By CHEAH UI-HOON

MORE than 25 years after it was written, Stella Kon’s Emily of Emerald Hill still resonates today – as evidenced in its Margaret Chan reprisal last Friday night.

Beyond the trappings of Peranakan culture and lifestyle that the character embodied, she is the wife, mother and grandmother that we can still relate to.

As Kon pointed out in the well-attended question and answer session after the show, as long as we have mothers who try to manipulate their children, and children who rebel, the play still rings true.

Emily has even been branded as a feminist play, but it certainly seemed to touch a chord in several young men on Friday night’s showing, as four of them – who seemed only in their 20s – got up to ask questions and comment on the play.

That speaks well of the play, written about a Singaporean woman in a particular time, that it could move young men to put forth their queries about it.

And it certainly was a good sign that the Singapore Arts Festival’s plan to restage iconic productions will go down well with the Singapore audience, especially as this play was one of the highlights of this year’s festival, with its sell-out showings.

Having veteran actress Chan reprise her role as the first Singaporean actress to play Emily was largely an exercise in nostalgia – and overall, a well-executed one at that.

Co-director Jeremiah Choy opted to keep the staging simple – paring down the props, so that the sole character stood out. Only three chairs were placed on the stage: one mother-of-pearl chair in the centre and two on the side, one with a telephone. Three panels designed to look like the wooden walls of a Peranakan house provided the backdrop, which also doubled as the projection screen.

The video projections themselves were kept to a minimum, mainly featuring the photographs of a Peranakan family in the beginning and then the textile patterns of batik for the rest of the time.

Against this backdrop, Chan played out the various facets of nonya Emily Gan, the second wife of a man many years her senior.

The story starts with her in mid-life, sending her eldest son away to study in England and receiving news of his suicide when he doesn’t get to work in the riding school, a job which he desired.

In the second half of the play, we see Emily explaining her earlier years – how she married into the Gan family and manipulated her way to become the matriarch, inheriting the Emerald Hill property after the death of her son and husband.

In the monologue, we saw Chan as the submissive daughter-in-law who worried her way into the affections of her parents-in-law, the commanding woman who has to run the household like clockwork, the competitive sister-in-law, the shrewed bargain-hunter, and one who can switch accents and demeanour in a blink of the eye when speaking to the bishop’s wife or the vegetable seller.

Chan was coquettish when the occasion called for it, cajoling the next, authoritarian and cheeky by turns, albeit with exaggerated facial expressions – the grin, the wink, the giggle.

On Friday night, she took a while to get us into the first act, but settled into her role more comfortably in the second half.

This, however, isn’t the time to critique the actress or the play as much as it is to celebrate its vintage. So besides the emotional moods it portrays of a matriarch, another resonant issue is that of the change in the Singapore landscape – something which is still relevant today as the island republic continues to ring with the din of construction.

Another question the play raises, a quarter of a century on, is which building is going to be today’s Emerald Hill, as the curtains close on Victoria Theatre for renovations after this final performance.