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**Title** : Peranakan heritage restored, revisited, revitalised

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SINGAPORE : Singapore is experiencing a resurgence of interest in the Peranakan culture. From the Asian Civilisations' Peranakan Museum at Armenian Street to MediaCorp's Channel 5 dramedy "Sayang Sayang" and its upcoming Channel 8 Chinese drama "Little Nyonya", the rich heritage and legacy of the Straits Chinese or Baba-Nyonya are being restored, revisited and revitalised.

The Straits Chinese are descendents of Chinese traders who settled in Malacca and Java in the 1400s, before migrating to other port cities in the region like Singapore.

Described as a "culture of assimilation", the lifestyle and cultural aspects of the Peranakans were borne out of a need to adapt and therefore consist of both the Malay and Chinese traditions.

The decline of the Peranakan culture began during World War II when many able-bodied Babas – male Straits Chinese descendents – were massacred. With their gold and jewellery confiscated, the Peranakan womenfolk or the Nyonyas were left to fend for themselves, subsisting on much less. Modernisation also eroded most of their culture.

Much of the present outreach efforts to revive the Peranakan heritage can be credited to theatre personalities who have sought to promote the essence of the culture through stage productions.

Many would remember the headstrong matriarch in Stella Kon's "Emily of Emerald Hill" and more recently, the doting Peranakan grandma in Desmond Sim's "Postcards from Rosa". One theatre company in Singapore – The Main Wayang Company – was even established with a view of sharing the Peranakan brand of fashion, food and other lifestyle activities with the younger generation.

Main Wayang's latest offering is a multimedia musical that chronicles the ups and downs of a Peranakan family from the 1940s to the present day. Titled "Siapa Baba?" ("Who's the Baba?"), the production will feature video montages, real antique furniture and fusion folk tunes composed by prominent cultural consultant Richard Tan, music and creative directors Alvin Oon and Kelvin Tan.

Written and directed by Peggy Ferroa, the musical employs the device of a narrator in the form of a 'talking portrait' to get audiences acquainted with the roots of the Peranakan culture and language which is a mixture of the Malay language, the Chinese Hokkien dialect, and some Portuguese and Dutch vocabulary.

Explaining her vision for the show, Ferroa said: "I was told to make it almost like a documentary on stage... It was a tall order because I had to tell a story round the songs that showcase the roots of the culture and there was so much to tell! So I made use of what was left of the Peranakan culture – photographs and antiques."

She added that extensive research was done in Singapore and Malacca to ensure accuracy in the factual details about the Peranakan heritage.

Branded under the umbrella of Republic Polytechnic's Community Arts Festival – Reflections 2008, "Siapa Baba?" is set to educate and entertain adults and children, as well as create some nostalgia for Peranakans as they take a trip down memory lane.

*"Siapa Baba?" will be staged at The Republic Cultural Centre on November 21 and 22. Information about ticket sales is available at [www.mainwayang.com/siapababa.htm](http://www.mainwayang.com/siapababa.htm)*

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