

Emily of Emerald Hill: A Reaffirmation of Peranakan Culture

By Coonoor Kripalani

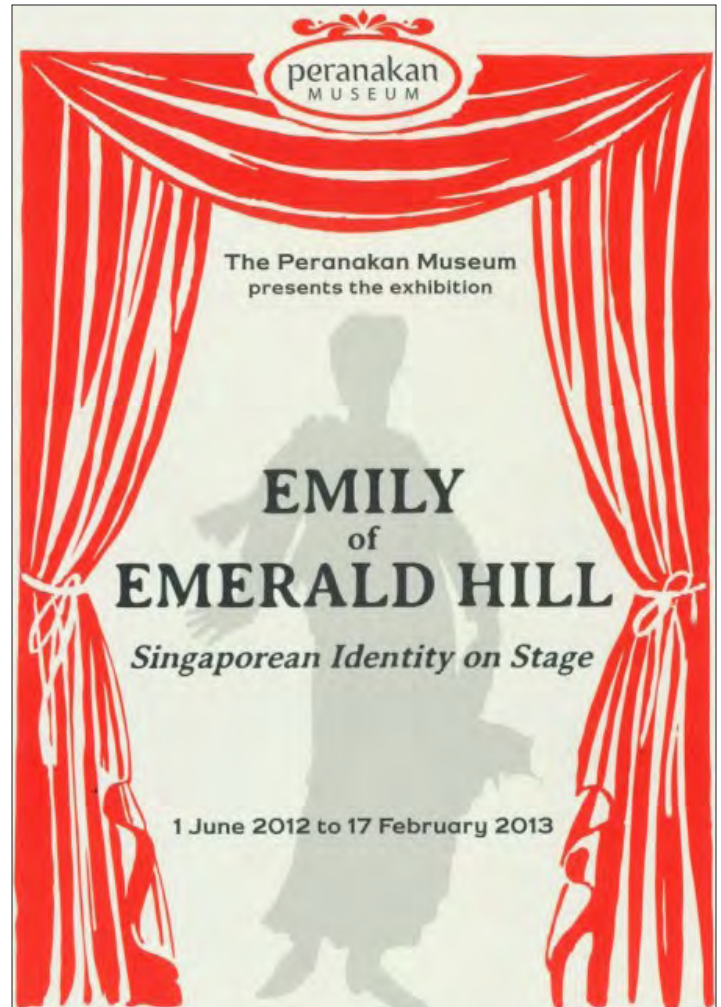
Stella Kon's *Emily of Emerald Hill* is one of Singapore's most enduring plays. Written in English and interspersed with Singlish (colloquially spoken-English) expressions, this one-woman play recounts Emily's life in the 1950s. Through her memories, the audience learns about the life, culture, and traditions of the Peranakans, a group of overseas Chinese long-resident in Penang and Malacca, who adopted Malay language and culture. Known variously as Babas, Straits Chinese, Melaka Men, and Peranakans, this community made enormous contributions to economic and cultural life in the regions of Southeast Asia they inhabited. The visibility and dominance of this community lend a special character to the Chinese community of Singapore.

The play is set in a traditional Peranakan mansion, based on Oberon, the home of the author's grandparents. Emily's memories conjure up the grand days of the patriarch, when the extended family lived under the same roof, until the time she is left as the sole occupant of the family home. The play gives the audience insights into the unique culture of the Peranakans in Singapore—their dress, food, lifestyle, family dynamics, and relationships.

Performed numerous times both in Singapore and overseas, *Emily* has become an icon of Singapore and a cultural signifier of the island state. In homage to this piece of work, the Peranakan Museum (PM) of Singapore held an exhibition of the play and its various stagings, sets, and scripts.¹ Lauding this effort, Margaret Chan, the first actor in Singapore to reprise the role of Emily, said, "Curating theatre is novel, and the Peranakan Museum (and so the Asian Civilisations Museum) should indeed be congratulated for this vision, which goes beyond the material culture associated with museums to theater which is ephemeral, existing only in the moment of its making."²



This is the old mansion Oberon, at 117 Emerald Hill Road that is remembered in the play. Source: [Emily of Emerald Hill.com](http://EmilyofEmeraldHill.com).



