

Eric's designs on horror

Creating costumes for a play based on a Japanese horror legend is not scaring Eric Choong one bit. **DENNIS CHUA** finds out why.

ACCLAIMED fashion designer Eric Choong is excited to be the costume designer for *Okiku, A Tragedy Retold*.

The play, inspired by a Japanese horror legend that also formed the basis for Hollywood film *The Ring*, began its 10-day stage run at the Kuala Lumpur Performing Arts Centre in Sentul Park last Friday.

Choong, 42, says he always wanted to design for a Japanese costume drama, and *Okiku* is "just the show" he has been waiting for.

"I always like Eastern costumes. I believe in designing each character's dress based on his or her personality," he said.

For example, if a particular character is described as pure and virtuous, white is picked as the costume's colour.

"The character in green is envious, while the one in black is mean," he says.

Choong picked up the Best Costume Design award at the 19th Malaysian Film Festival last year. He came up with the designs for Amber Chia and Carmen Soo in the film *The Third Generation*.

Choong takes feedback from his clients very seriously, and makes full use of their ideas to develop new fashion statements.

"A fashion designer never stops learning and must give clients what they want," he said.

The eldest of three siblings from Ipoh, Choong decided to be a fashion designer early in life.

"I loved art when I was a student of Sekolah Menengah Sam Tet, Ipoh. My ambition was to become either an artist or a fashion designer," he said.



Choong has always wanted to design costumes for Japanese plays.

Choong's mother, Lam Woon Keng, was a makeup artist in the 1960s. She encouraged him to follow his dreams.

Lam had Choong attend art classes when he was seven, and he excelled in traditional Chinese brush paintings.

"She found out that I loved art and design, and gave me full support in pursuing fashion design later on."

Choong studied at the Hong Kong Institute of Fashion Design from 1981 to 1983. Following this, he worked in Hong Kong as a designer, before returning to Malaysia in 1989.

For his tireless work and dedication to Malaysian fashion, he was nominated by the Malaysian Tourism Board as one of Malaysia's Top 10 Designers in the early 1990s.

He subsequently represented the country at international fashion shows in Singapore, Hong Kong,

China and Belgium.

Choong officially represented Malaysia in the Asean Designers' Fashion Show (held in Singapore in 1997) and the Asia-Pacific Young Designers' Show in Hong Kong the following year.

Last year, Choong was nominated as a "KL Six" designer by the Malaysian International Fashion Alliance.

This distinguished coterie comprises the country's six most promising and already celebrated Malaysian couture designers.

His clients include singers Sheila Majid and Camelia, actresses and presenters Paula Malai Ali and Soong Ai Ling, and model Gloria Ting.

The late Datuk Seri Endon Mahmood gave him great support and introduced him to batik design.

Choong cites as a "career milestone" his participation in the Malaysian Songket Designers' Show in 1993.

The designer has also collaborated with international fashion labels Cartier and Bvlgari for a millennium bridal and evening collection themed "Underwater Garden Fantasy" at the Regent Hotel in 1998.

In 2000, Tiffany & Co. invited him to design outfits for a fashion show which displayed the company's jewellery at Carcosa Seri Negara. The event's patron was Endon.

Choong has also been a fashion judge for Miss Malaysia/World competitions, and served as the pageant's evening gown designer in 2004.

He describes his fashion masterpieces as a blend of East

and West.

Choong's holding company, Eric Choong Kuala Lumpur, today helms five other names, Eric Choong Couture, Eric Choong Brides, Eric Choong Pret A Porter, Eric Choong Homme and Eric Choong Flowers.

He places Karl Lagerfeld and Valentino on his list of favourite designers.

"I follow their strategy. Work hard and always learn. Be humble."

Choong sees a bright future for the Malaysian fashion industry, largely because the Government has given it strong support to complement the tourism industry.

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