



CULTURAL
MEDALLION
— 2013 —

IVAN HENG



Born in 1963 in Singapore, Ivan Heng is one of Singapore's most prominent theatre practitioners, and the founder and artistic director of W!LD RICE. In a pioneering career spanning nearly three decades, Ivan has directed, produced and acted in some of the country's most notable theatre productions, and has contributed significantly to the performing arts landscape in Singapore.

Ivan was the first recipient of the prestigious British American Tobacco Arts Scholarship to train at the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama where he graduated as a top student, winning the Royal Lyceum Theatre Award for his portrayal of Shakespeare's *Richard III*. He then moved to London where he worked in film, television and radio, and founded the Tripitaka Theatre Company. The company's critically acclaimed intercultural works included *The Woman in a Tree on the Hill*, which won the Scotsman Fringe First Award in Edinburgh. Ivan was awarded the Young Artist Award in 1996. In 1998, after touring extensively throughout Europe with his autobiographical one-man show

Journey West, Ivan returned to Singapore to contribute to Singapore's nascent performing arts scene.

Ivan founded W!LD RICE in 2000, with his iconic and seminal performance of *Emily of Emerald Hill*. Under his leadership, W!LD RICE has grown to become one of Singapore's most successful theatre companies, through creating distinctively Singaporean works that are entertaining, thought-provoking, and accessible to all. Ivan has directed some of the company's most acclaimed works including *Animal Farm* (2002)—which won him the Straits Times Life! Theatre Award (Best Director) and toured to New Zealand, Hong Kong and Australia; the 20th anniversary revival of *Beauty World* (2008); *The Asian Boys Trilogy* (2004, 2007, 2013) and *Cooling-Off Day* (2012). Beginning with *Cinderel-LAH!* (2003), Ivan also reinvented the British pantomime tradition into the W!LD RICE blockbuster holiday musical in Singapore. Apart from defining and honing his own practice, Ivan has been unstintingly generous and visionary in grooming a new generation of Singapore theatre

practitioners and audiences through initiating developmental platforms like Young and W!LD, Chilli Padi and First Stage. He founded the Singapore Theatre Festival in 2006, with a mission to develop, present and promote new Singapore writing. With a bold, inspired and challenging programming that brings together local theatre companies and practitioners, it is widely recognised as a highlight of the Singapore arts calendar, and has to date presented 22 world premieres and 5 revivals of Singapore plays.

Ivan also took the helm as Creative Director of both Singapore's National Day Parade in 2009, and the Opening and Closing Ceremonies of the inaugural Youth Olympic Games (2010). As a respected and well-loved member of the arts community, he inspires many through sharing his experience and views about the role of theatre in society through talks and symposia, even as he continues to pursue excellence in his craft.



IVAN HENG A MAN FOR ALL SEASONS

By Gerald Chew

"In order to understand our world, to effect change, to respond to issues with compassion and integrity; our society must be able to see beyond the limitations and inevitable biases of our own perspectives. We need to imagine other possibilities.

We need a larger vision. We need Art, because the vision to see other possibilities is the gift art gives to society. And live performance gives art a connecting energy parallel to none. We enter a performance as strangers, but as witnesses in a shared experience, we leave as a community."

— Ivan Heng (2013)

Ivan Heng has been called "the quintessential thespian"¹. It is no understatement. He is universally acclaimed for being an actor, a director and Artistic Director of W!LD RICE, arguably Singapore's best-known theatre company.

He is an accomplished actor, an inspiring director and a visionary artistic director who has helmed productions in more than twenty cities across Asia, Europe, Australia and New Zealand.

When he performs his cherished characters and plays the roles he inhabits, they are almost embodiments of the persons portrayed,

life breathed into every pore, often skillfully parlayed through an immaculately designed exoskeleton of costume, make-up and repertoire of adroitly selected physical mannerisms. All the elements as an actor are routinely, and lovingly, executed with stylistic panache. He often manages to physically and figuratively connect with his audience in inventive and potent ways, as in his portrayal of the iconic Emily Gan in *Emily of Emerald Hill* (W!LD RICE, 1999–2011) where he moved outside the world of the play and into the spatial reality of theatre, improvising *in situ* with the audience, creating a spontaneity and immediacy in the performance.

