

Heart for the arts

Amex is celebrating its 90th year here, together with Singapore's 50th birthday, with a series of heritage-themed articles. In the 10th part of a series in which card members reflect on local heritage and the past, **AUDREY NG** talks to playwright **Michael Chiang**



Singapore Since 1925



Beneath his soft-spoken and unassuming appearance lies a literary giant.

His wit has captured the hearts and minds of many Singaporeans through some of his highly popular plays, such as *Beauty World* and *Army Daze*.

Veteran playwright Michael Chiang, 61, continues a passionate involvement in the Singapore arts and media scene and has two productions lined up this year.

Singapore can look forward to catching his new romantic comedy, *Our Sister Mambo*, in cinemas in July. He wrote the screenplay for the movie, whose cast includes Michelle Chong and Moses Lim.

Then, in November, the Victoria Theatre will host the production of one of his most popular plays, 1988's *Beauty World*. Cabaret girls singing show tunes will take the stage once again in the fifth staging of this crowd-pleaser.

He also released his book, *Play Things*, an anthology of all his plays, in October last year.

While all this is happening, he serves as the editorial director for *The A List*, a fortnightly arts guide for the National Arts Council, as well as the editorial consultant for the Defence Ministry's monthly *Pioneer* magazine.

In an interview with *SundayLife!*, he speaks about how the arts scene in Singapore has evolved over the years and his hopes for its future as part of Singapore's heritage.

Chiang, a bachelor, began writing plays in the mid-1980s when, he says, the local theatre scene was "practically non-existent". Most plays which were staged then were by foreign theatre groups or expatriates based in Singapore. The subjects and themes of most of the plays were not Asian.

There was the occasional Singapore play, but it would run for only two to three nights. This was not enough to make an impact or lasting impression.

During that time, he says, the arts were not considered important.

"Parents wanted sons to be engineers or doctors, not musicians."

He adds that the early actors in TheatreWorks, a local independent theatre company which was established in 1985, were lawyers turned actors.

The performing scene in the past also included Cantonese and Hokkien street operas or wayangs which were held frequently in public before the 1970s. "You could put on a performance at any corner," he says.

The Kreta Ayer People's Theatre, which opened in 1969, was a popular place to watch such operas, he adds.

Nowadays, he notes, there are fewer of such shows. Still, he adds, the People's Association and Esplanade are doing a good job in keeping these traditional shows alive through the cultural events they organise.

The lower demand for such shows is a reflection of how fewer people speak dialects now.

Chiang feels that Chinese dialects are very much a part of Singapore's heritage and he wishes there could be more opportunities for people to connect to their roots through dialects.



An American Express card member since 2005, playwright Michael Chiang (above) is at his childhood home in Evans Road.

PHOTO: STEVE ZHU

He is Hainanese and spoke with his grandfather in the dialect as a young boy. When his grandfather died in the mid-1970s, he did not speak it anymore.

He also used to speak Cantonese with his mother, but after she died in 2010, he stopped speaking it.

He senses that there is a desire, even among the young, to revive dialects.

He notes, for instance, that when Hong Kong artists such as G.E.M. Tang and Jacky Cheung come to perform in Singapore, the audiences – usually a mix of old and young – would ask them to speak in Cantonese.

"People would constantly be shouting, 'speak in Cantonese!'"

They would cheer when the performers switched from Mandarin and addressed them in Cantonese.

On his part, he tries to incorporate some dialect in his work. His movie, *Our Sister Mambo*, includes an Indian character who speaks fluent Cantonese. The parents in the film also speak some Cantonese.

When asked to describe how the theatre and local arts scene has changed since the 1980s, he says: "Wow."

He describes the current arts scene as "quite brilliant", especially with the emergence of many talented young writers and actors across fields such as theatre, literature and music.

He adds: "The writing these days is multi-faceted. People are questioning issues and telling personal stories. You see young directors and actors in their early 20s now."