The Peranakan Museum held a special exhibition *Emily of Emerald Hill: Singaporean Identity on Stage*, written in 1982 by Stella Kon. It is Singapore's most frequently staged play and has received international recognition. "Emily of Emerald Hill Moves into a Museum!" by Guo Wei Ho, June 6, 2012. Source: [Fever Avenue](http://FeverAvenue.com).

The Peranakans

Peranakan means "born locally" in Malay. Peranakan Chinese, Indian (Chitti Melakas) Peranakans, Jawi Pekan, and the descendants of Indian Muslims and Malays, as well as some Eurasian Peranakans, all exist within this unique community in Singapore. Legend has it that the emperor of China sent Princess Hung Li Po to Malacca to be married to the sultan in 1495. Li Po brought with her a large retinue of 500 noblemen and a few hundred handmaidens, who are said

to have intermarried with the local community. Their descendants are believed to be the Peranakan Chinese. Legend apart, these communities were born of traders who assimilated the local Malay culture as well as Western culture, creating a unique hybrid culture defined by the term “Peranakan.”

The Chinese Peranakans are part of the community of Straits Chinese (particularly from Penang, Malacca, and Singapore, as well as from parts of Indonesia), who form a portion of the larger Chinese diaspora. Descended from traders and businessmen from coastal cities of China who were attracted to the commercial and trade activities along the Southeast Asian sea routes, the Peranakans were a generally affluent community.

It is difficult to ascertain the exact number of Peranakan Chinese in Singapore.

*In 1911, according to the colonial census, they formed about 10 percent of the Singapore population. Today, they are collapsed under the broader category of “Chinese” in the population census, so it will be challenging to define exact numbers. There is also the issue whether Peranakan Chinese is a racial or cultural category.*³

Unlike the *sinkeh* (recently arrived Chinese), the older community of Straits Chinese—the Peranakans—were mostly employed by Europeans in commercial pursuits as merchants, shopkeepers, and cash keepers; or as petty traders and farmers.⁴ The Peranakans, in contrast to the *sinkeh*, did not get involved in politics in the motherland, had no desire to return there, and fully intended to live and die in Malaya.⁵ They identified politically with the British and quickly adapted to English and Western mores. This served them well until the end of the empire; “with the departure of the British, the ‘golden age’ of the Babas [ie, Peranakans] came to an end.”⁶

The Peranakan Chinese amassed fortunes as businessmen and traders and contributed greatly to building public institutions for health care and education in Singapore. In the first half of the nineteenth century, a number of prominent male community leaders were instrumental in resolving disputes in the Chinese community, building schools, temples and hospitals; promoting social reform; and even building infrastructure by contributing to public projects, such as waterworks, roads, and bridges.⁷ Peranakan women, too, were pioneers in many fields. Among them were the first woman in Singapore licensed to drive, the first female doctor, the first female lawyer,

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and several female philanthropists. On the political front, a number of Singapore’s senior leaders are from this group: Lee Kuan Yew, the first prime minister and the architect of independent Singapore, as well as the current Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, are both of Peranakan descent. On the creative side, writers like Josephine Chia, playwright Stella Kon, actors like the ones who have performed the role of Emily, as well as Dick Lee, singer-composer and Pierre Png, a TV artist, are Peranakan.⁸ Peranakans from families like that of Emily are known as *babas* (males) and *nonyas* (females). Their preferred language is Baba Malay—a Chinese Hokkien dialect

sprinkled with Malay terms. They feel differently from other Chinese, whom they may often describe as “too Cheena” (too Chinese).⁹

Peranakan culture contributes much color and spice to the city-state. The cuisine is unique with some basic Chinese elements blended into the spices and flavors of the region such as belachan (spicy prawn paste), sambal (hot chili sauce), ginger flowers, galangal (a type of ginger), and lemongrass. The cuisine, together with Peranakan dress, which is brightly colored and highly ornate—the sarong-kebaya for women and baju-bajang for men—demonstrates the culture’s *joie de vivre*. Accessories such as shoes are embellished with very fine beadwork of the Malays; while gold pins, buttons, and belts were finely crafted with Chinese motifs by Indian goldsmiths, giving the Peranakan adornment a unique style.

