

# starmag

## Spring rendezvous

*I Have a Date With Spring*, a musical that harks back to the 1960s, offers exquisite costumes that blend everything from Hispanic ruffles and Oriental cuts to nightclub-inspired glamour.

▶SMIO

# Completing the picture

When costume design succeeds, what actors wear doesn't just make for pretty images. It helps create the magic that draws an audience into the fantasy being played out on stage.

By ELAINE DONG

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ARRIVE early, before the set interview time. The location: Old China Cafe, Jalan Balai Polis, near Kuala Lumpur's Petaling Street.

I weave my way around busy camera crew logging equipment and ask for Khor Seng Chew, Dama Orchestra's music director. I am gruffly pointed up the stairs leading to the restaurant's upper floor. There, I find the chairs still atop the tables, which have all been shifted to one corner, creating an empty space near the windows where the most light gets in. The entire floor is badly lit, creating the effect of being backstage at a Chinese opera theatre (although I don't think this is intentional, it is just that the cafe is that old).

Today, they are shooting the costumes for Dama's latest theatrical extravaganza, *I Have a Date With Spring*. The show is an adaptation of the critically acclaimed Hong Kong play of the same name by Raymond To Kwok Wai, which was later adapted for the big screen in 1994.

For many of the cast, this is the first time they are suiting up, after months of rehearsals. There is a flurry of excitement in the air, and cast members finger dresses furtively, setting eyes for the first time on the costumes that will make their hard work fully blossom on stage.

Frenchwoman Dominique Devorsine, 42, is the matriarch behind the colourful, sequined and feathered outfits that are currently hung wherever there is space – on the back of upturned chairs, on a hat rack, on the knobs of vintage cabinets. Paper bags full of accessories are in one corner contain-

Dominique Devorsine drew on her Western background and decades-long Asian experience to design the show's culture-blending costumes.

ing plumed headdresses, glittery hairbands and even removable sleeves in shiny gold material. "Those are Lulu's sleeves," proclaims a smiling, waifish girl, who turns out to be Janet Lee, who is playing Lulu. Lee, 32, plays one of the five leading ladies, the other four being Tan Soo Suan, Chris Tong, Chang Fang Chi and Nell Ng. "She likes gold," the classically trained singer says of her character, and shows me the costume that goes with the sleeves. It is of the same material as the sleeves, a dress that is part cheongsam, part flamenco costume.

"This is the late 1960s," says Lee, indicating the period in which the character appears wearing the stunning ensemble. "I love that it has a Hispanic touch with an Oriental fringe."

That seeds to be the recurring feel of this production: a melting pot of different cultures and the coming together of diverse talent. The cast is an interesting mix of professional actors, musicians, singers, first-time actors and part-time actors.

Some come from English theatre, some from television, some from modeling backgrounds. Each brings



For the 1960s portion of the musical, the very diva-like Butterfly Yiu and her backup singers are dressed in appropriately in very diva-ish costumes. – Photos courtesy of Dama Orchestra



They're still talking about Devorsine's costumes for *Five Letters* from an Eastern Empire (above) and Dama's previous production, *The Butterfly Lovers*. – Flo photos

with him or her a different culture from different production houses.

Devorsine herself has been working in Asia for 20 years – specifically, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Thailand – as well as in Mauritius before settling down permanently in Malaysia in 1991.

The Frenchwoman certainly has an impressive resume, having worked with the British Women's Association (a non-profit organisation of expatriate women, abwm.com) and the Actors

Studio, among many other theatrical companies.

In 2004, Devorsine won the first of many Cameronian Arts Awards for her still talked about costume design for *Sumanda's Five Letters* from an Eastern Empire. At this year's Cameronian Awards, she won the best designer title for theatre for her work on *Antimal Farm*, staged by Pentaprospect Theatre Production.

And though she speaks with an unmistakable French accent, she peppers her sentences with the "lahs" and "trehs" she had quickly acquired once she settled here.

She tells me about going to a Chinese tailoring school in Petaling Street called King's House of Fashion in the 1980s during one her visits here.

"I learnt to sew from my mother, but when I really started to get into it (costume design), I wanted to learn the technical aspects of sewing," she says.

So, with her French sensibilities and Asian exposure, she was the right fit when Khor and director Pun Kai Loon were looking for a costume designer in 2006 for one of Dama's most successful productions, *Butterfly Lovers*.



Butterfly's fabulous friends in their beautiful costumes: (from left) Janet Lee as Lulu, Neil Ng as Yuen Pik, Chang Fong Chyi as Nancy, and Chris Tong as Feng Ping.



As a costume designer, Devosine believes it's about a whole look, not just the clothes. - ELAINE DONG / The Star

When *Date With Spring* came along, Khor and Pun naturally thought of Devosine again.

"It's about fusing Western and Oriental," says Pun of the choice to go with Devosine, "as with our music, we harmonise Chinese and Western sounds," the veteran thespian says.

"It is very consistent with Dama Orchestra," adds Dama founder Khor. "We are a Chinese group but we have best practices borrowed from Western theatre."

Pun goes on to explain the important part costume design plays in this production: "The show is set in the 60s through to the 80s. From the 30s to the 60s, it was the end of the *shidai* (popular Mandarin songs) period. From the 60s to the 80s, it was the *lo ge* (golden oldies) era, although at the time, they were known as pop songs. From the 1980s, it was the start of Cantopop as we know it today.

