

Film director, National Day Parade creative director... Toy Factory's unstoppable theatre director Goh Boon Teck is taking on new roles with relish

'DIVA' IN OVERDRIVE

BEADS of sweat trickle down theatre director Goh Boon Teck's forehead as he stands, hands on hips, under the searing 3pm heat on a floating platform at Marina Bay that is the venue for this year's National Day Parade.

All around him, similarly tawny and sweat-drenched national servicemen potter about, setting the stage for a parade rehearsal.

At 35, Goh is creative director of the parade the youngest ever appointed – taking over from theatre director Glen Goei, who helmed the last four years.

He winces when the Straits Times photographer tells him, from 10m away, to jump for the photograph, incredulously exclaiming "Haah?" at the request.

When the photo shoot moves to the top of the multi-coloured bleachers and he is asked to lean forward and pose on one foot as if he were running, he wipes his signature bald pate dry with a handkerchief and mutters: "Wah, this photographer is sadistic."

Clearly, the patience and physical energy of his rotund man are being pushed to their limits. But instead of throwing a hissy fit – as some "artistic" people are known to do – he obliges.

"I've been climbing these stands at least 20 times a day for the past five months," he later adds. "I think I've lost about 5kg."

Perhaps he is too exhausted by the time we sit down in a café at the Esplanade for the interview, because he tends to mumble and pause a lot mid-sentence, as if lost in thought or, simply, lost.

At least he has his feet firmly planted in local theatre.

As chief artistic director of Toy Factory Productions – it was until recently known as Toy Factory Theatre Ensemble – he has won accolades for its plays and musicals in both English and Mandarin, including *Shopping And ****ing* in 2002 and last year's *Cabaret*.

Known for straddling both English and Mandarin plays and moving fluidly between experimental and mainstream, his most high-profile achievement to date is writing and directing *Titoudao*, a multilingual play based on the life of his mother, Hokkien opera singer Oon Ah Chim. The play debuted in 1994, and bagged five

Life! Theatre Awards, including Play Of The Year, when it was restaged in 2000.

Titoudao was restaged again last year due to popular demand, and he is directing the movie version of it, produced by Oak3 Films and slated for release here in May next year.

The bilingual theatre director-playwright says: "I'm quite ready to move into movies. I like to give birth to a concept, nurture it, direct it and shoot it myself."

Actress and artistic co-director of Toy Factory, Beatrice Chia-Richmond, says: "To me, Boon Teck is a real artist, an auteur. His visual flair and generosity are incomparable."

From wayang to art to theatre

GOH was born the middle child to Madam Oon and Mr Goh Thiam Hock, who owned a civil construction company. He is "very close" to his parents, who are now 63 and retired.

Elder sister Anna, 37, is a graphic designer and florist while younger brother Zachary, 28, is an art director at Toy Factory.

He says he practically "grew up on the wayang stage" with his mother, a popular Hokkien opera performer in the 1970s. He was just three when he made his stage debut and often played "a little extra, a little eunuch, and other little servant types".

"Actually, I was very good," he adds proudly. "So good that my mother would 'activate' me to sing and dance whenever guests came to our house to visit."

For a year in his childhood, he lived with his mother, siblings and maternal grandparents on a rubber plantation in Choa Chu Kang, while his father lived separately with his own mother. Mdm Oon did not get along with her mother-in-law.

"She never had respect for my mother because actresses in those days were considered whores," says Goh, who had to prevent his

grandmother from going to see *Titoudao* as the strained relationship between the two women was fleshed out in the play.

Both women buried the hatchet, however, 20 years before his grandmother died in 2005.

His parents moved into an HDB flat in Woodlands in 1976 because "they missed each other too much", and they still live there.

Goh eventually outgrew the thrill of being on stage. In kindergarten, he discovered a talent for drawing and sketched his mother each time she performed, continuing through his days at Si Ling Primary and Swiss Cottage Secondary schools.

He enrolled in the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA) for a diploma in fine arts when he was 17.

It seemed the right path: He was the top student every year and never had to pay school fees, as it had a policy of rewarding its top three scorers with fee exemptions.

But shortly after graduating, he made a U-turn. He joined the late theatre doyen Kuo Pao Kun's Theatre Practice where he trained in "acting, making puppets and mopping the floor" for three years.

"He changed my life," Goh says. He remembers how Kuo made him redo his sketches for set design over and over again, thereby training his patience and art skills.

Through it all, he discovered that "theatre helps me better articulate my thoughts and communicate with people".

In 1990, when he was just 19, he founded Toy Factory Theatre Ensemble with 11 other theatre practitioners in his puppetry class and got logistical support from established companies TheatreWorks and Theatre Practice. Its first production was *Redear*, a physical theatre piece staged at The Substation in 1991.