The Play

All these features of the Peranakan Chinese community—food, dress, and language—are well-portrayed in the play *Emily of Emerald Hill*. Translated into a number of foreign languages, including English, the play has been performed over 350 times both in Singapore and overseas. Although a three-time winner of the Ministry of Culture’s drama competitions in the early 1980s, Stella Kon’s plays had never been performed in Singapore. She described herself pithily as “Singapore’s greatest never-produced playwright. . . .”¹⁰ In fact, the play debuted in Malaysia in 1984 under the direction of Chan San Sooi before it was performed in Singapore for the first time in 1985.¹¹ Kon has borrowed much from her grandmother’s home, Oberon on Emerald Hill while the character of Emily is very loosely based on her grandmother, Polly Tan, who married Mr. Seow Poh Leng.¹² The stage sets recreate some of Oberon’s interiors, although they are more elaborate than the original house.¹³

Set in the 1950s, the play opens with Mrs. Emily Gan dressed nonya-style in a colorful sarong-kebaya, sitting on



Margaret Chan as Emily of Emerald Hill. Photo: Peranakan Museum, Singapore.

a rosewood chair inlaid with mother-of-pearl and chatting on the phone. Beside the chair is a matching table on which the phone stands. Emily's sewing basket sits next to the table, and we soon learn that she is an expert quilt-maker. Her various conversations instantly give the audience a sense of her different identities as she speaks to her friends, tradesmen, and her son Richard.

Richard's birthday party, which is also a send-off party before he goes to university in England, reveals the Gans' social network as they greet each of their guests, among whom are councilors, lawyers, doctors, and affluent businessmen like Emily's father-in-law. The meal consists of dishes every Singaporean can identify: roast chicken, *sambal* (spicy sauce), *achar* (pickles), *babi buah keluak* (pork and Indonesian black nut, similar to candlenut), *otak* (fish marinated in spices, wrapped in Pandanus leaves, and grilled), and duck soup.¹⁴ Later, when Emily prepares for Chinese New Year, she lists all the ingredients while describing her recipe for *babi buah keluak*.

Through Emily's chatter, the audience learns that her father-in-law built the grand house on Emerald Hill at the turn of the twentieth century. Emily arrived at the age of fourteen as a bride to the eldest son, a widower who was twice her age. A girl from a poor background, Emily asserts her

position as wife of the eldest son by endearing herself to her parents-in-law. Constantly in competition with her two sisters-in-law (older in age but junior in status as wives of the younger sons), who also live in the family mansion with their husbands and children, Emily establishes her seniority by her wits.

Managing a large retinue of staff—cooks, cleaners, personal maids, baby maids, drivers, and gardeners—Emily restored the house to its former glory after the Japanese had occupied the mansion during the World War II. The stage sets provide a glimpse into Peranakan-style furnishings and Westernized lifestyle.

Before her father died and her fortunes plummeted, Emily recalled her own father as a jovial man who brought home a big silver cup he won at a tennis championship. Her father smelled of cigars and brandy and taught her American songs like "My Old Kentucky Home." Left as an orphan in extreme poverty, Emily's humble origins made her into a conniving and manipulative matriarch. As a result, she lost both her favorite son, Richard, and her husband. With the passing years, the other members of the household moved out. Emily continued living on her own in the house on Emerald Hill with the ghosts of her memories for company, surrounded by the urban clatter and clutter closing in on her as the city hurtled into rapid urbanization.

The Appeal of Emily—A Woman's Worth

The popularity of this play for the home audience lies in its familiarity. It is best stated by a young woman who took her grandmother to a re-staging of *Emily* performed in the Peranakan Museum by Margaret Chan on July 12, 2012. Her comments are reproduced below:

Emily's story is similar in part to many of us.

Grandma is the exact same age as Emily . . . fourteen years old in 1929.

Grandma lost her mother too when she was young.

Mom always felt bullied by her in-laws.

My mother-in-law has always enjoyed singing HER way.

I cried with Emily when she sent her son to England to study.

Growing old and suffering dementia is hard . . .

