

April 5, 2007

Analysing Annabel

Singaporean Grace Quek, aka Annabel Chong, set an infamous sexual world record in 1995. A play opening at the Esplanade today is the latest exploration of her psyche by the arts community

By Hong Xinyi, Arts Reporter



ON A hot afternoon last month, the cast of Toy Factory Theatre Ensemble's latest production was holed up in a Smith Street shophouse, warming up for a day of rehearsals.

The play in question is 251, which opens today for an 11-day run at the Esplanade Theatre Studio.

The title refers to the number of times home-grown porn star Annabel Chong, whose real name is Grace Quek, had sex with 70 men within a 10-hour period in 1995, setting a world record and catapulting herself into overnight infamy.

She was then 22 and a student at the University of Southern California.

The idea of exceptional behaviour is a recurring theme in the documentation of her life.

[« Previous](#) [Next »](#)

GEARED FOR CONTROVERSY:

Rosita Ng as Chong in Action Theatre's 1999 production Baby U Can Drive My Car.

Her entry in the book Singapore: The Encyclopedia, released last year to coincide with the Republic's hosting of the International Monetary Fund and World Bank meetings, states that she was 'educated at Raffles Girls' School and Hwa Chong Junior College, excelling academically in both schools'.



In one scene of 251, the cast is a frenzy of movement as they recite Singapore's other record-breaking feats: best airline, largest fountain, tallest hotel, smallest cat.

The woman herself is absent from the rehearsal, both literally and metaphorically. The actress playing Annabel Chong, Cynthia Lee Macquarrie, hasn't arrived.

Quek, now 34 and based in the United States, declined to participate in the project.

In 2003, she declared on her website that 'Annabel is dead, and is now replaced full time by her Evil Doppelganger... who is working as a web developer and consultant'.

[« Previous](#) [Next »](#)

MAN, IT WAS HARD WORK: Benny Lim as Chong, in Brian Gothong Tan's 2005 video.

The website went on to say: 'Now she is making a pretty decent living being a horrible geek and all that, proving that there are second chapters in American life, to hell with F. Scott Fitzgerald'.

The play's director Loretta Chen, 30, did work quite closely with Quek's friend, fellow Singaporean and writer Gerrie Lim, who has reported on the American adult film industry.

Lim, 47, provided her and playwright Ng Yi-Sheng with articles written about Quek, columns she wrote for various publications and audio



[« Previous](#) [Next »](#)
SHEDDING LIGHT ON ANNABEL
THE PERSON: (From far left) 251's
director Loretta Chen, lead actress
Cynthia Lee Macquarrie and playwright
Ng Yi-Sheng. -- DESMOND FOO,
OMNI INTERNATIONAL



[« Previous](#) [Next »](#)

Related stories

[Chong's just 'another character'](#)

recordings of her voice from recorded interviews. The drama group also sent her the script and publicity materials through Lim.

Although Quek hasn't endorsed the play, she did convey, through an e-mail to Lim, that she thought the heavy make-up used on Lee Macquarrie in the 251 publicity materials was a tad garish.

Sparked by Sunday Times column

THE play came about after Chen read a 2005 column in The Sunday Times by The Straits Times' Money Editor Ignatius Low. There was some buzz about her at the time as it was the 10th anniversary of what she had done.

In his column, Low, who was her Hwa Chong classmate, mulled over whether she could be considered a national icon.

Chen said: 'I wanted to shed light on Annabel the person, not the myth. But then again, to many people, she is half-myth, half-woman. This play is inspired by her, but not based on her.'

'I was interested in how she relates to the national psyche: Is she a source of national pride or shame? Is she a porn princess or a media maverick?'

The play is structured around three main phases: Quek's childhood and adolescence in Singapore, her life abroad as a student and porn star, and her current incarnation as a yuppie.

Chen is not the first to be intrigued by Quek. In fact, the number of artworks inspired by her is enough meaty material for a cultural studies class.

In 2005, visual artist Brian Gothong Tan shot a video featuring theatre performer Benny Lim in drag as the porn star, simulating sex while yelling out the line: 'The death penalty is immoral!'

