

For playwright Michael Chiang, pleasing his audience means more to him than pleasing critics.



Corrie Tan

If you are planning to watch Army Daze later this week, sneak a peek behind you in the theatre.

Chances are, playwright Michael Chiang will be standing in the shadows, carefully dodging the spotlight and watching audience members split their sides laughing at their favourite jokes – in a play crafted all the way back in 1987.

The popular army comedy opens for the sixth time on the Singapore stage this Friday with director Beatrice Chia-Richmond at the helm. But does Chiang ever get tired of watching his shows?

“No!” exclaims the boyish 58-year-old, who then stoppers his enthusiasm with sheepish self-consciousness: “I shouldn’t say this.”

He has made a habit of sitting with his audiences: “There’s a sense of one-ness. We’re all in the same zone. There are people reacting to the same thing, some of them cackling and cannot stop, and you can tell that the cast is picking up on it.”

“The whole thing is very organic and very dynamic. I love that. I think that’s my favourite part.”

And it seems that it is his devoted audience, rather than reviews of his work, that have become the barometer of success for this magazine consultant and creator of runaway stage hits.

When Life! goes to visit, the bachelor stands smiling and silhouetted in the sunlit doorway of his ground-floor unit in a leafy condominium in the east.

His 10-year-old labrador retriever pads over and leans in for a back rub – quietly friendly, just like its soft-spoken owner. The term “quiet” is often used to describe the self-effacing writer.

“Don’t take my paunch,” he cautions the photographer with a tinge of embarrassment, while straightening his button-down shirt over a perfectly trim frame. A Jimmy Ong artwork hangs over his desk in his study, and carpets and fabrics provide pops of colour to his tasteful apartment.

He is, initially, barely audible over the splash and gurgle of a nearby water feature on the estate grounds – that is, before his excitement about his work takes over. Chiang comes across as someone who views his semi-charmed life on and off stage with a sort of incredulity, almost as if he is not quite convinced of his success and the series of fortunate events that led up to it.

The unabashedly populist playwright is having a bit of a mid-career revival. He is most recognised for his ability to tune in to the Singapore sense of humour with his broad archetypes and mischievous in-jokes, as well as his well-executed use of Singlish that was ground-breaking especially in the 1980s.

While his plays have enjoyed healthy restagings over the past decade, he took a break of 14 years before writing his latest work, High Class. It wrapped up its run last week.

This long hiatus may come as a surprise to the many audience members who assume he is a full-time playwright when his primary career path is, in fact, rooted in publishing magazines. Over the past two decades or so, he has launched and rebranded a stable of instantly recognisable titles, including 8 Days, FHM Singapore, i-weekly and Elle Singapore.

He used to write after hours and on weekends, and jokes that he always needs a deadline to finish his work – a bit of an occupational hazard. He has also cultivated a habit of travelling out of Singapore to write, away from the “distractions” of home. To finish High Class, he stayed with a friend in Japan for two weeks to hammer out a draft, and later holed up in a hotel in Bangkok to finish it off.

Offstage, behind the good-natured fluffiness of his scripts, there is a sharpness to the former Straits Times writer and editor who later climbed the rungs of the then-Singapore Broadcasting Corpo-



ST PHOTO: KEVIN LIM

MAN OF MASS APPEAL

ration Enterprises to become chief executive of Caldecott Publishing. His last position, before he left to set up his own consultancy in 2009, was editorial director at MediaCorp Publishing.

But after nearly two decades in the publishing rat race, he hungered for change: “I thought, I’ve been here too long. I want to step out. But I had no idea what I was going to do. So I thought, maybe I should just let go of the corporate life first and see what happens – and just let the universe decide for me.”

While he was considering his options he got a call from a contact – the Ministry of Defence was looking for someone to revamp their monthly magazine, Pioneer.

He grabbed the opportunity and brought his editorial Midas touch with him, throwing up a suggestion that raised a few eyebrows: “Put in a pin-up girl.”

“Trust me,” Chiang says to you, as if addressing the editorial team, “I used to do FHM, where one of the biggest groups of readers is NSmen. We’ll do it tastefully, they will not be dressed in skimpy clothing. But a pretty face, a bit of eye candy – trust me. They will open it.”

