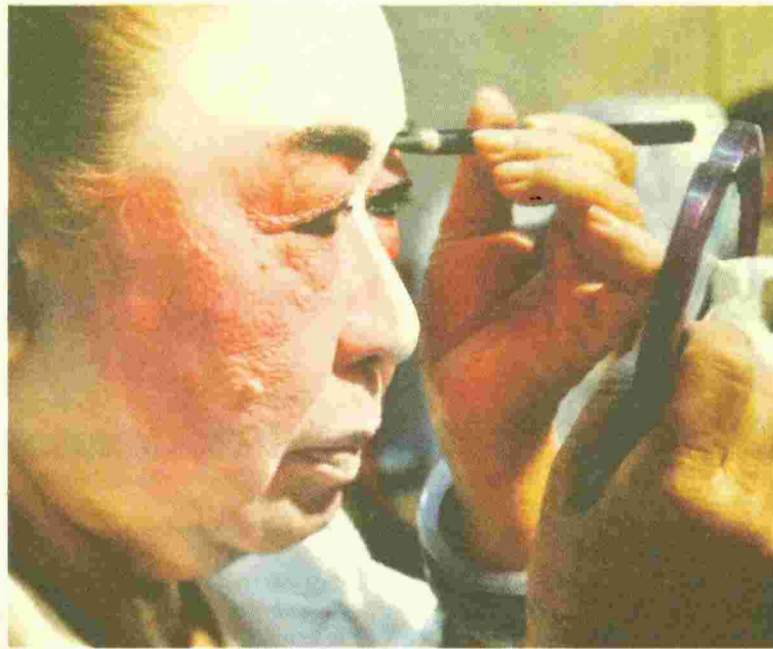


LIFE&TIMES **FAMILY**

Doyenne of Cantonese opera

Elizabeth Choy Yim Heong, regarded as the last senior grand dame of Cantonese opera, tells **Aneeta Sundararaj** about her journey



Preparing for a star turn on stage.

A MAN was strolling in a park when he spotted a child walking aimlessly. When he got closer, he realised she must be under 5 years old.

Yet, the child was able to tell him her parents' names. Many a parent reading this today may shudder at what could happen next and pray that the child remains safe.

"But nothing happened to me," says Elizabeth Choy Yim Heong. "When I was 3, I was lost in the park. I still remember telling a stranger my parents' names. He recognised the names and took me home."

Shaking her head, she adds: "Now, it's not so safe anymore."

The doyenne of Cantonese opera, who turns 80 this week, narrates her story while cleaning the altar in preparation for Chinese New Year.

"I was born in Seremban in 1933 and was later adopted by my (new) mother. My mother's life was hard, you know. She was an orphan. When she left China, she went to Singapore and worked in Katong, peeling onions and prawns to make curry. Even though she was very young, she could sing well."

Unable to remember the exact date when her mother moved to Malaya, Yim Heong says it must have been in the early 20th Century. Smiling, she adds: "Her pet name was Kwai Leng Seng Mo (which roughly translates to Goddess of Good Heart). She used to adopt any child who was unfortunate." This explains why Yim Heong has so many siblings.

As she removes dried flowers from a vase, Yim Heong says that when her mother married a man who was involved in Chinese opera, they set up their own troupe. "They also bought a coffee shop in Ampang and named it Nam Fatt."

Her voice then changes. "When the war started we had to evacuate. We fled to Bentong where we stayed for nearly four years."

The family wasn't idle during the Japanese Occupation. "We used to put on shows in Bentong. One show could last 20 days and we made

money." But her father was a gambler and they lost most of the money they made. Luckily, her mother was thrifty and had some savings. All this effort almost came to naught once the war ended. During the Japanese Occupation, the market was flooded with currency commonly referred to as Banana Money. After the Japanese left, this money became worthless.

Luckily, her mother was involved in a barter trade of sorts. During the Occupation, when people needed money, she traded currency for jewellery such as jade, diamonds and pearls. With these to fall back on, the family returned to Ampang.

Yim Heong was sent to an English-medium school but having communicated in nothing but Cantonese all her life, she was overwhelmed by the English language. After three months, she quit and dedicated her life to her art.

Yim Heong dips a towel into a bowl of water with a pomelo leaf floating in it. "We use this leaf to get rid of negative elements," she says, wiping the table where she will place the items from her altar temporarily.

She continues: "I wasn't always in theatre. I also had to do other things. One of my jobs was to serve customers in my father's underground casino, with a piece of wet cloth."

"I always wanted to be *fa-tan*, the lead singer. I was already 16 and 1.57m tall. My mother kept telling me something was not right. Every night, after my performance, I removed my make-up and went to see my rivals perform. I learnt a lot from watching them. Soon, more people were coming to our shows."



Choy looking resplendent.

Taking a break from her chore, she adds: "I also knew that my mother wanted me to take over the company. The most successful person and monarch at the time was Queen Elizabeth. So I decided to use her name. That's why I'm now Master Elizabeth Choy."

One of her favourite roles is Koon Choon Foong, a doctor who is blinded while working with gun powder. She falls in love but the man refuses to marry her because she's blind. Rejected, she continues with life. When the army invades town, she crosses paths with an army officer who takes pity on her. He gives her a box of gold and tells her to escape. She uses the gold to seek treatment and regains her sight. She meets the army officer again and they decide to marry. At the wedding, she hears a voice and recognises it as that of her first love. She is horrified to learn that her first love is actually her husband's brother.

"I love all this melodrama," says Yim Heong with a grin. "Still, I was



Grand dame of Cantonese opera.



Choy loves the melodrama.

more popular in other roles. Those characters were quirky or naughty."

With due reverence, she picks up one of the idols. "This is Cheong Hin Sin See, the God of Drama," says Yim Heong who also prays to Wa Kong Si

Fu (God of Music) and Thing Tau Yi Si (God of Action)."

Once all the items are removed from the altar, her task for the day is over. "Now, this area is clean, I will only make the next offering on the eve of Chinese New Year."

On her wishes for the Year Of The Snake, she replies: "I hope I can continue performing. It's not easy to make a living."

With a faraway look, she adds: "I've been teaching and there are people who want to learn. But it's a dying art."

Contact Yim Yong Tin (012-299 5797) to book Madam Choy Yim Heong for performances.