

Lady sings the blues

The tragic story of Frank Swettenham's wife was brilliantly told in Sabera Shaik's play, *Lady Swettenham*, writes **DENNIS CHUA**.

SHE was the long-suffering wife whose husband was the toast of the town in British Malaya.

As he basked, she suffered in silence; unloved, she gradually became mentally ill.

She was Sydney Constance Holmes or Lady Swettenham, the wife of colonial British administrator Sir Frank Swettenham, who served as resident-general of the Federated Malay States and high commissioner of the Straits Settlements from the 1890s to 1900s.

Sabera Shaik's play about Holmes' life with Swettenham recently returned to the big stage as a monologue performed by the producer herself.

Staged recently at the Kuala Lumpur Performing Arts Centre, *Lady Swettenham* returned to its roots as a solo piece, having been performed by an ensemble five years ago.

Directed by Tage Larsen, the monologue was a recollection of Holmes' life in Malaya as she moved her wheelchair around in an asylum equipped with nothing but a chair and table.

She brought the audience's attention to a newspaper report that Swettenham, whom she initially knew as a "gentleman from the East", recently divorced her.

Then, after removing her woollen sweater, Holmes reminisced about her early days.

An enthusiastic and adventurous youngster who loved her garden and was subjected to her elder brother Cecil's incessant teasing,

she was married off to Swettenham by her domineering father.

Holmes embraced the warmth of the Malayan people with ease, as all she wanted was to get away from cold England. She rode on a rickshaw in Singapore with child-like excitement. She did her utmost to be Swettenham's perfect wife, but he seemed more interested in using her as a prop to advance his career in the administrative service.

As a result, she resorted to drinking wine during lonely evenings, her manservant Kassim and his wife Siti witnessing her sorry decline.

As the play progressed, Holmes became more outspoken and rebellious.

She would burst into tantrums in front of her husband's important guests to get his attention.

When her husband was not around, she tried to mingle with the socialites but was snubbed, thereafter having nothing to do with the "witches" as she called them.

When she became pregnant, Swettenham had her bundled off to England where she gave birth to a stillborn child.

By the time they were divorced in 1937, she had been confined to an asylum in south London.

She fought back with a letter describing his affairs and excesses such as abusing his powers to acquire land in Selangor.

Dressed in a long, white and blue dress reminiscent of women of that era, Sabera was in top form playing multiple roles, changing her voice, expressions and postures with ease.

Her Lady Swettenham connected with the audience, making them feel her 60 years of pain, suffering and agonising descent into madness.

Her characterisation of Holmes was at its best when she sang her blues at the Selangor Club, at times with a bottle between her legs.

Sabera based her play on Datuk Henry Barlow's book about Swettenham and his wife published in 1996.

Lady Swettenham came as a double bill with *Rumor*, director Roberta Carreri's monologue that celebrated unknown actors between the two world wars who travelled in third-class trains and slept in dirty lodges just to cheer the masses.

Actress Cinzia Ciaramicoli performed the monologue, which centred on the life of her grandmother.

While *Rumor's* story was far less painful and tragic than Lady Swettenham's, Ciaramicoli captured the essence of her travelling grandmother's hard life.

Living with prostitutes, befriending abused children with eating disorders, getting harassed by crazy fans and visiting places as different as Paris and Kota Baru, were among the highlights of her grandmother's colourful life.

Ciaramicoli brilliantly sang and danced to the music of Fred Astaire's *Cheek to Cheek*, and also swayed fluidly to the haunting melodies of a *wayang kulit* performance.

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