It is wonderful that Emily is now installed in the Peranakan Museum, a fitting and perfect place for her to continue to remember, teach and inspire future generations . . .

Yes, Grandma wore her nonya baju . . . the rest of us did also in a small way.¹⁵

The fact that today's young population can identify with the character of Emily makes this work iconic in Singapore. But its popularity and many stagings overseas speak for its

universality in a multicultural world. As a woman, Emily is a daughter, wife, daughter-in-law, sister-in-law, girlfriend, and mother. In each of these roles—which resonate with women everywhere—she manipulates to stay on top, trying to make meaning of her life in a man’s world. Identifying Emily with their own mothers makes both women and men more understanding of their mothers.¹⁶

The significance of this play lies in the linkage it provides for the postcolonial past “toward a history of the vanishing present.”¹⁷ This idea is explained by Max Le Blond, literary critic and the director of Emily’s first staging in Singapore in 1985:

*In its harnessing and evocation of a series of temporal motifs: history and folk belief, youth versus age; tradition versus modernisation. . . . [through] prewar, wartime and postwar Singapore. . . . The play. . . establishes, in vividly particularised detail, a whole way of life which it enacts, celebrates, critiques, and, finally, elegises.*¹⁸



Emily’s costume on display with Peranakan artifacts at the Peranakan Museum. Photo: Peranakan Museum, Singapore.

Emily has spawned its own legacy of inspiring artistic creativity in other areas. The play is studied and performed in schools and “is embedded in the Singaporean consciousness and its cultural memory.”¹⁹

The exhibition of the play at the Peranakan Museum served to refresh and preserve this cultural memory. It displayed the works of Stella Kon, as well as costumes and artifacts from the various performances of the play while reminding viewers of the contributions of this unique community, its vibrancy, and its spirit.

Reaffirming Singaporean Identity

At a forum to discuss their roles and feelings toward playing Emily, veteran actors Pearly Chua, Margaret Chan, and Ivan Heng were asked by moderator Huzir Sulaiman, a well-known dramatist of Malaysia and Singapore, how they related to the character. Did their Peranakan heritage make a difference?

Pearly Chua, the first actor to play Emily in the debut of the play in Malaysia and who has performed the role over 160 times, replied that being Peranakan helped her relate to the character. Pearly grew up in a Peranakan household and began to wear a sarong at age thirteen. All meals were eaten with sambal belachan. Pearly always travels with her sarong and feels that the jewelry is part of the nonya persona. The culture is deeply rooted in her, and she keeps it alive. Her son performs the tea ceremony at Chinese New Year for her, and they speak the language as well, switching back and forth from Baba, Hokkien, Chinese, and English.

Ivan Heng, the only man who performed this role, directed first by Krishen Jit and later by Glen Gooi, said he grew up Peranakan without knowing it. At Sunday lunches at his grandfather’s home, the men ate first and left to watch football while the women would eat later. He only learned about the women’s role when he performed Emily. This is a useful insight into understanding women as custodians of culture and their role in keeping traditions of dress, behavior, and cuisine alive.

Margaret Chan, however, did not think about being Peranakan but simply performed as one. While she found it excellent to see a living tradition on stage through the role of Emily, an exhibition on the play is even a greater tribute to living culture in her view. All three artists agreed that far from being a “museumified” artifact—“a relic in a box”—Emily, by virtue of the exhibition, showcases the Peranakan culture as being very much alive.

Malaysian audiences identify with Emily, said Pearly, and their reaction to it is, “This is so much like my own family.” The play has an impact on and resonance with audiences there who also view it as a celebration of their culture. Stella Kon herself explained the Western and Asian influences on her work that came through her family.²⁰ She deliberately writes in language that sits easily on the tongue of Singaporean and Malaysian speakers.

Conclusion

Both the play and the exhibit stand up to scrutiny when judged by the standard criteria used for visual art. Its nominal authenticity and origin are unquestioned, as author Stella Kon is a well-established playwright. The expressive content is written into the play, performed by actors who are Peranakan and whose interpretation as they develop into the role is encouraged by the playwright. Its cultural authenticity

is verified by the audience's reaction to it, who feel an immediate connection to Emily and her lifestyle, even if they are outside observers, thereby validating the authenticity of experience.

