out and get the role, and I can't see myself doing that," she said.

Her job as a Singapore Polytechnic lecturer gives her the freedom to pursue acting on the side, while providing her with a stable career and income.

I note that *Jointly & Severably* is, ahem, adult-themed. A teacher doing an R(A) play? How unconventional.

"The play is not

sensational in the sense of T&A (tits and ass)," she corrects me with another wake-up bang on the table.

"It's about pushing societal boundaries".

Bang, bang, bang.

"Education is the best way to change a person's mindset.

"Being able to do this play while being a lecturer just shows that changes are already taking place."

### [ ] BROTHER'S ANTICS

Finally, we come to the part where we ask about what it's like being Edmund Chen's kid sister.

Immediately, Loretta's eyes light up.

Edmund did most of her artwork for her when she was in school. It was only when a teacher asked for a demonstration of her "technique" that their plot was uncovered.

More recently, he "jumped into a huge overflowing canal" to retrieve her bag.

Loretta may want to change the world, but it seems she has a big brother to hold her hand while she's at it.

**Jointly & Severably, a play about gay relationships, opens on Apr 9. It is rated R(A). Tickets at \$25-\$45 are available from Sistic outlets, or call 6348-5555 for more details.**

Actress and academic Loretta Tan laughs easily and thinks seriously about social problems.

Picture: KIA CHEE SIONG