They did. To top it off, the magazine bagged four local and international awards last year both in design and use of social media.

For someone so closely associated with the army on stage and off, Chiang was in fact given a free pass to skip out on National Service: He was not a Singapore citizen.

He was born in Muar, Malaysia, the youngest son of a schoolteacher and a housewife. As a child, he made frequent trips to the cinema and developed a taste for movies, particularly the Hong Kong classics of the 1960s.

He came to Singapore to study at the Anglo-Chinese School when he was 11 years old, where he was placed in the care of his eldest brother Dr Chiang Hai Ding, then a university lecturer.

His five other siblings, including an adopted younger sister, were also mostly teachers. Dr Chiang, 75, retired ambassa-

dor and former MP, says fondly: “He’s the quietest among the seven siblings, something we could learn from him.”

He adds: “He’s probably the one who speaks the least but listens the most attentively, and can catch nuances in speech and shifts in condition.”

It was Dr Chiang who encouraged his younger brother to do his NS, for practical reasons: If he were to decide to get Singapore citizenship at some point, NS was the logical thing to do.

Chiang says: “All my friends thought I was insane... I wouldn’t say I was the laughing stock but it was like a standing joke: You’re the only person who doesn’t need to go and you volunteered?”

He chuckles: “It was meant to be.” Because he was not a Singapore citizen (he became one in 1992), he had to sign a three-year contract with the army. He ended up becoming an officer and training new recruits.

He describes the mummy’s boy Malcolm Png, the iconic main character of Army Daze, as an amalgamation of him and his friends: “Maybe not as blur as Malcolm, but I guess you’re a bit mollycoddled and then suddenly getting exposed to having to wash this, polish boots, clean toilets – I don’t think any of us excelled at it but we made it through.”

After graduating from the former University of Singapore with majors in English literature, Chinese studies and philosophy, Chiang did a short stint in the technical supplies department of Singapore Airlines before realising, quite quickly, that the job was not for him.

He left to join the now-defunct tabloid New Nation in 1980 as a journalist, a job he thoroughly enjoyed. He says: “I think for a lot of the characters that I write, my training came from my journalism days. Because you end up talking to people and observing them, and then you have to go back and try to describe what this person is like.”

“So I think subconsciously that’s where I developed this knack of capturing people, the way people talk.”

When New Nation folded, he moved

on to The Sunday Times where, apart from writing features, he also penned humour columns. There, he got a call to submit a half-hour script for the 1984 Singapore Arts Festival. While attending a read-through of other scripts, he thought to himself: “I can do this.”

He churned out what would become his first play, Beauty Box (1984), in one night, laughing to himself as he typed out the script about an imaginary beauty pageant where beauty queens each represented a shopping centre.

Chiang recalls: “The first time when all the actors were cast and they started reading it, all laughing away, I sat at the back, a bit embarrassed because I couldn’t believe they were reading it. It felt very strange, sitting there – and it came out exactly the way I envisioned it.”

But Beauty Box did not get good reviews. The Singapore Monitor described it as “a crass example of how the arts can go sour”. It also said, damningly: “While it had many clutching their sides, it sadly failed to draw a line between the privilege of laughing at ourselves and taking rude potshots at those below our station.”

Chiang was utterly deflated, until Beauty Box co-director Tzi Ma pointed out the audience’s reaction: “He said, ‘Michael, look at the audience.’ They were really hysterical... He said, ‘This is what matters. Don’t forget that.’”

In fact, many of his plays were not always embraced by critics – but they were crowd-pleasing favourites, such as Beauty World (1988), his collaboration with composer Dick Lee. The popular musical about a wide-eyed Malaysian girl coming to work in a shady cabaret in Singapore struck a deep chord with viewers and has since been restaged three times.

His grasp of hot-button talking points and popular culture is prominent in all of his works. Mixed Signals (1989) centred on romantic relationships when the Social Development Unit was the “in” thing. Mortal Sins (1995) was about a censor who strikes up a friendship with a stripper. As for My Lonely Tarts (1999), it followed a Malaysian who comes to Singapore to collect his inheritance.