Emily of Emerald Hill holds a special place in the history and culture of Singapore for the number of stagings and accolades it has received and for showcasing the culture of one important Singapore community. Apart from its uniqueness in making Peranakan culture visible, Emily appeals to the universal values of family, tradition, and the position of women within the family. The emotion she invests in her son is recognized everywhere as a basic human one, as are the family dynamics that engage Emily's capabilities, pragmatism, and kindnesses.

Exhibiting this work through the material culture—the artifacts borrowed from Peranakan homes to create the sets as well as others from the permanent collection of the museum—and the writings of the playwright, together with a performance, must be recognized as unique. It takes an ephemeral visual art form, the play, and turns it into a material visual art form suitable for museum display. It reaffirms the pride and tradition of the Peranakan community—a community that contributed significantly to Singapore's vibrant economy, culture, and political system.

The Peranakans are an example of the type of community that prospered under colonial rule by learning English and adopting British social mores, making it easier for them to interact with their colonial rulers. This gave them the influence to work for the betterment of their community and the settlement of Singapore. The play is recommended for teachers and students to learn about the cultural life and social habits of people in this region and to understand how these societies grew with the migrations of various diaspora groups.

NOTES

1. The exhibition *Emily of Emerald Hill: Singaporean Identity on Stage* was held at the Peranakan Museum of Singapore from June 1, 2012 until April 7, 2013. The original script of the play can be found in Stella Kon, *Emily of Emerald Hill, A One-Woman Play* (Singapore: Constellation Books, 2002). It includes explanatory essays by Stella Kon and the early directors of the play, as well as a very useful glossary of Baba terms used in the script.
2. Margaret Chan in personal communication (email) to author, August 19, 2012.
3. Jackie Yoong in personal communication (email) to author, October 25, 2012.
4. Kwok Kian Woon, "Singapore," *The Encyclopedia of the Chinese Overseas*, ed. Lynn Pan (Singapore: Archipelago Press, Landmark Books, 1998), 202.
5. Song Ong Siang, quoted by Kwok, *ibid.*, 205.
6. *Ibid.*, 211.
7. These eminent Peranakans each have a space in the Peranakan Museum's gallery showcasing public life of the community.
8. See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peranakan#Singapore>, last accessed October 28, 2012.

9. As mentioned by Ivan Heng at a forum on *Emily of Emerald Hill*, at which three actors who reprised the role of Emily over the years—Pearly Chua, Margaret Chan, and Ivan Heng—presented their views. Moderated by Huzir Sulaiman, August 18, 2012. The term connotes that the people who are "too Cheena" lack the exposure and sophistication of the Peranakans.

10. Krishen Jit, "Bitter Sweet Eulogy," in Stella Kon, *Emily of Emerald Hill, A One-Woman Play* (Singapore: Constellation Books, 2002), 61–62.

11. Played by Margaret Chan, directed by Max Le Blond.

12. Stella Kon, "Fact and Fiction in the Play," 59.

13. *Ibid.*

14. Stella Kon, 21.

15. Personal communication (email) from the granddaughter of Chor-Chor Goon ("Grandma Goon"), July 14, 2012.

16. Ivan Heng, the only man to play the role of Emily, wrote as he prepared for the role in 2011, "It's really exciting and emotional to be returning to the role after ten years. And it's also very rewarding, not least because it helped me to understand and appreciate my mother so much more," personal communication (email) to the author, January 11, 2011.

17. This phrase quotes the title of the book by Gayatri Spivak, the well-known postcolonial and literary theorist.

18. Max Le Blond, "Notes," *Modern ASEAN Plays*, ed. Robert Yeo (Singapore: ASEAN Committee on Culture and Information, 1991), 170–171.

19. Jackie Yoong, "Emily of Emerald Hill: Singaporean Identity on Stage," *bemuse* 5, nos. 3 and 20, (2012): 56.

20. Stella Kon, "Cross Cultural Influences in the Work of a Singaporean Writer," *Perceiving Other Worlds*, ed. Edwin Thumboo (Singapore: Times Academic Press, 1991), 305–307.

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