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Michael Chiang: From Army Daze to 8 Days



Did you know that Michael Chiang almost had a Broadway moment?

BY MAYO MARTIN - SEPTEMBER 29

Did you know that Michael Chiang almost had a Broadway moment?

Over a spot of tea at tai-tai haunt Arteastiq in Mandarin Gallery, the 59-year-old playwright revealed how, at one point, there was talk of his 1992 play, *Private Parts*, possibly heading to New York — thanks to a buddy of his, '80s Chinese pop star-turned-musical theatre actor Kris Phillips, better known as Fei Xiang.

“He never even saw *Private Parts* but read the script and was quite convinced it would work on Broadway. So he embarked on this massive project: He got me to properly film the stage production and prepare a marketing kit. I’m not sure how many Broadway

producers or theatres he eventually showed it to,” recalled Chiang, who said there was definitely interest in the pre-Priscilla (Queen Of The Desert) piece about transsexuals, but in the end, it fell through.

“I don’t know lah. It wasn’t my pursuit,” he quickly added with a laugh, as if embarrassed that he brought it up in the first place.

Indeed, this juicy bit of trivia was blurted out as a relatively unimportant aside. And it probably was. After all, Singapore’s most famous and successful playwright has a lot more on his plate this year, having worked on the recent National Day Parade (with his Beauty World partner-in-crime Dick Lee) and the coming comedy flick Our Sister Mambo. He is also busy preparing a new arts magazine — which will be coming out soon — and will be dropping by the coming Singapore Writers Festival.

More importantly, he’ll be launching a book this week. Titled Play Things, it is a collection of every play he has written, from the early hits such as Army Daze and Beauty World to last year’s High Class. It’s an apt way of celebrating his 30th anniversary as a playwright — a career that began somewhat by accident.

BEAUTY BOX TO HIGH CLASS

Born in Malaysia to a family of schoolteachers, Chiang had been an entertainment journalist and editor for The Sunday Times when he was invited to submit a play for a production called Bumboat for the Singapore Arts Festival in 1984. All because someone liked the occasional humour columns he wrote for the paper.

“I was told the scripts coming in were all very angsty and they needed something light. So I went away and over the weekend, I wrote Beauty Box,” he said of his offering, a piece about beauty queens and shopping malls.

It was his very first shot at playwriting and it didn’t go down well with critics. “I was singled out as the worst thing in that whole production. They said it was full of caricatures with no substance, just cardboard,” he recounted.

Audiences, however, loved it. And the rest is ha-ha-history. The following year, Chiang penned Love & Belachan and, more significantly, he wrote a book about life in National Service, titled Army Daze. The book did so well that he was convinced by TheatreWorks to do a stage version of it in 1987 (and nine years later, a movie adaptation). His next production was a musical.

“Dick approached me. He said they’d been commissioned to do a Singapore musical. I said okay since I had fun doing Army Daze,” said Chiang, adding that all Lee had was a title — Beauty World — and an extremely catchy opening song. “We had no idea where the story would go.”

As it turned out, *Beauty World* would go places, even as far as Japan. Like *Army Daze*, it has been restaged a number of times (including a made-for-television version in 1998). It will have a massive seven-week run at Victoria Theatre next November, with Lee directing the musical.

These two productions cemented Chiang's status as top dog, but there was more to come. He revisited the Social Development Unit premise in *Love & Belachan*, mashed it up with killer litter and came up with *Mixed Signals* (1989). After being somewhat inspired by the story of stripper Rose Chan, he mixed this up with the issue of censorship and produced *Mortal Sins* (1995). In 1999, there was *My Lonely Tarts*, about a Malaysian who comes to Singapore, although unlike *Beauty World*, it wasn't set in the world of cabaret but the corporate world. As a de facto resident playwright for TheatreWorks, his plays would also reflect the theatre company's artistic evolution under Ong Keng Sen — multimedia segments and stylised, layered theatre techniques found their way into the productions.

But *My Lonely Tarts* would be his last theatre work for a long time — until last year's *High Class*. The magazine world had taken over his life.

THE MAGAZINE GURU

Audiences were drawn to Chiang's comedies and musicals (interestingly, he hasn't received a Cultural Medallion yet — let that sink in for a while), but his *Midas Touch* also extended to Singapore's reading culture. You could say that Chiang literally changed the face of Singapore magazines as he revamped and revived entertainment and lifestyle magazines from the late '80s onwards.

For instance, he started the trend of putting celebrities on the cover. For the first revamp issue of the floundering women's magazine *Go*, it was the Channel 8 trio of Xiang Yun, Zeng Hui-fen and Zheng Wanling. That issue promptly sold out. Another magazine he revamped was *Men*, which featured a young Glen Goei, then making waves in *M Butterfly* in London; and writer Philip Jeyaretnam on its covers. Most recently, he made the MINDEF magazine *Pioneer* look, well, cool.

And then, there were those TV guides. Out went the clunky titles (*Radio And TV Times* (English) and *Radio And TV Times* (Chinese)); in came *8 Days* and *I-Weekly*.

"I wanted to do something like *Time Out*, *People* magazine, all the magazines that I liked, rolled into one product and to make it cheap," said Chiang, who was seen as a guru of sorts at MediaCorp's magazine publications: At one point in his long, 19-year-stint from 1990 to 2009, he was running more than 20 magazine titles.

Although he's working on various projects these days, Chiang's name will always be synonymous with the word "entertainment". It might be a bad word for some artists, but not for Chiang.

“I’m just plugged into popular culture. (Entertainment) has always been my main thing. It’s not a bad word. Not at all,” he said.

Play Things (S\$39.95) will be out in bookstores on Oct 1. Chiang will be doing book signings on Oct 11 (3.30pm) at Books Kinokuniya and Oct 15 (7.30pm) at BooksActually. There will be a Meet The Author session at the Singapore Writers Festival on Nov 2, 7pm.

For our in-depth interview with Michael Chiang, visit For Art’s Sake! (<http://tdy.sg/artssakeblog>).

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