

Power and Grace

Play attempts to encompass the personal story and symbolic power of one woman

> theatre

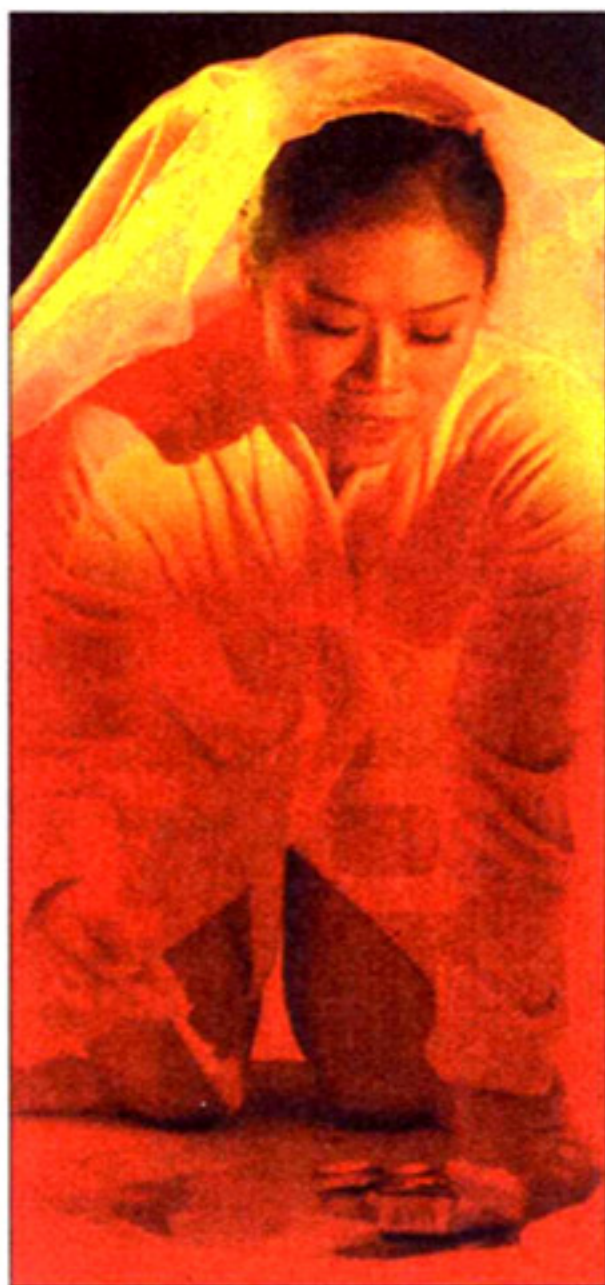
251
Toy Factory Theatre Ensemble
Esplanade Theatre Studio
Thursday

Hong Xinyi

HOW do you solve a problem like Annabel Chong? Her claim to fame is legion and can be summed up by a series of mind-blowing figures: Sex with 70 men 251 times in 10 hours in 1995, setting a world record and resulting in one of the best-selling adult films of all time.

The play 251, written by Ng Yi-Sheng and directed by Loretta Chen, is an attempt to encompass both the personal story of Grace Quek, Chong's real name, and the symbolic power of her porn persona.

The play spends a considerable amount of time detailing her childhood and adolescence in Singapore. The Grace Quek of the play is given various psychologi-



PORTRAIT OF A VICTIM:
Cynthia Lee Macquarrie's Grace is a fragile thing, quick to tear and eager to please.

cal motivation for her sharp swerve away from being a conventionally upstanding citizen, including a soured relationship with a close girl friend (played

with verve by Cheryl Miles).

This aspect of the play is engaging, but often veers too much towards Channel 8 melodrama. Cynthia Lee Macquarrie's Grace is a fragile thing, quick to tear and eager to please – a characterisation that leans towards a too-easy portrait of a victim.

The allegorical bent of the play contains more interesting tensions and joyous ambitions, beginning with the opening monologue that painted Annabel Chong as a mythic abstraction, “the flesh of her legend grown greater than islands, too large for cities to hold”.

