



HISTORY ON STAGE

Days of glitzy expat theatre

We raise the curtain today on our series of exclusive excerpts from *Theatre Life!*, a book by *LIFE!* writer **CLARISSA OON** on the history of English-language theatre in Singapore. The first describes British expat theatre in the 1950s

JUST as the other language streams looked to their respective motherlands for inspiration in developing their theatre, English drama here looked to British drama and its playwrights.

It was this colonial stranglehold that the angry young men of the Experimental Theatre Club, founded in 1961, would react to.

As one of its founder-members, Robert Iau, told *Theatre Life!*: "We felt a sense of alienation from all those Gilbert & Sullivan operettas. We didn't want to be another group of short-legged Chinese men in Western period costumes."

A civil servant, Iau would later become the first executive chairman of the Singapore Arts Centre company from 1992 to 1997.

But the expatriate theatre scene in the 1950s had its own unapologetic allure, ranging from black-tie openings at the Victoria Theatre to the odd thespian jewel from Britain.

The height of this was probably visiting legend Sir John Gielgud treading the boards as Hamlet at the Old Vic in 1946, in a touring production by the Entertainment Unit of the British Armed Forces.

The Stage Club productions — as many as eight a year — were very much social occasions, according to former member and *Straits Times* theatre critic Kate James.

Senior Singapore government officials in the 1960s would turn up for opening night black-tie fund-raisers. The club survives today as an amateur theatre group with 150 members of different nationalities.

Providing more informal entertainment were servicemen's drama groups like the Changi, Seletar and Tengah theatre clubs, Rowcroft Theatre and Naval Base Drama Group.

Formed after World War II among British troops here, they did as many as six productions a year, before leaving the island with the 1971 British armed forces pull-out.

Aside from the likes of

Clive Scharenguivel, a Eurasian actor and former National Institute of Education lecturer who played, among other things, Malvolio in *The Stage Club's* 1964 production of *Twelfth Night*, very few Singaporeans were involved in productions by the British groups.

Scharenguivel and the old Stage Club members told *Theatre Life!* that Singaporeans then were not interested in taking part in English drama.

Others, however, have attributed the lack of Singaporean participation to an exclusionary colonial mentality. [Lloyd] Fernando [who scripted the first made-in-Singapore English drama, *Strangers At The Gates*, in 1958], for example, records that for Gielgud's fabled appearance at the Old Vic, Singaporeans were only allowed into the theatre as ushers.

Still, mixed-race groups like the Singapore Arts Theatre and the Sceneshifters did manage to attract Singaporean members. The Arts Theatre was started by Donald Moore in 1950 while the Sceneshifters was the drama group of the YMCA at Orchard Road.



That princely young actor, Sir John Gielgud's performance as Hamlet at the Old Vic in 1946 was a highlight of the colonial years. The Stage Club (top) moved into its home at 41 Malcolm Road in 1965.

BEACON: THE STAGE CLUB

IT STARTED in 1945 with 200 members - British troops as well as civilians. The Stage Club productions were usually held at the Victoria Theatre with audiences flocking to the old Adelphi Hotel (now the Adelphi Shopping Centre) and the Cricket Club for pre and post show dinner and drinks.

By the 1960s, the club was meeting regularly on Monday nights in the bar of the Singapore Cricket Club. In 1965, the club moved to a permanent home at 41 Malcolm Road, an old colonial

black-and-white bungalow.

The late Maureen Clark, a Eurasian and the club's longtime treasurer, was the force who held it together, especially in the 1970s after audience and membership levels plummeted. Kate James recalled; "Whenever the Land Office wanted to put the rent up, she would tell them, Lee Kuan Yew told me at a cocktail party: 'I leave the future of Singapore theatre in your hands', so if you want to do anything please consult him."