Whether he is acting or directing a contemporary play like *The Campaign To Confer The Public Service Star on JBJ* (W!LD RICE, 2006, 2007); or classics like *The Importance of Being Earnest* (W!LD RICE, 2012), Heng strives to break down barriers, between actors and audience, between the world of the play and contemporary life and times, between language and action, between the stylistics of art and the mass appeal of popular entertainment.

Theatre is about the essential connection between actor and audience. For Heng, "The essential bargain of theatre is that one group of human beings comes together with another...to enrich the experience of being human".²

This is a recurring theme of Ivan's work. For him theatre is a snapshot of life that is framed so that the audience can "observe what they see, and understand what they know".³ His company, W!LD RICE, consistently produces work that balances entertainment with social commentary. Playwright Huzir Sulaiman commented that, "not everyone can find that balance. Usually a company or artist goes one way or the other. Heng, more than anyone I know, understands that a spoonful of sugar makes the medicine go down more amicably".⁴

The actor is central to his theatre work, giving voice and agency to ideas and aesthetics within any play. Heng says, "My work as a director is about choreography, about bodies in space, about creating a space where the actor is king! One of the common questions I get asked is: how come so many lawyers become



Emily of Emerald Hill (2011)
Photo Credit: W!LD RICE Ltd

1 Seet, K.K., "Ivan Heng, The Quintessential Thespian"

2 Interview with Ivan Heng, 2 October 2013

3 *ibid*

4 Interview with Huzir Sulaiman, October 2013



Cooling-Off Day (2012)
Photo Credit: WILD RICE Ltd

actors; and so many actors are lawyers by training? Most recently I have realised the answer to that question. Actors to me are advocates.”⁵ His conviction is that through the medium of theatre and the use of the ‘imagination’, actors can wear the shoe on the other foot, enter into the world of ‘the other’, who often are the conflicted, the misunderstood, the marginalised; and give these worlds a voice, posit a point of view, offer a means by which conflict can be resolved, questions asked, empathy sought and given, action taken.

Heng believes that “theatre is a safe space to ask questions, invite a diverse range of opinions, where we can all learn about conflict resolution, where we can learn how to live with each other in this society. The shared experience of theatre is a forum: celebrating our diversity, reflecting on the possibilities and problems of our times.” He believes in presenting shows that “inspire, challenge and entertain.”⁶

This *raison d’etre* drives the disciplined, detailed preparatory work he does in building a character as an actor in an effort to manifest the best possible connection between the ideas, issues, aesthetics inherent in a performance, and the audience. His attention to detail is legendary, studying aspects like a character’s circumstance and environment, habits, tastes, sensibilities including shapes, colours and textures of the clothes he/she wears and the food he/she prepares or eats. He is known to enable his characters with a ‘voice’ that is clearly communicated—with strong diction and vocal versatility.

In the early years of his acting career, he dabbled in musical theatre as Frankie in the iconic *Beauty World* (TheatreWorks, 1988); but was perhaps best known for playing Song Li Ling in the Singapore Arts Festival production of the international sensation *M. Butterfly* (TheatreWorks, 1990) written by David Henry Hwang and directed by Malaysian theatre doyen, Krishen Jit. In these roles were a glimpse of Heng’s ability to shift characters and modes in one performance while maintaining concentration and command of space and character. After winning all the acting prizes possible at the Royal Scottish Academy of Dramatic



Weight of Silk on Skin (2011)
Photo Credit: WILD RICE Ltd

Arts where he trained for three years on the inaugural British American Tobacco Arts Scholarship, he spent eight years in London as artistic director of Tripitaka Theatre Company. TIME OUT London proclaimed him as ‘part of the future of theatre’.⁷

Returning to Singapore to helm the Singapore Repertory Theatre (SRT) as artistic director for a brief spell, he continued to work as an actor. Notable performances at this stage of his career included *Kiss of the Spiderwoman* (SRT, 1998); part of the original ensemble in the *Descendants Of The Eunuch Admiral* (TheatreWorks, 1995). His breakthrough performance as Emily Gan directed by Krishen Jit saw him turning the traditional cross-dressing *bibik* role on its head, injecting depth and weight into an otherwise genre-convention role-type in Peranakan Theatre.