In 1997, he received a two-year Visa International arts scholarship to study theatre directing at Rose Bruford College and Middlesex

University in London.

He spent a lot of time watching plays and musicals at the West End, which exposed him to "millions of different cultures and music".

But there was one thing the self-described "patriot" kept on his mind: "Wah, I missed Hokkien mee a lot, man."

In person, Goh's cherubic visage belies a man who takes himself very seriously – perhaps too seriously.

He pauses to think before replying, even when asked for something as simple as the date he was born – Nov 19, 1971.

Despite admitting to being a "control freak" on his sets, he does not appreciate your prying into the grittier details of his life.

"Very *ba po* (Mandarin for one who loves to gossip) leh, your questions," whines the bachelor who lives alone.

When he isn't working, he loves to travel and read novels in both English and Chinese.

"Being sensitive about world affairs, travelling more, reading more books are all things that Singaporeans can improve on, not just the arts," he observes, wryly.

He also says he's a good cook, and can whip up a mean Hokkien vinegared pork dish.

He's also handy with the funny analogy. Chia-Richmond, 33, credits him with conjuring some of the oddest – but most effective – metaphors and analogies, like when he was directing her and lead actress Pam Oei in *Titoudao*.

She recounts: "He was trying to describe a woman who was very restless. He said, 'This woman ah, her backside is sharp one so cannot sit down. Every time she tries to sit down, she will stand up'."

Yes, Goh does have a special way with words – sometimes even using gibberish and onomatopoeias.

When explaining why Toy Factory was so named, he says: "We had a puppetry instructor whose name was *bruhllrrpprruhrruhrr* – this long Thai name none of us could pronounce. But he said we could call him Toy, so we did."

'Backside is so sharp'

AFTER two hours, his energy is waning and he lapses into inaudible mumbles again.

It's a bit hard to believe how someone so soft-spoken could have once hurled a slipper at actor Mark Richmond during a stage rehearsal out of frustration – but he did.

Then, breaking into a guffaw, he lets slip that "actors are not divas – I'm more diva than they are!"

Which begs the question: Does the diva think directing the National Day Parade is a good use of his talents?

Of course, he says. "Usually I create my art for an audience of 3,000 to 5,000 people. The parade will be for an audience of hundreds of thousands. More sound, more sights, more people, more fun!"

Goh promises that the parade, titled *PossibleCity* – meaning a city of possibilities – and boasting special effects and fireworks set against the city's skyscrapers, will make for a unique experience.

Suddenly getting self-conscious, he asks: "What is the buzz like on your side? It's my first time doing something like that. I will be so *paiseh* (Hokkien for embarrassed) if nobody wants to watch."

You notice the dark under-eye circles, which tell you that he has been working long hours and sleeping little lately.

He is simultaneously overseeing Toy Factory's next production, *Big Fool Lee* – about 1950s radio icon Lei Dai Soh – to be performed in early August. He is also planning to stage an avant garde play at next year's Singapore Arts Festival.

And there is the script for an English musical, yet unnamed, about a Han dynasty princess looking for love during wartime, that he is starting to write.

Talk about a man in overdrive. Perhaps Goh takes after his mother, the equally multi-faceted and passionate woman whose backside is so sharp she can't stay seated for long.

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flashback

'I don't know how to put this in words... I don't have the right shapeliness? I'm quite conscious of how I perform and what I look like doing it. It's not easy, I think'

On why he did not continue acting

'People say *Titoudao* is a tribute to my mother. I think that's partially why I'm so attached to it. At the time of its creation (1993), she was undergoing hip replacement surgery and as a son, it hurt to see that'

On how his play *Titoudao* will always have a special place in his heart



PHOTOS: JOYCE FANG (ABOVE), ALAN LIM (LEFT)

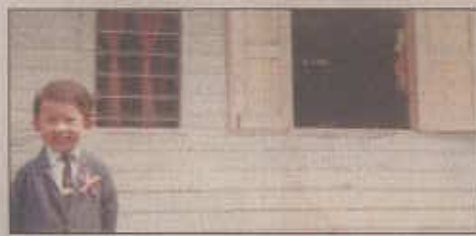


PHOTO: COURTESY OF GOH BOON TECK

A BOON: Goh Boon Teck with his mother Oon Ah Chiam (top), at age three (above), and butting in some free advertising for his play *The Morning People*, at the Life! Theatre Awards in 2002 (left).

'Because you're a small child, you kena a lot of (roles playing a) little eunuch... (where you) have to clean the chairs and tables'

On his roles on the Hokkien opera stage with his mother

Monday interview



Michelle Tay



AIMING HIGH: Goh Boon Teck may be exacting and serious on stage, but his feet are firmly grounded in local theatre.