



ST PHOTO: NEO XIAOBIN

NELSON CHIA, 40, and MIA CHEE, 34

Husband-and-wife duo, theatre practitioners and founders of the new Mandarin theatre company Nine Years Theatre

Why: As the first new Mandarin theatre group in several years, Nine Years Theatre is expected to inject new life into the theatre scene.

Actor-director Chia had wondered if starting a new company would mean depleting resources from the pool of theatre grants and funds. But the duo decided to take the plunge – nine years after he first wanted to start his own company, hence the name.

The couple work from their home, with the constant chatter of their eight-year-old twin daughters in the background. But the company will soon have a nook in the upcoming Aliwal Arts Centre, which is slated to open in the months ahead. The duo want to focus on actor training and audience education, as well as work with arts centres such as the Esplanade to do commissioned work.

They will also emphasise on the classics, as reflected in their first production, a Mandarin rendition of Reginald Rose's seminal 1954 American courtroom drama, *Twelve Angry Men*. It will run from Feb 15 to 17 at the upcoming Huayi – Chinese Festival Of Arts organised by the Esplanade. They also hope to organise sharing sessions with the audience held in tandem with their productions. These sessions might tackle topics such as the history of Western theatre or how to better understand post-modern theatre.

Chia, who won a Life! Theatre Award for Best Actor in 2011, stresses: "We want to produce Mandarin theatre works but also, more importantly, we want to question the notion and the state of Mandarin theatre in Singapore.

"We're not monolingual. What does it mean to do Mandarin theatre in Singapore? If I have English actors speaking a Shakespeare text in English, and if I flash the Chinese translation on top, if I want to use that juxtaposition, if I want you to hear English but see Chinese – what does that mean? If I have all the actors speaking in dialect, is that Mandarin theatre? Mandarin theatre is not so straightforward."

Corrie Tan