This aspect of the play was often awkwardly integrated. But situating her feat in the context of the controversial status of performance art in 1990s Singapore is an intriguing touch, freshly reconfiguring her place in the local realm of socio-political conservatism.

While the personal and symbolic meanings of Annabel/Grace often clashed uneasily, the play's mixed signals sometimes presented a powerful sort of confusion, the futility of rebellion and the despair of exile in communion with the sharp, exhilarating sting of striking your own path.

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Some tweaks made to phrasing

THE play inspired by the life of erstwhile Singapore porn star Annabel Chong contains one topless scene (featuring Cynthia Lee Macquarrie) and other scenes of intimacy.

These elements will remain in the play 251, which opened on Thursday night. Tickets for its 11-day run at the Esplanade's Theatre Studio are sold out.

But certain phrases in the play's opening voiceover have been tweaked and removed, at the request of the Esplanade. The play is part of the arts venue's annual Theatre Studio Season programme.

“In the beginning was the body” has been changed to “Imagine a woman”. Another phrase, “and the body made dwelling”, has been removed from the same monologue.

The arts centre could not be contacted yesterday for comment.

The play's director, Loretta Chen, 30, says: “There were concerns that the lines were Biblical references. I had no problems with the changes.”

She had made other revisions to the script on her own accord, and these stemmed “less out of concerns about censorship and

more from my own artistic choices”.

For example, sex scenes were staged very stylistically and not graphically, she says. Politically charged dialogue was also given a casual touch by making the characters' tones more playful.

“I wanted the play to be more character-driven so people would see Annabel Chong as a human being. She is already a very alienating figure. If the play is too cerebral, it will just make people hate her more.

“This story is about a person, not an anti-Singapore symbol. That's the direction I skewed towards.”

Pushing boundaries for art

Play explores controversial porn star Annabel Chong's psyche while putting her sexual 'feat' in S'pore performance context

THEATRE REVIEW

by David Chew

251

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ONE of the most talked-about plays of the year, Toy Factory's *251* shines a spotlight on what some might consider the most infamous figure in Singapore's recent past: Porn star Annabel Chong.

Written by Ng Yi-Sheng and directed by Loretta Chen, *251* premiered last Thursday and runs until Sunday at the Esplanade Theatre Studio.

Born Grace Quek, Chong became notorious in 1995 for having sex 251 times over 10 hours with about 70 men in what was touted as the World's Biggest Gangbang.

The feat became the centrepiece of a bestselling porn video and Chong was also the subject of the 1999 documentary, *Sex: The Annabel Chong Story*.

What could have driven an unassuming Singapore student – played in *251* as a born victim by Cynthia Lee Macquarrie – to pursue such an unlikely (some might say demeaning) career path?

251, which also stars Amy Cheng and Lee Weng Kee as Chong's parents and Cheryl Miles as her best friend, does a creditable job of tracing Quek's life journey, exploring her motivations and family background and offering possible reasons as to why she did what she did.

In the space of just 90 minutes, Ng also raises the spectre of other infamous public "artistic" displays such as Singapore artist Josef Ng's public snipping of his pubic hair in 1994 and fellow artist Vincent Leow's consumption of his own bodily excretions in the same year.

While putting the gangbang in this context helps make Ng's point that Chong did what she

did in the name of art, the cursory treatment fails to do justice to these earlier incidents.

Also included are scenes focusing on persecuted historical figures such as second century Roman Empress Messalina and third century Sicilian Martyr St Agatha, who are portrayed in ridiculous costumes and against laughable backdrops.

