

Drag artist takes after seamstress grandmother

Shawn Hoo

For Singaporean drag artist Opera Tang, 29, a seven-decades-old Singer sewing machine handed down from her 93-year-old grandmother stitched a precious bond between them.

"She likes seeing me continue with the skills she practised when she was younger," says Tang, whose preferred pronoun is she/her. She grew closer to her maternal grandmother about five years ago, after she picked up sewing from the former seamstress.

Madam Martha Lau, a small but spritely Teochew Peranakan woman, has cared for Tang and her four siblings under one roof since they were born. They still live together.

The only one out of her siblings who did not go to school, Madam Lau declares proudly in Teochew: "In the past, we didn't formally learn our craft - we were all self-taught."

She name-drops that she used to tailor clothes for the late Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew and his late lawyer-wife Kwa Geok Choo at an Emerald Hill shop where she worked in the 1980s.

Tang's claim to fame is starring in Singaporean director Lei Yuan Bin's documentary feature Baby Queen (2022), and she is a regular performer at various clubs and bars.

She believes that she has inherited her grandmother's self-starter spirit in executing her own costume designs, often inspired by local iconography such as the mosaic dragon playground and the Vanda Miss Joaquin.

Even her grandmother says Tang is more "ngiao" (Teochew for calculative) about perfection in her tailoring.

The arthritis in Madam Lau's hands has made working on a sewing machine more difficult, but she does not hesitate to praise Tang as a good apprentice.

Tang jokes that every session is "a consultation that she can't run away from", but her grandmother seems more than pleased to teach Tang the tricks of her old trade.

With Tang now accepting commissions for custom-made costumes from private customers, grandmother and grandchild are



Drag artist Opera Tang, 29, learnt to sew, cook and speak Teochew from her 93-year-old grandmother Martha Lau. ST PHOTO: CHONG JUN LIANG

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OPERA TANG (left), who picked up sewing from her grandmother

practically cut from the same cloth.

Madam Lau once made her daughter's wedding dresses, and Tang is now making a wedding dress for her sister with the help of their grandmother.

Asked which of her nine grandchildren she feels closest to, Madam Lau is sharp to say she does not play favourites. But Tang, who performs at night and therefore spends most of the day with her grandmother in their seven-room HDB flat in the north, jokes: "Deep in my heart, I know it's me."

While Madam Lau is in great shape for her age - she still cooks for the entire family of eight - a recent bout of food poisoning and a hospitalisation scare has made Tang more conscious about how to

better care for her grandmother.

"I realised then that she is old, even though she is still so able," says Tang, who helped Madam Lau with basic activities like putting on her clothes when she was ill.

Tang - a former Chinese dancer, gymnast and wushu athlete - also taught the elderly woman basic exercise moves including squats to improve her mobility, which Madam Lau now does daily.

An upcoming family vacation to a faraway destination will leave Madam Lau home alone for long stretches in the day, but Tang hopes to still be in touch from a distance. The family is acquiring a walking robot-cum-camera which can send audio messages to be a digital companion for Madam Lau when they are away.

"It is only through drag that I've grown closer to her," says Tang. Madam Lau, who has seen Tang perform in drag, says she is a very good performer: "What I like is that this is her interest. Ah ma is very chin chai (Teochew for easy-going)."

Tang and Madam Lau both appear in the documentary Baby Queen. Madam Lau, who some-

times gets recognised by filmgoers or followers of Tang's social media, relishes the minor on-screen attention.

"I'm famous," Madam Lau says with a beam.

Tang, who says it is not common for drag artists to have such open support from their grandparents, adds: "I'm super blessed. A lot of drag queens cannot even do their make-up at home."

On the dividends of spending more time with her grandmother and what that has taught her, Tang says: "She has a strong sense of duty to her family and shows love through actions rather than words."

Like most Asian grandmothers, Madam Lau is not prone to dramatic words of affection. But in one moment during the interview, as the two gather by the Singer sewing machine, Madam Lau turns to Tang and says in her Teochew-accented English: "I love you."

"It's the everyday things, it's the quiet and constant support. That's all I need from her," Tang says, fighting back tears. "I hope I can be that person for someone else as well."



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OPERA TANG