

Weekends, for veteran fashion designer Goh Lai Chan, are spent catching up with his family. Says the 13th of 15 children of a timber merchant and a housewife: "Coming from a big family, there's always somebody's birthday or an anniversary to celebrate. It's always good to catch up with my brothers and sisters and their children."

But he bears a heavy responsibility too. As the only dressmaker in the clan, the 49-year-old is in charge of outfitting the family for special occasions such as weddings. The soft-spoken designer, who opened his only boutique, Laichan, in Raffles Hotel Arcade in 1991, specialises in eveningwear and cheongsam priced from \$120 for a top.

"It's always a production when it comes to family weddings. Not only do I have to make the gowns for the bride and the bridesmaids, I also have to make sure everyone in the family is well coordinated."

He designs outfits for everyone, from his mother right down to his young nieces and nephews.

Last year, when his niece got married, Mr Goh took three months to make no fewer than 50 cheongsam and suits.

"It's just like designing costumes for plays. These family occasions are like performances on stage because I have to make sure the outfits suit the scene," he says.

He is now gearing up for another production - he is the costume designer for Wild Rice's stage production of Romeo & Juliet. The modern take on the classic Shakespeare play opened last Thursday at the Drama Centre and will run till April 28.

Director Ivan Heng was very particular about giving the play a local flavour, so the costumes "are designed to look like what young Singaporeans today are wearing on the streets", says Mr Goh.

He has designed costumes for other theatre productions, including 2009's Victor/Victoria and 2010's Fried Rice Paradise.

The bachelor started designing clothes at age 18, when he was studying real estate management in Ngee Ann Polytechnic. At that time, he was making cocktail dresses and gowns for his peers for a small fee.

His first big client was an architect who asked for a custom-made cheongsam for her wedding while he was in national service.

That fuelled his interest in fashion design and prompted him to set up his own shop in 1982 in Liang Court. Called The Dress Shop, it was a joint venture with his seventh sister, Sue Ann.

The boutique, which offered mostly women's casualwear as well as bespoke tailoring services, did well enough for him to open Laichan. When his sister dropped out of the business in 1993, they decided to close down the first shop so he could concentrate on Laichan.

Mr Goh, who turns 50 in November, cites designing and making costumes for major stage productions such as Fried Rice Paradise as the highlight of his career.

"It's really good to know that, after half a century, I've accomplished many things while still learning new things such as how to make classic plays relevant to the youth of Singapore through costumes.

"Plus, for a 50-year-old, I think I look not bad."

Romeo & Juliet is on at Drama Centre till April 28. Tickets from \$44 to \$69, are available from Sistic.com.sg.

PHOTOS: TERENCE LIM FOR THE STRAITS TIMES



HIS BAG
I bought this weekend bag from Halo, a British label, earlier this year in London. I like that the leather is very hardy and scratch-proof.

7 THINGS IN HIS BAG

1 NOTEBOOK

I love vintage notebooks. I bought this brandless notebook from the Thieves' Market in Sungei Road. I wrapped it in brown paper, dressed it up with old photographs and used a retro clip as the binder. I love the whole nostalgic feel to things.



2 TOKYO MON AMOUR BOOK

I'm researching for an upcoming project and this picture book on the ad campaigns and sights of Tokyo is really inspiring, especially with its vibrant colours.



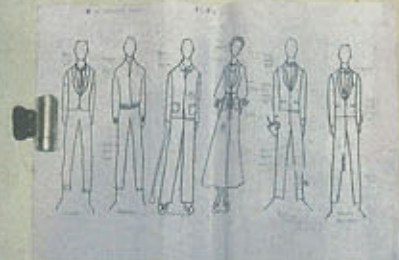
3 MARIMEKKO WALLET

I've had this fabric wallet from the Finnish label for a while now. I chose this because it's not the usual branded leather wallet that you see everywhere. I like to be different.



4 SKETCHES

These are the sketches for the Romeo & Juliet costumes. I usually design for each character according to individual scenes and that can come up to hundreds of designs.



5 MACBOOK

This is my life. It has everything from soft copies of my sketches to photographs of family and friends. I take it with me everywhere.



6 AIR-TIGHT CASE WITH KINDLE

I'm now reading The Kite Runner e-book. It's such a sad story. I placed my kindle with my old pager and old family photographs as I like mixing the old and new. I don't like everything to be modern.



7 PENCIL CASE

I cannot leave my house without this. I sometimes have to modify designs or sketch something on the spot when I meet clients or during dress rehearsals.



STOCKISTS Bottega Veneta, 01-048 Ion Orchard; Dr Martens, 02-17A Wheelock Place; Givenchy, 01-41 Paragon; GoodPoison, P2-22 Parco Marina Bay; Gucci, 01-38 Paragon; H&M, Level 1 Orchard Building; Hermes, 01-12 Scotts Square; Know It Nothing, 51 Haji Lane; Levi's, 01-32 Raffles City; Maison Ikkoku, 20 Kandahar Street; Michael Kors, 01-16 Scotts Square; Montblanc, 01-01 Mandarin Gallery; Parco Next Next, Level 2 Parco Marina Bay; Prada, 01-01 Ion Orchard; Quintessential, 02-01 Pacific Plaza; Sacoor Brothers, 01-12 Raffles City; T.M. Lewin, B1-20 Ion Orchard; What Women Want, 02-22 Mandarin Gallery