As an actor, he is both inspiring and challenging for a director, and other actors. When directing him in *M. Butterfly*, Krishen Jit remarked during that production that Heng is the quintessential leading man. His drive, talent and dedication to building the definitive performance of each role could inspire and rally the whole cast and creative team around his process, taking a production to new heights. For a playwright, the actor that is Ivan Heng is also a worthy and inventive collaborator. In *The Weight of Silk On Skin*, (Checkpoint Theatre, and WILD RICE MAN THEATRE FESTIVAL 2011), playwright Huzir Sulaiman shares that “he brings a sense of dedication and commitment to the craft of building a character, even when it is written for him...I felt that I could push my text further, tinkering with it and even cutting lines the day before opening performance, with the confidence that Ivan would make it work beyond what I could dream of.”⁸

In his formative years at Anglo-Chinese School (ACS) and Temasek Junior College (TJC), Heng actively participated in drama productions, singing competitions and even conducted the Temasek Junior College choir. Heng graduated from National University of Singapore (NUS) with a law degree but never

⁵ Interview with Ivan Heng, 2 October 2013

⁶ *ibid*

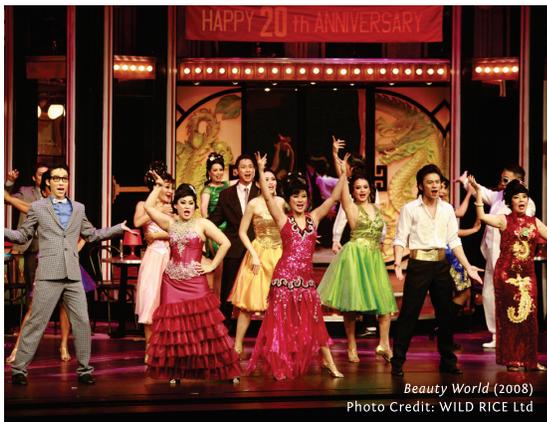
⁷ TIME OUT London,

⁸ Interview with Huzir Sulaiman, October 2013

practiced. He started working as an actor immediately, with Singapore Theatre American Repertory Showcase (S*TARS). He also directed productions. He attended Kuo Pao Kun's directing workshop, designing sets as a founding member of The Necessary Stage, and started building creative partnerships with other artists such as William Teo, Ong Keng Sen and his mentor Michael Dobin. His first foray as a professional director was *Mixed Signals* (TheatreWorks, 1989), completing his participation in a trilogy of popular Michael Chiang plays, the first two being *Army Daze* (TheatreWorks, 1987) and *Beauty World* (TheatreWorks, 1988). He made his directorial debut in the United Kingdom at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival with Ovidia Yu's *The Woman in a Tree on the Hill*, which won the Scotsman Edinburgh Fringe First and the Scottish Daily Express New Names of 1993 Award—Singapore's first and only prize at the international festival.

"Heng's forte as a director surpasses his strength as an actor. He is groundbreaking in the conceptualising and actualising of a few firsts in Singapore Theatre. He conceived and directed *Ah Kong's Birthday Party* (SRT, 2000) which gave 'dinner theatre' a new banquet spin. The production merged site-specificity with immersive theatre where the diners and actors interacted and 'collaborated' in an evening long performance. Heng was also responsible for several bold directorial moves—his reinvention of Ovidia Yu's *The Woman On A Tree On The Hill* (Tripitaka Theatre Company, 2001), combined feminist and postmodern sensibilities into a watchable collage of local and global idioms. In Alfian Sa'at's *Landmarks: Asian Boys Volume 2* (W!LD RICE, 2004), Heng's astute direction displayed masterful command over the anthology play form where he weaved the vignettes into a tapestry of dramatic tension and humour—all the time threading through the episodes with an almost dystopic yet familiar vision".⁹

Heng's artistry is ultimately channeled at the engagement and involvement of the audience. "Our (W!LD RICE) productions tell



powerful stories that enable an audience to see themselves, and also to put themselves into another's shoes. They are entertaining, and we always employ humour, which is at once fun and disarming. We see this as a way to open hearts and minds, to break down barriers."¹⁰

