



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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Newsmakers & hotspots

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



PICTURES BY SUHAIMI YUSUF/TI

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 all, 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



Think City's James (left) and Khor were part of the support team



Peh of E&O Bhd was roped in to help set up the displays and now oversees the running of the Gallery

childhood, when her family home shared the same glorious view of the straits as well as a fence with the Grand Dame.

"Now when I look at it, I think, 'Wow, we had a great life, and we were living so close to this wonderful icon'. Today, I'm back here, extricating all these stories from the people who came to this hotel. It's part of everyone in Penang, really," says Kulwant.

Without the experience or technical knowledge of creating such a gallery, Kulwant has managed to create a space that celebrates nostalgia without the maudlin, far from a static display of dusty old things within 74.96 sq m. The exhibits can only be described as interactive and engaging, inviting visitors to share their own E&O memories and inspiring many others to create their own for the future.

The experimental nature of the exhibits was spawned of necessity. Many of the hotel's original artefacts were either destroyed in the wars or lost due to negligence. With little to no physical artefacts to work with, Kulwant and her team, which included E&O's Chai, then E&O Hotel public relations manager Marzeta Hassan, then E&O Hotel general manager Marco Battistotti and technical expert Yvonne Teh, had to get creative.

It was Teh, who had helped set up a museum in Zanzibar, Tanzania, and was involved in the remodelling of the Penang State Museum, who drove the point that their approach should be from a social-historical standpoint.

Kulwant recalls, "We were thrown into the deep end of the pool and for a while, we were wondering when we were ever going to surface. In a way, the fact that we didn't have an inventory, let alone an impressive one, was a blessing in disguise. It forced us to take a different approach and it forced Yvonne to tell us to forget this idea of a historical museum and look at the social history aspect of it – get the people involved, get the stories ... let every object have a story so that there's a human dimension to this space."

This detail is seen right through to the E&O Gallery logo, which comes from a found object, a table ornament sculpted with the lettering "E&O", that was acquired by a former staff member of the hotel – Yvonne Yeoh. Even the piano music that sets the mood in the gallery was curated – Kulwant asked each of those she interviewed what music best described their memories of E&O and she ended up with an elegant song list that takes you from Gershwin to Johnny Mathis. Pianist Philip Yeoh, the son of musical couple Albert and Nancy Yeoh, who used to perform at the E&O back in the 1950s, was recruited to play these pieces for the recording.

Chai remarks, "Because E&O is so intertwined with Penang's history and so cherished by Penangites, with 128 years of history now, it has become a repository of special memories. What was amazing was that so many of these people, even the children and grandchildren of those no longer alive, were so willing to offer these stories and props along with them."

As the collector of these stories, Kulwant faced various challenges. The first of which was where to begin, the hardest being earning the trust of these people. She began with long-serving staff members, who in turn led her to former employees who still met up for dinner once a

month. Kulwant would join them occasionally, document their tales and build her network from there. Through Battistotti and Mazeta, she got the contacts of the hotel's old faithfuls, who return regularly to the Grand Dame for their R&R.

"There's a certain element of trust that you have to work on when you're dealing with people and their memories," says Kulwant. "It took a little bit of coaxing, it definitely took more than one meeting with several of them. They couldn't believe the value we were attaching to what they felt were so ordinary stories, but once we had them convinced that we treasured their stuff and that we would take care of them, they took the trouble to look for things."

And what a windfall it was – the team couldn't believe it. They went from barely anything to more than they could imagine. Carolyn Peh, E&O Bhd assistant GM of branding (property), was then roped in to help with the setting up of the displays.

Says Kulwant, "All the contributors are the real heroes of this gallery ... without them, there would be no gallery."

Using the specially commissioned tome, *The E&O Hotel: Pearl of Penang* by Ilsa Sharp, as the foundation, Kulwant culled the stories to form the various sub-themes of the gallery. It's an opportunistic gallery, she explains, "If there's enough to support a new exhibit, we will do it. The displays have been designed to evolve."