And of course, Army Daze cashes in on

every Singaporean man’s shared experiences of the military. Chiang dashed it off in several weeks while staying with a friend in Taiwan. Written shortly after Beauty Box, he was shocked at the positive public response to his first full-length play.

Pondering this, he says: “I wanted to write funny things, and to me, the Singapore language was so unique, so colourful, so I really wanted to play with it. So I think it kind of made it fun for a non-typical theatregoer.”

It was his 1992 play about transsexuals in Singapore, Private Parts, that took him on a more serious turn – and was his first work to receive praise from reviewers.

Theatre director Ong Keng Sen, 49, who directed Private Parts, Beauty World and the film version of Army Daze (1996), first met Chiang as a newbie doing box-office duties for Army Daze in 1987. He says: “In a strange way, because Michael is so light-hearted, he’s able to talk about really serious things like the security issues of Army Daze, and alternative sexuality prejudices in Singapore. His work gave us hope that Singapore theatre could reach huge audiences in the future.”

Yet the thought of becoming a full-time playwright never crossed Chiang’s mind.

“The money was so sad!” he laughs, “I think for Army Daze it was \$200 for that script, that first production. I think Beauty World was \$500. Cannot lah! I couldn’t be churning out a script every year for \$500. How to survive?”

His largest cheque to date was the royalties from the second run of Private Parts in 1994; with it, he bought a second-hand car for \$40,000. Conversely, for the movie edition of Army Daze, he was paid upfront for his screenplay and did not get a cut from the film’s takings.

While cautioning that this is only a rough (and possibly inaccurate) estimate, he calculates that he has made about \$120,000 from the Army Daze franchise – from the 1985 book till last year’s 25th anniversary of the play. That works out to \$4,800 a year.

But times are a-changing, theatre has become more of a viable vocation, and Chiang hints that he might write plays more often now that the stresses of his publishing career have eased up.

He confides: “I’ve had a lot of fun writing and I’ve had a lot of fun getting involved in High Class – so I guess it’s not so intimidating now, having sort of gone back into it.”

One can almost guess at the type of plays the future holds.

“I’ve told someone that I love blockbuster movies. I love things that are escapist and fun,” Chiang says with a grin. “And my friends will go, ‘Eeee, how can you like that movie?’”

He interjects: “But I had a good time, what!”

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My life so far

Michael Chiang, who was not a Singaporean till 1992, served National Service and trained recruits as an officer.



“I don’t really enjoy it if I have to think about it too much. So I think I’m a bit more ‘mass’ lah.”

Playwright Michael Chiang on being accessible to his audience

“For me, it’s about hearing what doesn’t work. Sometimes you’re listening to it and you go, hmmm, she sounds strange saying that, or that scene is taking too long or it’s redundant. I have to hear it. So a first read for me is important.”

On how he refines his plays



Four-year-old Michael Chiang (above, second from left) in kindergarten in Muar, Johor, and with pop singer Fei Xiang (above right) during his journalism days

“My best lines are those that really hit home when it’s something that people talk about, are not happy about or amused about.”

On how he connects with the audience



PHOTOS: COURTESY OF MICHAEL CHIANG

“I have stage fright even today. I don’t really enjoy standing up and talking to people. It’s not something I do naturally.”

On choosing to remain behind the scenes in theatre

“When I was writing it in Japan, I told (director) Beatrice (Chia), I wish I could show it to you. And then I put it aside, and when I came back after two weeks, I thought, my God – this is so crappy. Thank goodness I didn’t give it to her.”

On the first draft of his latest play about tai-tai wannabes, High Class

Book it

ARMY DAZE

Where: Drama Centre Theatre
When: Friday to July 28, 8pm (Tuesdays to Fridays), 3 and 8pm (Saturdays), 5pm (Sundays), no shows on Mondays
Admission: \$42 to \$79 from Sistic (call 6348-5555 or go to www.sistic.com.sg)
Info: www.facebook.com/michaelchiangs
highclassarmydale