The 700,000 people have seen their shows in W!LD RICE's first ten years come for the entertaining, accessible but no less intelligent, well-crafted, meaningful works. The works can also be edgy and controversial and recently have taken on various political dogmas and policies of the incumbent political party. Resident playwright Alfian Sa'at's works like *Asian Boys Vol 2 & 3* (W!LD RICE, 2004, 2007) present alternative lifestyle issues, whilst *Cooling Off Day* (W!LD RICE, 2011), and *Cook A Pot of Curry* (W!LD RICE, 2013) played to sold-out capacity crowds on the heels of the 2011 Singapore Election Campaign and the hotly debated 'Local vs Foreigners' topic. Social and political commentaries are woven into their annual localized end of year family pantomimes (based on popular stories like *Sleeping Beauty* and *Cinderella*). A string of potent 'political' plays include Eleanor Wong's *The Campaign to Confer the Public Service Star on JBJ*, George Orwell's *Animal Farm*, *The Eleanor Wong Trilogy* and Kuo Pao Kun's *Double Bill*. W!LD RICE productions have earned both praise and more than a fair share of ire from more conservative quarters.

Heng remarked that his thinking about the Singapore pledge, particularly when it refers to "building a democratic society, based on justice and equality" has been deep at the heart of his recent efforts.

Heng's appointments as creative director for the 2009 National Day Parade (NDP) and Opening and Closing ceremonies of the Youth Olympic Games (2010) demonstrate this. Reflecting and affirming the Singapore story and point of view, these grand ceremonies pushed the envelope and signaled a paradigm shift—redefining the relationship between spectator and the event

9 Interview with Dr Robin Loon, September 2013

10 Interview with Ivan Heng, 2 October 2013

through set design, multi-media and performance creating a dignified, humorous, complex and inclusive NDP. His Olympic ceremonies celebrated Friendship, Respect and Excellence, core values of the Olympic spirit that showcased Singapore's origins, diversity, warmth, generosity as host nation to the rest of the world.

Playwright and Artistic Director of The Finger Players, Chong Tze Chien remarked that it is hard to think of mainstream Singapore theatre without W!LD RICE or Ivan Heng. "Heng is the face of the popular and mainstream Singapore Theatre" positioning him and W!LD RICE at the centre of the theatre ecosystem.¹¹

Heng, together with W!LD RICE, has championed the cause for professionalising the creative industry, supporting playwrights and collaborators in long term relationships; provide work and professional opportunities for actors, designers and technical theatre specialists. They curate festivals and foster programmes to groom the next generation of artists. As always, Heng is always at the forefront of reaching out to an audience, charming and dazzling them with excellently told stories so that more and more of them will come back to the theatre, to witness and enjoy the experience that art and culture provides.



11 Interview with Chong Tze Chien, October 2013

ABOUT THE WRITER

Gerald Chew is a director, actor, writer and educator who has worked in theatre, film and television for the past two decades.

WORDS OF APPRECIATION

“ It takes a village to make theatre, the most collaborative of all art forms, and I am deeply indebted to so many people, with whom I share this award.

My parents, Mr Joe Heng Boon Chuan and Mdm Nancy Ong, who gave me a loving home, values to live life by, the gift of music and all they never had.

My mentors Krishen Jit, Kuo Pao Kun and Michael Dobbin, who have shaped the way I think about the essential role that theatre plays in every society. My teachers at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland.

Glen Goei, for the amazing adventures, and always inspiring and challenging me.

Dr K K Seet, for nominating me; watching, writing and sharing your thoughts about almost every production I was ever involved in.

The playwrights, directors, actors, designers and artists, whom I have had the privilege to know and work with in the struggle to understand and present the possibilities and problems of our times. The production, stage and technical crew who help us convey our work to an audience.

My tireless colleagues and members of the Board of W!LD RICE, past and present, for enabling, championing and defending the work.

The sponsors, supporters, foundations, agencies and Angels who make our work possible through their generosity and vision. The audiences, for coming to share in the experience.

Tony Trickett, my partner in life and work, for taking this journey with me, for being my strength and stay through all these years.

I am very grateful and proud to be part of the Singapore theatre community, and I humbly accept this great honour on everyone's behalf. ”

Ivan Heng