

Taking Centre Stage: Theatremaker and Practice Associate Artist Isabella Chiam's First Original Monodrama THE LAST GARDENER debuts this April

This is a story about growth, grief and good gardening. The Theatre Practice (Practice) proudly presents *The Last Gardener* by performer, theatremaker and Practice associate artist Isabella Chiam. A compelling mix of heart and humour, the one-woman show is a tender portrayal of the maddening, beautifully complex relationship between parent and child.

Planting Seeds: The Inspiration Behind *The Last Gardener*

The first edition of *The Last Gardener* was developed during the COVID-19 pandemic as part of Practice's *It's Not About The Numbers* series, where it received rave reviews.



Staged as a gardening workshop for up to two audiences, the work was partially inspired by Chiam's own interest in gardening, which developed during the pandemic lockdown. Beyond the therapeutic effects of gardening, it also triggered a shift in her relationship with her father – also an avid gardener. “We started having conversations about plants in a way that we never did before!”

The production was also inspired by the story of Abu Ward, also known as the Last Gardener of Aleppo, who cultivated vibrant flowers and plants in the besieged city during the Syrian war. His young son, Ibrahim worked alongside him and continued maintaining the garden centre after his father was killed in a bomb strike.

Musing on the idea of legacy and inheritance in parent-child relationships, Chiam reflects, “Abu Ward's story is not just about gardening and nature flourishing in a crazy time. It's also about having hope and passing that hope to the next generation. There is a Greek proverb: ‘A society grows great when old men plant trees in whose shade they shall never sit.’ What seeds are being planted for us, in us by our parents? What do we carry with us that came from them?”

“When my dad lost my grandmother, I suddenly saw him as a child of a mother. In some ways, the play is also me preparing myself for the eventual loss of my parents, and understanding what they have left behind that will help me move forward with strength and hope,” Chiam adds.

Media Enquiries

Hanling Chuang hanling@practice.org.sg
Jasmine Lim jasminelim@practice.org.sg

Tel: +65-8768-2217 | WhatsApp: +886-958372220
Tel / WhatsApp: +65-8288-7507

Sparking Growth: Envisioning A Brand New Black Box Version

For the next stage of *The Last Gardener's* development, Chiam has been given the opportunity to scale up for a larger black box setting, transforming it from an intimate interactive workshop into a text-based monodrama. Centred around the protagonist Eve (also played by Chiam), it explores her life changes from young adult to motherhood and her relationship with her father and son, through the metaphor of gardening.

The change in format has also meant large changes to the script. “The first version was structured to allow space for participants to fill in their own stories, which also intersected with two plot lines: the narrator’s relationship with her father, and a retelling of Abu Ward’s story,” explained Chiam. “A monodrama is much more character-driven so it needed a clearer narrative structure. We ended up cutting a lot of material from the original script to put focus on the central character’s emotional journey instead.”

Joining Chiam on this monumental task are two new additions to her core creative team — director Tan Shou Chen (Joel Tan’s *Mosaic* [Esplanade *The Studios* 2023], Henry Purcell’s *Dido* [The Opera People]) and co-writer Cheyenne Alexandria Phillips (*A Literary Trail of Sungei Buloh Wetlands Reserve*, *A Grand Design* [Checkpoint Theatre]). “I don’t want to be alone, it’s not fun!” laughs Chiam. “Having them in the process gives me a sense of distance, so that I can look at the work from a more objective point of view and see it as a piece of storytelling rather than being tied to me as a person. Secondly, they also provide perspective and resonance because each of them relate to the story in different ways.”

“As a writer and poet, Cheyenne is able to articulate certain things in such an elegant way that it really elevates the script. Meanwhile, I really like Shou Chen’s aesthetics as a director. Being an actor himself, he is also able to access the work differently so he brings a very good combination of skills to the team,” adds Chiam.

Tending The Garden: Nurturing The Next Generation of Art-makers

The Last Gardener is produced by Practice, as part of Chiam’s role as Practice’s Associate Artist. A prolific performer in the Singapore theatre industry, Chiam has appeared in countless productions including *Four Horse Road* (The Theatre Practice), *The Fourth Trimester*, *Brown Boys Don’t Tell Jokes* (Checkpoint Theatre) and *Oo-Woo* (The Necessary Stage). She has also directed numerous Theatre For Young Audiences (TYA) productions (*Here Comes Kaya & Roti! "Where Are Our Friends?"* (2020, 2021) [The Theatre Practice], *Oddsocks* [Gateway Theatre], *Together* [Playtime]), and assistant directed two editions of Practice’s epic promenade theatre epic, *Four Horse Road* (2020, 2023).

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She was invited to join the Practice Associate Artist Programme in 2020 and has been with the programme ever since. *The Last Gardener* marks a key milestone in her art-making career — both as her first solo performance and first original non-TYA work.

