



SNAPSHOT

Elegant, graceful and strong – three words that often come to mind anytime Zhang Ziyi appears on the big screen, she of delicate beauty and fierce martial arts skills. She was glowing in this dazzling black silk bustier dress embroidered with white feathers from Chanel's fall/winter 2012/2013 haute couture collection at the 50th Golden Horse Awards in Taipei, Taiwan. Zhang won the award for best lead actress for her performance in *The Grandmaster*, the Chinese martial arts film by Wong Kar-wai based on the life story of the Wing Chun grandmaster.

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BY JACQUELINE TOYAD

Gateway
to the past

The E&O Gallery opens a 'portal' to the hotel's rich heritage that is inextricably interwoven with Penang's social history

From a charming lodging house to the social nucleus of George Town, the Eastern & Oriental Hotel is a piece of Penang's history that has witnessed colonialism, the rise of a metropolitan culture, two world wars and the birth of a nation. It has even survived abandonment and several recessions, yet there it remains today, resplendent as ever on the history-steeped Farquhar Street, the luxury heritage hotel in Malaysia. If structures could speak, imagine what the E&O would say!

E&O Bhd managing director Datuk Terry Tham Ka Hon has always emphasised the fact that owning the E&O Hotel goes well beyond just trying to run a successful business – it involves the responsibility of guarding the incredible legacy of the establishment. This ideal, of course, inspired the idea to set up a mini-museum dedicated to E&O Hotel's rich heritage – a space where people could come in and learn about the history of the hotel and how it is interwoven with Penang's history.

"It's one of those intangibles – because we're a heritage, historic hotel, if we could, we would love to have a museum, but will it contribute to your bottom line? No," says Lyn Chai, director of group corporate strategy at Eastern & Oriental Bhd and initiator of the concept. "Datuk Terry is one of very few bosses who would actually say yes. It costs us money and it might not make us money, but it enhances the whole value of this hotel. I don't think there are many corporate people who are so visionary."

The E&O Gallery is a beautiful and elegant mini-museum that was two years in the making. Ensnared in a quiet corner of the Victory Annexe, the E&O Hotel's new wing, it pays tribute to George Town's heritage as a cosmopolitan port city.

Walking through its glass doors is like entering a portal to somewhere else in time. The floor gleams with black-and-white tiles, a throwback to the favoured aesthetic of the time of E&O Hotel's founders – four Armenian brothers called the Sarkies, whose legacy also includes The Raffles Hotel in Singapore and The Strand in Yangon.

In the background, there's the tinkling of a piano. You're humming along to Eric Maschwitz and Manning Sherwin's *A Nightingale Sang in Berkeley Square*, and as you study a black-and-white picture of women in glittery gowns dancing with bow-tied men, you can almost hear the clinking of champagne glasses and the low buzz of conversation about the weather in old Malaya, like an echo from far away.

This is when you begin to really inspect the



Curator and p
manager Kulv
(left) and E&O
Bhd's Chal lec
pioneering pr

pictures and text on display. Smiling faces from a fading past seem like that of strangers at first, until you read their stories of love and celebration. You fall in love with the real-life love story of Victor and Patsy Oorjitham, who had their wedding at E&O's grand ballroom – the dress Patsy handmade and wore that day has a place of pride among the displays. There's a touching tale of the army officer's widow, who brought back the ashes of her husband to scatter on their favourite spot when they used to holiday here.

In one corner, former F&B supervisor and maître d' at the hotel, Lim JL, boasts of the time he served Britain's Princess Margaret when she came to visit in the 1970s. Just beside his anecdote is an old menu from the hotel bar indicating the

"Drink of the day" – whiskey stengah. In a glass case sits a tin ingot a member of the hotel staff had received as a tip from a trader from India. Another, the passenger lists of P&O ships that used to dock here in the 1920s make up part of the Travel Journals section, which traces the origin of the hotel's early visitors. At the centre of it is a television runs a loop of three videos depicting interviews with descendants of the Sarkies, the Oorjithams and the Jekyll family, whose link to the hotel spans five generations.

All credit for this rich and vivid exhibition is due to E&O Gallery project manager and curator Kulwant Jessy, a former lawyer, passionate history fan and, most importantly, Penangite through and through. Her own link to E&O goes back to her

PICTURES BY SUHAIMI YUSUF/T