The clip was first used in a play titled Human Lefts, which was inspired by the existence of the death penalty in Singapore, and ultimately became a piece that explored issues of censorship.

Last year, Gothong Tan, 26, re-used the clip in his installation for the Singapore Biennale contemporary art exhibition.

Titled We Live In A Dangerous World, the work featured a variety of distorted local icons, including a dissected Merlion.

'I was very fascinated with Annabel Chong for a long time,' he said. 'I would like to go inside her head and see what she is thinking.'

His take on her claim to fame?

'I think most people don't like Asian women to be so strong. She had complete control over her body, her sexuality and her history.'

The first wave of Annabel Chong-inspired art actually happened in 1999, the same year the documentary *Sex: The Annabel Chong Story*, was released.

Made by American Gough Lewis, the film was nominated for a Grand Jury Prize at the Sundance Film Festival.

That year, DJ X'Ho wrote a poem about her, titled *Princess Grace (For Annabel Chong)*, marvelling that 'in a kind of chaos you thrive'.

Film-maker Tan Pin Pin also made a short film titled *Annabel And Me*, a cinematic essay on 'the idea of grand gestures', that year.

Said Tan: 'Being a person of small gestures, I took a certain vicarious interest in what she did.'

Playwright-performer Rosita Ng created a one-woman show that same year, titled *Baby U Can Drive My Car*.

Action Theatre artistic director Ekachai Uekrongtham, who produced that play, said: 'Annabel Chong represents everything Singapore is not supposed to be - radical, liberated, doing things without awareness of censorship. It's intriguing to artists because they are drawn to characters and situations that are extreme.'

In another 1999 play, *sex.violence.blood.gore*, poet-playwright Alfian Sa'at created a monologue spoken by a character named Annabel Lee and it was later performed in Sweden.

He said: 'I think in Singapore, Annabel Chong has indeed become a kind of symbol of the Singaporean id, this unconscious psychic energy that has to be constantly policed.'

When the Swedish drama group staged the play, he added, the character became less of a symbol and more sympathetic.

Icon of female sexuality?

IF YOU watch *Sex: The Annabel Chong Story*, you may be struck by how vulnerable this symbol of defiance can seem.

'To be a good girl in Singapore, you must be well-behaved, and not smoke or drink or dance or wear your skirt too short,' she said in the film. 'You must close yourself up to the world.'

She also repeatedly states that her record-breaking attempt was an attempt to subvert notions of female sexuality.

But former actress Margaret Chan, 57, a practice assistant professor of theatre and performance studies at the Singapore Management University, is not buying that argument.

She said: 'Perhaps artists who see themselves as the archetypal challengers

of cultural norms see her work as a courageous stand against convention and hypocrisy.

'But we must note that the performing Annabel Chong was fiction; she was a staged persona.'

Staging pornography does little to subvert notions of female sexuality, Chan added. She said that the men who took part in the event probably did not know her or care for her as a person, and probably did not participate to make art.

'In this sense, her work appears to concretise rather than subvert the notion of objectified female sexuality,' she said.

In the age of Paris Hilton and pole-dancing workout sessions, 251 may perhaps seem like less of a issue. That record itself was eventually broken by another porn star in 1996 (her number was 300).

So why the continuing obsession among some Singaporean artists with a woman who has obviously moved on with her life?

For playwright Ng, 251 is an attempt to examine the real person behind the symbol, a new approach that looks beneath the veneer of the icon.

He said: 'I think Annabel Chong has been used too much as a symbol. I wanted to explore her family history, and her relationships with her friends and lovers.'

'It's time for Singaporeans to know some facts about this woman.'

hxinyi@sph.com.sg

• **251 plays at the Esplanade Theatre Studio till April 15, at 8pm with 3pm weekend matinees. Tickets at \$33 from Sistic (www.sistic.com.sg, tel: 6348-5555).**

I was interested in how she relates to the national psyche: Is she a source of national pride or shame?

251's director Loretta Chen, on Grace Quek/Annabel Chong