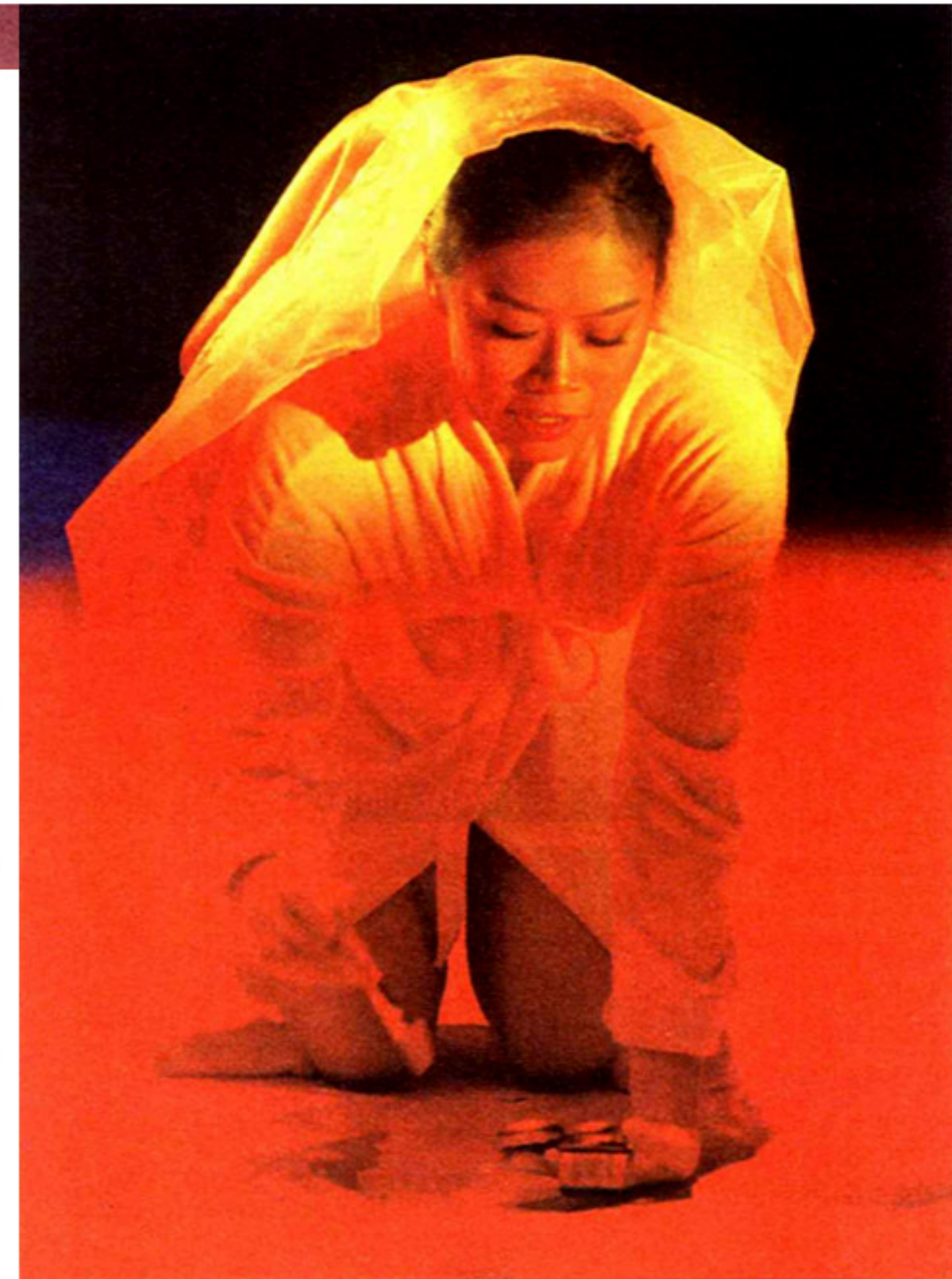
These scenes could have been left out without diminishing the overall effect.

Putting aside the uneven script and spoty acting from Macquarrie – who, for better or worse, is far more convincing as a porn star than as innocent schoolgirl Grace Quek – *251* is worth seeing not only for its success at putting Chong's dubious "achievements" in perspective as performance art, but also for pushing the boundaries of what is acceptable subject matter for a Singapore stage production.

WHAT: *251*

WHEN: UNTIL SUNDAY, APRIL 15

WHERE: ESPLANADE THEATRE STUDIO



SEX & TOFU: Macquarrie playing Chong in a homage to a 1994 artistic performance by Josef Ng, where he caned pieces of tofu to protest the entrapment and caning of men caught performing illicit sex acts along Fort Road.