

Flamenco with a Peranakan touch

By Jan Lee

Famed Spanish dramatist Federico Garcia Lorca's classic *The House Of Bernarda Alba* is about the repressed lives of five sisters in a Spanish village, who have been forced by their domineering mother into an eight-year mourning period after her second husband dies.

Now, imagine the same play set in a Peranakan household in Singapore, where everyone knows how to dance the flamenco.

That is the gist of *Flamenco Sin Fronteras'* adaptation of Lorca's tale.

The home-grown dance company is founded by Spanish flamenco maestro Antonio Vargas. This production, titled *The House*, is its first foray into dance theatre. Vargas and his Singaporean wife and co-founder Daphne Huang Vargas, 41, think the two-year-old company is ready to branch out into a fusion of dance and theatre.

Says the 72-year-old maestro: "My dancers have matured and gotten better over the years and I think they are ready to try something like that."

Lorca's script is adapted by up-and-coming local playwright Joel Tan, 26, while the production's artistic direction is handled by Vargas.

Tan's first full-length play, *Family Outing*, debuted at the Singapore Theatre Festival in 2011.

Asked why *The House* has a Peranakan setting, Vargas says: "We wanted to express the flamenco dance in a local context and *The House* translates really nicely into local Peranakan culture."

Trained in dance since age 11 and renowned internationally as a flamenco dancer and choreographer, Vargas had previously worked on two dance adaptations of the play during his younger days in Europe and Sydney.

Tan adds: "The Peranakan culture is very matriarchal. All my Peranakan friends had these really strong mother figures like *Bernarda Alba*, which is why I think this adaptation makes a lot of sense."

Bernarda Alba is the tyrannical matriarch in Lorca's 1936 play.

Her second husband, who fathered all her daughters except the eldest, has died and she wants the whole household to mourn.

Tragedy results when her youngest daughter Adela falls in love with a charming young man.

Localising the play, however, was not easy for Vargas and Tan.

Tan says: "The language in the original play was very elevated so I really had to bring it down to everyday spoken Singlish. The end result is still quite elevated, but there's definitely a local flavour."

Vargas adds: "You have to try and filter out the best elements of the two mediums (drama and dance) to make them work in harmony. Ultimately, you want the show to come together."

The originally dialogue-heavy play has been largely overhauled so that it does not overwhelm the dance choreography.

For example, *Bernarda Alba*'s five daughters, including main lead Adela, do not have lines in this production. The matriarch and the maids of the house have the bulk of the lines.

Tan explains: "I wanted to play to everyone's strengths and I thought the dancers who play the sisters could better express themselves physically. What they cannot portray through words, they express through action."

Traditional Peranakan costumes, which are tailored close to the body, have also been altered to flare out at the bottom to better accommodate the flamenco dance medium.

Despite the difficulties of adapting the play, the duo are confident it will resonate with Singaporeans even if its original was set in a completely different time and place.

"I think the play has a lot of resonance with any political system where there's a kind of locked-in, repressive climate," quips Tan.

The production, which will have live music by traditional flamenco musicians, is also a project for charity. All the proceeds from its opening night show will go to the Straits Times School Pocket Money Fund.

Mrs Huang Vargas, 41, who is also one of the dancers in this production, says: "We've always wanted to help children and we thought the fund would be a good avenue to do so."

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• *Flamenco dancer Yuriko Kurose (above) in a Peranakan costume that has a flared bottom to accommodate the dance steps in *The House* by playwright Joel Tan, Daphne Huang Vargas and artistic director Antonio Vargas. -- ST PHOTOS: KUA CHEE SIONG*