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Thrills but no spills, please

In the final scene of TheatreWorks' 120, actors handling precious artefacts keep curators on edge

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ARTS REPORTER

THE final scene of 120, a new production by TheatreWorks that is set in the National Museum, is making some curators very tense.

About 10 of them hover nervously before, during and after rehearsals, and watch eagle-eyed over the 19 actors'

every move. It's understandable, since the actors are handling precious artefacts from the national collection as part of the site-specific performance for the museum's 120th anniversary celebrations. And it is the first time non-museum staff are doing so.

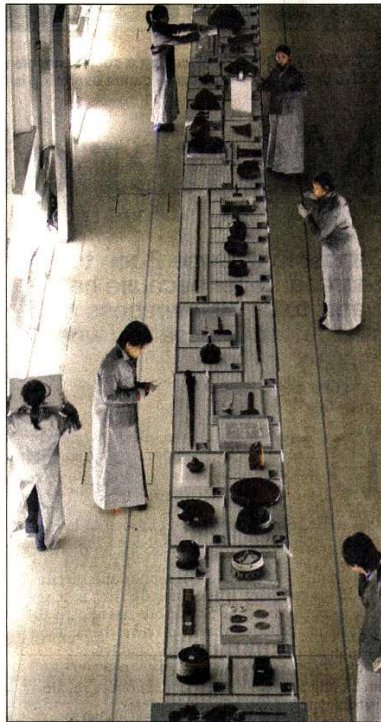
In a 15-minute procession, actors in long, grey robes move 120 artefacts with gloved hands from a temporary repository backstage and place them on a long table in the museum's ground floor corridor.

There's one object to represent each year in the museum's history, and they include a quail trap from Pahang acquired in 1905, a piece of moon rock presented by former American president Richard Nixon to Singapore in 1973 and a party dress by Italian design-



ST PHOTOS: DESMOND LIM

MARCH OF TIME: To mark the National Museum's 120th year, actors from TheatreWorks (above and below) will parade with an artefact that represents each year of its history, such as old costumes, jewellery and sculptures.



'A museum's collection is like a person's possessions'

TheatreWorks director Ong Keng Sen on why he chose to include the artefacts in the performance

er label Miu Miu donated by Ms Lee Chor Lin, the museum's director, this year.

These diverse artefacts are usually stored in the Heritage Conservation Centre in Jurong.

National Museum senior curator Cheryl-Ann Low, who shortlisted the objects for 120, says: "We don't do this regularly. They are usually behind show-cases, so we're a bit tense this time."

She added with a laugh: "We actually feel quite helpless."

But the actors have been briefed thoroughly on how to handle the precious items.

Rule No. 1: Absolutely no running while holding them.

There are others: Textiles must be transported in a trolley in case they unfurl by accident and get damaged in the process.

Gloves must be worn to protect the artefacts and, in the case of a quiver of poisoned darts from Bukit Payong in Malaysia, to protect the actors from any residual poison.

Director Ong Keng Sen, 43, said he chose to include the artefacts in the performance – which takes audiences on group tours around the museum – as he was interested in the changes in the museum's collection over the years.

He says: "A museum's collection is like a person's possessions. Before I wore all-black clothes, I had a beige and olive-green phase in the 1980s. When you examine what a person owns, you see how he has changed over time."

This is reflected in the artefacts included in the production. For example, a totem staff from North Sumatra, acquired in 1911, shows the museum's focus on ethnology; while a spittoon, acquired in 1980, shows its attempts to collect typical household items used in shophouses, after most Singaporeans moved into HDB flats.

"The museum was remarkably open, it let me go into the hallowed halls of its collection," he says with a laugh. "But these are delicate objects, so they are all babysitting us while we rehearse."

And so far, no accidents have taken place. But what if someone drops an item?

Curator Low shot back almost immediately: "Touch wood."

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> 120 is on at the National Museum of Singapore on Saturday and Sunday at 8pm. Tickets cost \$28. Log on to www.nationalmuseum.sg or call 6332-3659.

See story on Japanese designer's Designs on Drama on facing page.