"So the songs drive the story, and the costumes, through the different fashions during that time frame, reflect the shifting of time, completing the picture."

As Khor and Pun get busy with the cast, Devosine begins putting together the different outfits for the 30-man show. She dilly dallys the hair of one actress into a high ponytail while giving instructions on accessories to another.

"Being a costume designer is not



The bright colours and shiny material are perfect for nightclub scenes. - ELAINE DONG / The Star

just about making the clothes," she says. "It's about designing a whole look."

For this show, she made some of the costumes herself and had others made by tailors who worked to strict instruction and her patterns. She also drew on her own collection of vintage outfits that she picked up from her travels over the years.

"The show is set in a night club, so the costumes are glittery and glitzy. I've tried to design them so that they are showy, but not tacky," she says.

In keeping with the show's period, there are numerous qipao and cheongsam pieces, along with twirly dance dresses, worn by the supporting cast, with the men in smart tuxedos.

Flamboyant headpieces go with these costumes, and they have all been handmade by Devosine. Her favourite piece is one worn by Chang Fong Chyi, who plays Nancy. It is a siren red piece resplendent with sequins and beads. Chang, 38, loves it too. "You saw what I looked like before right?" she said, referring to her casual jeans and shirt pre-dress rehearsal. "And this is me now!"

Assistant director Melissa Teoh, 33, loves this outfit too. "Chang in person is no-fuss, casual - and now look how feminine she is!" she exclaims. "The play takes the audience through three different time periods, and the costumes have a very strong visual impact. You can see how looks evolve, how the patterns and textures change."

Tan Soo Suan, 32, Dama Orchestra's resident soprano, plays the lead role of Butterfly. Today, she



They got all dressed up just for fun! The debonair powers behind the scenes are (from left) concert master Gan Boon We, music director Khor Seng Chew, and director Pun Kai Loon.

is in a white 1960s shift dress with beading and embroidery. Her hair is done in a teased bouffant, the style of the time.

She is thoroughly enjoying going back in time to a period of musical awakening in Hong Kong.

"Because of my musical background, it is really exciting to know what the music of the time is like. It's like I am taken back in time to that era through the music, makeup, hair and dance.

## Down memory lane with Butterfly

DAMA Orchestra chose to celebrate its 15th anniversary this year by adapting the film version of the play, *I Have a Date With Spring*.

This is a popular big screen musical that won acclaimed playwright Raymond To Kwok Wai the Best Screenplay award and Law Koon Lan the Best Supporting Actress title at the Hong Kong Film Awards in 1994.

*Date With Spring* re-creates the fictional life and memories of celebrated nightclub singer, Butterfly Liu.

In this local adaptation of the original story, Butterfly, who has been living in Australia, returns to her hometown in Kuala Lumpur for the first time in years to perform a benefit concert at a night-

club that's facing closure.

This is the club that gave her a start, the club in which she and her three dearest friends first performed, the club that is full of memories, good and bad.

As she revisits the past in her mind, the audience is taken on a journey back in time to the 1960s when four young girls first set off to follow their dreams and experience love as well as trials and tribulations as they struggled to make their way in the world.

With her return to the club for the last time, Butterfly must come to terms with the ghosts of her past and lay them to rest.

The musical will be in Cantonese with English and Chinese surtitles.

says Tan. She then proceeds to show me several cheongsams that Devosine has sewn from curtain material.

As Tan is called away to get her photo taken, I spot a familiar face: it's none other than prolific actor Neil Ng. She plays Yuen Pik, "The diva", as she calls her character. Ng, 36, is appropriately diva-esque in a form-fitting green sequined cheongsam.

"I am the veteran of the night club," says Ng of the character she plays. She flutters her lashes and gives me a theatrical glare, then relaxes into a grin.

But my role is just a cameo, you will see me fitting in and out of the scenes, being scornful of the four girls, the newbies," she laughs.

The last of the four girls that Ng is referring to is Feng Ping, played by Chris Tong. Tong, 26, calls her character "the most tragic among the five".

"She falls in love with the wrong man," she explains. "So it is very fitting that my qipao is blue too!"

The photography session is in full swing now, and cast and crew mingle in a sea of T-shirts, jeans and glittery costumes.

Some release lines while waiting and others whip out their cameras for photo opportunities. Amidst all

this, assistant director Teoh reminds everyone not to put up pictures of the costumes or the photography session on Facebook.

I catch Devosine for one last quote before I leave.

Despite her years of experience and various industry accolades, Devosine admits she still gets stage fright.

"I only feel confident once the director approves everything," she laughs. "It's the boss!"

As I make my way down the stairs, music from the show blares, probably to get the cast in character for the photography.

In my mind's eye, I see Butterfly, Lulu, Feng Ping, Nancy and Yuen Pik in their outfits, belting out show tunes under the glare of spotlights, shining the rest of us mere mortals a slice of life from the golden age of song.

"I Have a Date With Spring" will run from Oct 10 to 25 at Prntas J, Kuala Lumpur Performing Arts Centre (Jalan Selayang, Off Jalan Ipoh, Sentral Park). Tickets are priced from RM50 to RM275. For more information go to [damaorchestra.com](http://damaorchestra.com); for ticketing enquiries, call the KLPac at 03-4047 5000 or the Access Hotline at 03-7711 5000. The musical will be in Cantonese with English and Chinese surtitles.