



PHOTO:

Going digital are (from left) writers Madeleine Lee, Alvin Pang, Eleanor Wong and library staff Ang Sor Hoon and Lim Siew Kim.

Whose line is it, anyway?

An archive of 200 digitally scanned manuscripts by Singapore writers is now available online for free

Kristina Tom

IMAGINE sneaking into a writer's study, riffling through his desk and finding a treasure trove of, say, poems written on scraps of paper, or scripts with comments scribbled in the margins.

Now, anyone with access to the Internet can enjoy such an experience — for free — thanks to the National Library Board's new Online Repository of Artistic Works (Nora).

Nora is an online showcase of digitally scanned images of almost 200 manuscripts by more than 20 contemporary Singaporean and Singapore-based writers — available to you at the click of your mouse button.

It hopes to be the first of its kind in the world, that is, a comprehensive and centralised collection of an entire country's hard-to-find literary works.

While several e-text archives like the American based Project Gutenberg (www.gutenberg.org) exist online, most of them focus mainly on older or classic works whose copyrights have expired.

Even websites chock-a-block with contemporary literature — such as the Academy of American Poets (www.poets.org) — have more information on the writers than text files of the works themselves.

With Nora, you can surf for rare, out-of-print and unpublished fiction, drama and poetry which were either created here or have Singapore at their heart.

All you need to do to get started on it is to register — for free — by logging onto the NLB's website at www.elibraryhub.com. Click on Digital Library, then Singapore Pages and then Nora itself.

After all, Nora is not meant just for literary and history buffs. Students of theatre and literature, as well as actors of course, now have instant, handy access to scripts, making the production of local plays much easier than it has been in the past.

Among the novelists, playwrights and poets whose names will pop up when you search through Nora are local luminaries like the late dramatist Kuo Pao Kun, Canadian-based novelist Goh Poh Seng and poet-academic Edwin Thumboo.

Professor Thumboo, who is director of The Centre for the Arts at the National University of Singapore, says: "Such an archive lays the foundation for recording the experience of all Singaporeans as expressed by writers.

"Nora will provide a sense of continuity between the past and present."

All 11 drafts of a poem he still considers a work in progress, titled *Conjunction*, are now available on

Nora.

The archive is the brainchild of Singaporean playwright Eleanor Wong, 42, who first conceptualised Nora as a collection of xeroxed play scripts in the mid 1990s.

She tells Life! of her impetus: "Most times, we produce a play whose script ends up nowhere after the play is performed. A lot of good pieces are inaccessible to anyone because there's no print version available."

But it was only in 2003 that things really got going. She began talking with local poets Madeleine Lee, 42, currently with the investment advisory company Athenaenum, and Alvin Pang, 32, founding director of The Literary Centre, who wanted to include other works like poetry that, like plays, were equally vulnerable to being lost.

A few chats later, they came up with the idea of an online archive.

Asked why they plumbed the digital realm, Mr Pang says Nora wouldn't have worked as a paper-based arts archive — for very pragmatic reasons.

"There's the physical cost involved in documenting, sorting, and warehousing work. An online library, however, doesn't cost much, and once digitised, it's there forever," he points out.

The trio approached the National Library Board (NLB) about Nora in September 2003.

The board bought into it immediately and, in turn, soon secured funding and put its team of 10 people to work to suss out, scan and sort out the works — not to mention designing a Net interface that made for easy searching and viewing of documents.

Nora is now part of the NLB's larger digital library of Singaporean historical documents, literary works and research.

NLB plans to expand the list of contributors in the future, as well as include works written in Tamil, Chinese and Malay.

If things really roll, Nora will eventually encompass film scripts, music scores, essays and even visual art.

Of course, copyright issues will arise, but so far, contributors and their publishers have been mostly enthusiastic about the project and have given NLB permission to archive their work online.

While the three writers have since turned the project over to the NLB, they still advise the Nora team and have big hopes for Nora.

As Mr Pang puts it: "Nora is not yet a definitive collection of Singapore's artistic works, but it's the first step towards building one."

► Nora will be launched officially at 6:45pm on Thursday at the Library@Orchard. Open to the public. Admission is free. For details on contributing work to the archive, contact Mr Mohamed Salim on tel: 65467280 or e-mail: Mohamed_SALIM@nlb.gov.sg