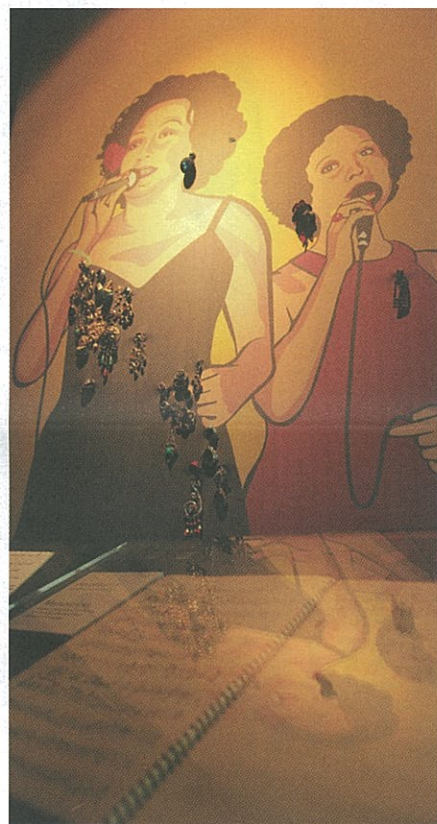
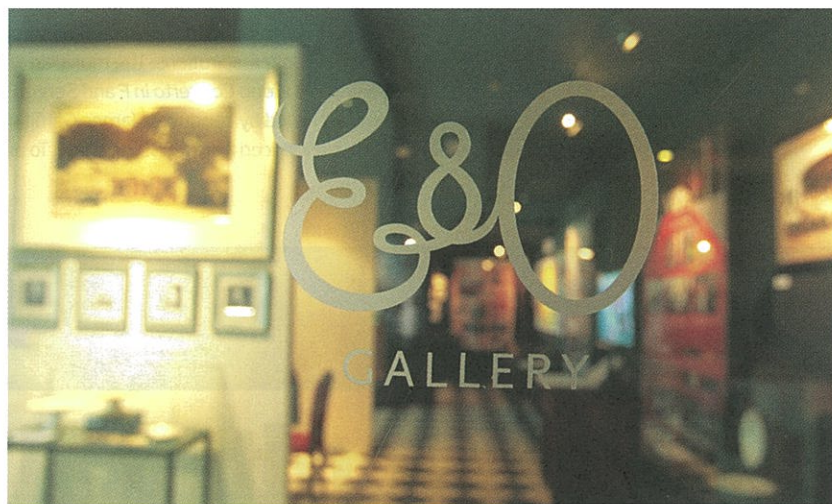
Think City Sdn Bhd, a Khazanah Nasional Bhd subsidiary tasked with implementing the George Town Grants Programme (GTGP), offered its support to the whole process of creation with a grant. Programme director Neil Khor and senior manager Agnes James were also involved in the preliminary discussions and it was they who brought technical consultant Teh on board.

Khor says, "What you see at the E&O Gallery is the social history of Penang as experienced at the E&O. If you look at the outstanding universal values of George Town as a Unesco heritage site, you can see certain parts of it where it is very clear what the role of a hotel like E&O plays in a port city. You can see the multicultural and multi-religious aspects of George Town in the different types of stories and the different types of people who come here. In that way, we have managed to capture the essence of George Town. We don't put the E&O story at the forefront, we let the people and the stories depict that. That's what is unique about this place. This is a gateway story."

And the research continues. At the gallery itself is the memory book where visitors can record their own experiences and personal links with the hotel. One volume is filled to the brim with many guests who have attached photographs to their entries. The second volume is now in the process of being filled.

Says Chai, "This gallery is for the people of Penang, for the people who visit Penang. It's not just for our hotel guests. That said, if you've got anything that you want to share and add on to this social history gallery, you know it's in good hands with us and we'll be your partner in the endeavour."

The E&O Gallery is located at the Victory Annexe, Eastern & Oriental Hotel, 10 Lebuhr Farquhar, Penang.
Tel: (04) 222 2000 ext 3209



Every object tells a story, depicting the social history of Penang as experienced at the E&O Hotel