

# A splendid collection

**I**t was a place where you could swim across a clear bay to have dinner on the terrace of a private house. A place where people often judged you, hired you and fired you by the colour of your skin.

A place where the expatriate population from Europe and the United States made snide comments at their Peak parties about the expatriate population from China. And it was a place where two people from different ethnic backgrounds fell in love to a moodily romantic theme tune.

Some things about Hong Kong have changed, some things never were, and some things are depressingly the same as when Jennifer Jones and William Holden acted out the true story (with inevitable Hollywood alterations) of author and doctor Han Suyin's love for a young journalist who died in Korea.

It is an old story, over-romanticised and somewhat dated, but it is in the belief that *Love is a Many-Splendored Thing* is still a rather splendid thing, that artist Hiram To has planned and curated an exhibition which opens today at the Fringe Club.

He invited six artists to watch the 1955 Hollywood classic together and provide their visual and witty responses.

To, 32, who left Hong Kong when he was 14 to live in Scotland and later in Australia, said the movie had a strong effect on him when he first saw it last year in New South Wales.

"I'd seen bits of it before, and my mum has often hummed the tune. It's real nostalgia for me."

The 1955 Hollywood classic *Love is a Many-Splendored Thing* has inspired an exhibition by a group of local artists. Victoria Finlay reports

But it was not just nostalgia that motivated him to use this as an exhibition theme: there are elements of the film that are still relevant today, he said.

"The film is about identity - the whole occidental-oriental thing. Han Suyin is Eurasian, which is really important to her. Her feelings about how 'Chinese' she is, and other people's feelings about it affect the whole film."

The movie is also about another, earlier time of rapid change in Hong Kong, he pointed out. In 1949, thousands of people were crossing the border into Hong Kong every day, escaping from the communists in China. In 1996 the Chinese border is, once again and for different reasons, on everyone's mind.

Also, as one of the most popular Hollywood treatments of Hong Kong, the film also has its role in any discussion about how outsiders see, idealise and summarise the territory, To said.

I watched the film last week with To and with Lisa Cheung, one of the artists in the show, and it is a very participatory movie.

"Five thousand years of tradition set aside in thrilling moments of enchanted love," read the trailer titles, over a se-

quence of the couple holding each other passionately.

It is enjoyable to groan, with exquisite 1990s awareness of 1950s stereotyping, when Han, dressed in cheongsam, misplaces her fan or when she meets Mark for the first time and both wobble their cigarettes romantically.

There is also (oh no) a character called "O No", and a poor mainland mother who offers rather too casually (and in an American accent) to sell her son to pay for medical bills.

But other parts of the film manage to be refreshingly socially aware and satirical.

Han (played by the rather un-Chinese-looking Jennifer Jones) at one point states that she always feels that she is Chinese, like her father. "I know how you feel," squawks the ghastly Mrs Adeline Palmer-Jones. "The minute I put on a Chinese frock I feel Chinese."

The location shots are intriguing. "Where's that?", we wondered aloud as the film opened to show Dr Han in a rather grand hospital building (the former Victoria Hospital, later the Foreign Correspondent's Club in Barker Road). "Or that?" as Mark and Suyin swam

across a clear bay (a pre-pollution Deep Bay with help from scenery painters).

It was these shots, as well as others - a post-war Kai Tak, a less-reclaimed Kowloon - which inspired Warren Leung's contribution to the exhibition.

His pinhole camera pictures of Hong Kong summarise the disappearing territory, and the beauty that is still present when you look for it.

Cheung, who this week leaves her job as visual arts co-ordinator at the Fringe Club to continue her arts studies in London, decided to create an outside leather cheongsam for the exhibition.

"I love this film: I'm a complete kitsch person," admitted Cheung.

The movie, strangely, reminds Cheung - who left Hong Kong when she was six, and returned at 23 - less of the territory than of her home in Toronto. "My mother knew everything about the movie. It reminds me of her."

Her installation work is an attempt to investigate the issues of identity raised by the film, in which Han's ethnic origins are seen as important by her, her family, her friends and the ghastly expatriate members of the community.

Other artists symbolised the wedding that never was - with a rat-eaten picture frame next to a covered tray of party glasses - and showed a pair of car registration plates, one with the registration DR, the other an ominous blank.

*Love is a Many-Splendored Thing* Fringe Gallery. Ends August 4. Free gallery talk with Hiram To (English and Cantonese). August 1, 7.30pm



Identity search... Hiram To, left, and Lisa Cheung, feel that some of the issues raised in *Love is a Many-Splendored Thing* remain relevant today. Below, William Holden and Jennifer Jones in the movie