The young people who turn up for auditions now can sing, act and dance, compared with the past when most were good at only one or two of these, he says. It helps that there are dedicated arts schools, such as the School of the Arts and Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts, and parents who are more willing to send their children for an arts education, he says.



PHOTOS: COURTESY OF MICHAEL CHIANG



"It was my little sanctuary when I was a child."

Chiang on the Botanic Gardens, a hangout for him as a child (left, about 11 years old) and as an adult (above, third from left)

He believes the flourishing arts scene is shaping a part of Singapore's heritage and that this should be nurtured for the future.

"The arts scene is very bright. I'm very optimistic. I think we'll have a great future in all fields of the arts."

He also talks about Singapore talent in all fields – people who have helped create a type of Singapore brand in their

respective fields – and considers them part of Singapore's heritage too.

Such personalities include singer Stefanie Sun, musician Jeremy Monteiro, theatre director Ong Keng Sen, film-maker Eric Khoo, architect Chan Soo Khian, Peranakan restaurateur Violet Oon and "makan guru" K.F. Seetoh.

He says: "These people excel in their

Amex gives to ST Pocket Money Fund

American Express (Amex) has an ongoing Member Since campaign, which gives to charity while marking its 90th year in Singapore.

In the campaign, card members go to the website, Amex90.sg, enter the year of their membership and receive a fun factoid about Amex or Singapore from the same year.

Non-members can also go to the website to participate in the campaign.

Both card members and non-members can then share their support on their Facebook pages. When they do, Amex will donate 50 cents to The Straits Times School Pocket Money Fund.

Amex has already pledged \$25,000 to the fund regardless of the number of social media shares. It will cap the donation at \$50,000 once there are enough shares to reach this amount.

Facebook users can also go directly to Amex's page, from which they can support the campaign via Facebook or Twitter.

respective areas and help put Singapore on the arts and culture radar.

"To me, the Singapore brand is about content that is able to appeal and resonate beyond our shores."

He hopes that, in time, this brand will be recognised more, both at home and internationally.

Apart from the traditional arts, he also sees and appreciates the art in the landscaped greenery of Singapore parks and architecture of traditional shophouses. He hopes Singaporeans will also recognise and treasure these as part of their heritage.

Turning to his childhood – he was the youngest of eight children – he remembers he came to Singapore from Muar, Malaysia, in 1966 at age 11 to study at Anglo-Chinese School. He lived in an apartment in Evans Road with his oldest brother, who was a lecturer at the then University of Singapore.

After about two years, they moved to a bungalow in Dalvey Estate nearby.

He spent many evenings in the nearby Botanic Gardens, taking his one-year-old nephew – his brother's son – in a stroller around the gardens. "It was my little sanctuary when I was a child," he says.

When he went to university, he stayed at the old Raffles Hall near the gardens and used to have picnics with his friends there.

It was during this time that he developed a love of trees and grew to appreciate the many green spaces around Singapore. He considers Gardens by the Bay to be very special as it allows visitors to see all types of rare, beautiful plants.

A way parks can be made more accessible for everyone to appreciate, he feels, is by building more walkways through them.

He also remembers there used to be grand fountains at several roundabouts around Singapore. One was at the former National Theatre, another in Queenstown and – the best, in his opinion – at the junction outside Tanglin Mall. "They were lit up at night and were beautiful," he says.

When he was older, he moved to a two-storey conservation shophouse in Koon Seng Road in Joo Chiat and stayed there from 1997 to 2011. He recalls that tourists would photograph the facade of the shophouse, which featured unique tiles and decor.

Living there made him appreciate the fact that Singapore could retain some of its charm through traditional buildings and he is thankful for the efforts made in recent years to preserve such old buildings.

"It is still possible to find parts of old Singapore," he says, referring to other areas such as Emerald Hill, Blair Road and Chinatown. And he hopes this does not change.

"I hope Singaporeans will be able to cherish what they now have. It's not just about preserving heritage buildings and vanishing foods, but also being able to appreciate the Singaporean books, music, films, plays, art, architecture and talents.

"They will all be part of tomorrow's legacy."