Citing the show's long, multi-stage development period, Practice's artistic director Kuo Jian Hong reflects on the company's partnership for its Associate Artists. "What we look for in an associate artist is a hunger to develop their own works and an interest in collaborative artistic processes," explains Kuo. "Unlike many associate artist programmes, we do not require yearly output, demand exclusivity nor prescribe a specific development process. What's most important is that there is a relationship of mutual growth and learning. *The Last Gardener* is a culmination of Isabella's growth as a performer and an art-maker, and our team has also learnt a lot from being a part of its development process. We're growing together, and growing each other!"

Tickets for *The Last Gardener* are now on sale on BookMyShow. For more programme information and ticket discounts, please refer to the ticketing platform (<https://practice.bigtix.io>), or follow us at @thetheatrepractice.

Publicity Visuals

Credit: Courtesy of The Theatre Practice

Trailer: <https://youtu.be/fjET2CeldVg>

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Synopsis

The state of the garden tells you a lot about the person who owns it.

Eve returns to her childhood home to find her father's beloved garden in disarray.

When will the flower bloom again?

In its own time. In its own time.

A compelling mix of heart and humour, Isabella Chiam's *The Last Gardener* is a tender portrayal of the maddening, beautifully complex relationship between parent and child. **This is a story about growth, grief and good gardening.**

A first version was staged at Practice's *It's Not About The Numbers* series in 2021 to rave reviews, and has been brilliantly reimaged in collaboration with director Tan Shou Chen and co-writer Cheyenne Alexandria Phillips.

Programme Details

Dates: 10 – 14.04.2024

Time: 8PM (Wed – Sat), 3PM (Sat – Sun)

Venue: Practice Space (54 Waterloo Street, Singapore 187953)

Language: Performed in English with Chinese surtitles

Ticket Price: \$40 + \$3 booking fee

Get Tickets Here: <https://practice.bigtix.io/events/TTP24TLG>

Promotion:

- 15% Bundle Discount
 - Minimum four tickets per booking
 - Limited discounted tickets per show
 - Promotion valid till 16.03.2024
- 10% PAssion Card and SAFRA Members Discount
 - Limited discounted tickets
 - Promotion ends 09.04.2024

Creative Team

Concept Artist / Co-Writer / Cast: Isabella Chiam

Director: Tan Shou Chen

Co-Writer: Cheyenne Alexandria Phillips

Set Designer: Ong Guat Teng

Junior Set Designer: Jobelle Mok

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Lighting Designer: Faith Liu Yong Huay
Sound Designer: Sandra Tay

About Isabella Chiam (Concept Artist / Co-Writer / Cast)

Isabella Chiam is an actor & theatre-maker.

Trained at RADA with Masters in Theatre, Isabella's recent acting credits include *Oo-Woo* (The Necessary Stage), *Four Horse Road* (The Theatre Practice) & *The Fourth Trimester* (Checkpoint). She has performed in international productions and was twice-nominated and won for "Best Ensemble" at the Life! Theatre Awards.

Isabella also has an interest in actor training & collaborative theatre-making. She is an adjunct lecturer at NAFA & Lasalle and her most recent works include *The Dog Who Wasn't Useful* (Dramabox) and *A Collection of Things: Serangoon* (Issy x Cher). Isabella is an Associate Artist with The Theatre Practice, and a founding member of theatre collective Five Stones Theatre.

About The Theatre Practice

The Theatre Practice (Practice) is Singapore's longest-standing professional bilingual theatre institution. Artist-driven and deeply progressive, Practice strives to be an arts space in Singapore that consciously nurtures and empowers people who care about humanity. Over the past 59 years, we have developed and presented works that aim to reflect the richness and complexities of Singapore's diverse cultures.

Today, we carry on the work of our visionary co-founders and cultural medallion recipients, Kuo Pao Kun and Goh Lay Kuan. Under the helm of current Artistic Director Kuo Jian Hong, Practice continues to shape Singapore's cultural landscape as the definitive voice in Singapore theatre. Jian Hong is deeply influenced by the importance of play in art-making and under her leadership, Practice has become the embodiment of the irrepressible spirit and fearless experimentation of play.

Practice is motivated by a desire to always respectfully entertain. We have collaborated with Singapore and international artists alike to present a critically-acclaimed repertoire of over 350 productions including musicals, classics, original and experimental works. We have toured extensively in the region. Many of our works have entered the canon of Southeast Asian literature and have been adapted and presented by theatre companies worldwide, presenting an authentically Singaporean voice on the world stage.

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Since our inception, Practice has served as a cultural bridge between Asia and the world. Our current theatre festival – *Patch! A (Live) Theatre Festival of Play* – comes from a legacy of carefully curated festivals and seminars that gather practitioners of all disciplines and cultures for sharing and exchange, while providing a valuable platform for outstanding international works.

As pioneers in Arts Education in Singapore, Practice has been instrumental both in nurturing leaders in the Singapore arts scene, and inculcating a love for the arts in generations of Singapore youth.

Artistically diverse and constantly relevant, Practice will always engage with the ceaseless exploration of new frontiers.

The Theatre Practice is supported by the National Arts Council under the Major Company Scheme for the period of April 2023 to March 2026. Practice is also an Institution of Public Character and a recipient of MCCY's Charity Transparency Award 2023.

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