

Play with words.

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Director Glen Goei sees Noel Coward's *Blithe Spirit* as more than a good comedy. PARVATHI NAYAR finds out what makes the text-rich farce interesting

GGLEN Goei is best known for his Singaporean hit film *Forever Fever* - and for landing that three-picture deal with Miramax on the strength of its success. But Goei's first love was theatre. After a five-year gap - *The Magic Fundoshi* in 1996 - he's now returned to directing on the local stage with Noel Coward's *Blithe Spirit*.

Touring for a year-and-a-half to promote *Fever* and working on film scripts kept Goei busy but 'I missed working with actors, the energy and electricity of a stage performance'. Unashamedly a text-based director, Goei picked *Spirit* because 'I liked the premise, the play's structure and the dialogue. It's not just a good comedy, it's a good play'. Coward's play centres on a novelist Charles; as research material for his latest novel he decides to hold a seance and conjures up the spirit of his first wife Elvira. Needless to say, Elvira can only be seen and heard by Charles, which doesn't please his second wife Ruth. Contrary to popular belief, comedy is very difficult to pull off, says Goei, and the text-rich farce demanded experienced actors. Rather than look abroad, he pulled together tried-and-tested Singaporean talent he's worked with before: Margaret Chan, Lim Kay Siu, Neo Swee Lin, Tan Kheng Hua, Selena Tan, Bill Ang and Pam Oei. Goei believes in the depth of local stage talent. In the past, as the first artistic director of London-based theatre company *Mulan*, Goei showcased local talent abroad, working with Singaporean scripts - Henry Ong's *Madame Mao's Memories*, Chay Yew's *Porcelain* - and actors like Adrian Pang. *Spirit's* timing is oddly serendipitous for the play premiered in London in 1941 and played through the darkest days of World War II. Goei suggests the Coward play is right for the times in other ways too. '*Spirit* is a classic - and classics inform new writing', which he feels is the weakest link in local theatre.

After all, a good, well-structured script is what draws an audience whether it's film, TV or theatre. 'As children we liked fairy tales because of its beginning-middle-end structure; it's the most natural way to tell stories. It's important for local theatre to push the boundaries but not lose sight of where theatre started - as a way to tell stories. Theatre has come of age in Singapore, but there are local theatre-going audiences who're not being served - those who want to see a good story.'

And those who want to enjoy words. 'I love the English language; like many Singaporeans I studied in an English education system in a post-colonial society - and we shouldn't disinherit this history. I think text is important; text is words, conversation, integral to our day-to-day living, to every facet of society. Talking - is what we do!' Unsurprisingly, one of *Spirit's* strength is the sparkling dialogue.

The play is being produced by Wild Rice, the company founded by Ivan Heng. At \$200,000, *Spirit* is Wild Rice's most expensive production to date - and a departure from its hitherto familiar repertoire of local plays and monologues. Goei explains it's part of Wild Rice's larger vision to reclaim classics and make them relevant to local, contemporary audiences. For while staying faithful to the intent of Coward's play, Goei has updated it by setting the play in Singapore, which will offer entertaining moments of 'discovery' for a local audience.

After Spirit, Goei will return to the fifth draft of his script for Miramax, which deals with food, comedy and Manhattan. 'I'm a writer by default - I got into scripting Fever only because I couldn't find a local film script, and now I'm in deeper!' Goei plans to divide his time between London and Singapore. His parents are growing older, Goei himself turns 40 next year, and returning to Singaporean roots seems like a rather pleasant way to handle the not-mid-life-crisis. 'I'm an optimist, I'm looking forward to 40, it'll only get better,' he smiles.

Blithe Spirit at Jubilee Hall, Raffles Hotel; evening shows 8pm, weekend matinees 3pm; no shows on Mondays; Tickets \$25-\$52 from all TicketCharge outlets, hotline 296 2929
Proceeds from tonight's gala performance goes to UNIFEM Singapore (a non-profit organisation that helps women and children in developing countries); Donation tickets from a minimum of \$75; Queries: Wild Rice/Adriana at 339-0121 or UNIFEM/Shawn at 238-6761.