

PART C

Life!

THE STRAITS TIMES
MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 29 2008

Loretta Chen
Sees life as
a theatre scene



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life! people

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Wild thing

'The world is my playground but in the end, Singapore is home. It shapes and moves me. I know the nuances of the city, its people and the history'

Theatre director
Loretta Chen (left)

ST PHOTO: ALBERT SIM

8 QUESTIONS WITH... Loretta Chen

First, an Annabel Chong play. Now, The Vagina Monologues. Loretta Chen is big on taboos

tara tan
arts reporter

Theatre director Loretta Chen, 31, is a political animal who pushes boundaries on and off the stage.

Her controversial play about Singaporean porn star Annabel Chong, 251, got people talking when it was staged in April last year.

She is also an active member of the Young PAP and posed questions about censorship to Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew at a youth dialogue last year.

Chen was recently nominated by Dr Teo Ho Pin, mayor of North West district, to be in the North West Community Development Corporation's executive committee.

Her current project is Eve Ensler's feminist play, The Vagina Monologues, which opens on Wednesday. The play also marks the inaugural show of her new company, Zebra Crossing.

Here is a little-known fact: She is also the baby sister of television actor Edmund Chen.

"As a 10-year-old, I used to tag along to all his filming sessions," chuckled Chen, who is 14 years younger than her brother.

"That was what got me hooked on performances: seeing my big brother turn in to someone else on screen."

Born to a clerk and a housewife, Chen, who grew up in a two-room flat in Tanglin Halt, calls herself "a complete accident".

"My dad was 41 and my mum was 39 when they had me. Eric, my second eldest brother, is only three years apart from Edmund," said Chen.

She went on to study theatre studies at the National University of Singapore, where she now teaches part-time while pursuing her doctorate on queer performances staged in Singapore.

In 1999, she headed to University of London's Royal Holloway for her master's, before starting on her doctorate at the University of California in Los Angeles where she lived for over two years.

She returned to Singapore in 2002 and went on to garner a Life! Theatre Awards nomination for Best Director for Ten Brothers, a cheeky retelling of a Chinese folktale about 10 siblings who each possesses a different superpower.

1 What draws you to controversial plays?

I am drawn to material which is overlooked in mainstream society and I question why people react to it that way.

The contents often centre on fascinating personalities such as strong women, as well as issues I feel very much for.

2 I hear you are quite superstitious. Is that why you are dressed in all white today?

Yes, my geomancer told me it is my lucky colour. I just thought, what the heck. I bought a white car, lots of white clothes, then white shoes and white bags to match.

When I was harbouring thoughts of starting a theatre company, I got my for-

tune told in a temple in China that said I should start my business with my close friends, which I did.

3 Why name your theatre company Zebra Crossing?

(Laughs) I have a theory for that. We spend a lot of time on the road, where people have little patience or much space.

At zebra crossings, however, traffic ceases to exist and only people matter. No matter how important the driver is or how big the car, you have to stop for the pedestrian.

Zebra Crossing will produce all sorts of theatre, from Broadway musicals to newly commissioned works.

4 What does theatre mean to you?

When I was studying in California in 2002, my partner committed suicide. Theatre, in a way, helped me deal with this very difficult time. I was able to look at it as if it was a scene from my life's play.

Sometimes, when something melodramatic happens to you, you need to be able to distance yourself and look at it with some objectivity.

5 What was your childhood like?

I grew up in a working-class family but I always had enough even though we were not very rich. The house was full of love.

I never felt poorer than my classmates, who were always jetting off on holidays to the United States or Europe.

I had nice pencil cases and birthday parties at McDonald's. Thinking back, all these must have cost my parents quite a bit but they gave them to me so I was never in want of anything.

6 What do you think makes a strong woman and do you think of yourself as one?

To me, a strong woman is someone

who says she can do anything she puts her mind to. Sometimes, it takes more strength to be able to say you are wrong or you are not good at something.

As a director, I rely on my collaborators. I have ideas but need talented people to carry them out. We directors are useless without them behind us.

7 What made you join the Young PAP?

If you want to make a change, you have to actively make it and that means working within the political avenues.

Some people get quite disheartened, cynical and feel powerless because they keep criticising from the outside.

I say: Jump in and fight for what you believe in. Theatre is a great platform for me to be politically aware and socially involved while still being creative.

8 Complete this sentence. If I could live my life all over again, I would...

Not change it at all. I needed to go through my life the way I did.

On a lighter note, however, I wished I went for my bunion operation earlier. I am going for it next month but now my feet look funny.

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book it

THE VAGINA MONOLOGUES

(Rated R18 for adult content and strong language)

Who: Zebra Crossing

When: Wednesday to Oct 12 (except Mondays and Sundays) at 8pm. Matinees on Saturdays and Sundays at 3pm

Where: Drama Centre Theatre @ National Library Building

Tickets: \$17 to \$57 from Sistic (log on to www.sistic.com.sg or call 6348-5555)