



Sailing into theatre as a career



Photo: ST

Actor-director Nelson Chia, founder of Nine Years Theatre.

by **CORRIE TAN**

THE STRAITS TIMES (/SOURCE/STRAITS-TIMES-0) | Feb 05, 2014

Hard to imagine, but Singapore almost lost one of its theatre stars to the navy.

Nelson Chia's theatre company has only three productions to its name, with a fourth to open this week.

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But the talented actor-director, 41, has cemented Nine Years Theatre's reputation as one of the most exciting new theatre groups in Singapore - by taking classic Western works and giving them a dazzling cultural makeover in Mandarin. His wife Mia Chee, 35, is the company's co-founder and producer.

Last year, he wiped the dust from the American courtroom classic *Twelve Angry Men* (1954) with a tightly knit ensemble that won universal rave reviews.

And this year, his adaptation of the Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen's socio-political tragedy *An Enemy Of The People* (1882) had audiences on the edge of their seats as the actors tackled issues of democracy and mindless populism.

But in the early 1990s, Chia had signed on as a regular with the Singapore navy. He had been a Sea Scout in secondary school and took to the idea of being promoted through the ranks: "I really thought that was what suited me best."

It was his younger sister, graphic designer Karen, who dragged him to an audition for bilingual theatre company Toy Factory Productions about 20 years ago that he first set foot on the theatre stage.

The navy's loss was theatre's gain.

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