

A FORTUNATE MAN by New Perspectives

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“The Doctor Who Couldn’t Save Himself”

Reviewer: Isaac Tan

Performance: 19 January 2019

A Fortunate Man is an attempt by New Perspectives, a theatre company based in Nottingham in the UK, to respond to a book of the same name by art critic and essayist John Berger and photographer Jean Mohr.

First published in 1967, it chronicles the routines of a country doctor, John Sassall, and the personalised style of care that made him indispensable to the community. The book took on a new complexion when Sassall killed himself 15 years after its publication.

As the book consisted of an interplay of photographs, pithy lines, and vignettes, playwright and director Michael Pinchbeck decides to take the audience into the book through what the programme notes rightly describes as an “expressionistic explosion”. And it is a beautiful one at that.

Initially framed as a lecture-performance, actors Haley Doherty and Jamie De Courcey introduce us to the book by way of Mohr’s photographs, projected on a medical screen, and Berger’s philosophy as entry points. Sassall’s practice is also contrasted with how things are today, as time pressures and bureaucracy make it almost impossible for professionals to practise personalised care. Pinchbeck also keenly highlights Mrs. Sassall’s role in keeping her husband’s practice together – a fact left out by Berger altogether.

Where the expressionistic element comes in is through tossing the audience into an avalanche of images. Pinchbeck brings in lines from the book, other writings by Berger, and props that enhance the atmosphere of the vignettes presented.

A memorable example is when Doherty bandages a tree branch as De Courcey narrates an incident in which Sassall treats a man who had been crushed by a tree. Apart from eliciting laughter, the absurd image also highlights the futility of the treatment in this case, as Sassall comforts the patient by saying, “I know... I know... I know.”

That simple phrase may mean little on paper, but it has a great effect on the patients. This also epitomises the whole production as the actors offer very understated portrayals, allowing the audience to let the images to sink in and process the emotions they elicit.

Yet, the meditative atmosphere does result in the show sagging a little towards the third quarter.

But just before I tip over into a state of comatose, I am revived by the beautifully elegiac rumination on the effects that Sassall’s bipolar disorder had on him. It is heart-breaking to watch how the doctor could not save himself, as the options for treatment then were so

dismal.

As De Courcey, embodying Sassall, walks on a carpet of strewn papers towards the audience with a bottle of medication in hand, I had the urge to hold the good doctor's hand and not let him retreat into the pages of the book; into the bottomless pit of his condition.

With the book prized by medical professionals as a reminder of their calling, it is tragic that we still have not come up with a way for the carers to be cared for 52 years after its publication.

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ABOUT THE PRODUCTION

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18 – 19 January 2019

Esplanade Theatre Studio

ABOUT THE REVIEWER

Isaac graduated from the National University of Singapore with a BA (Hons) in Philosophy, and he took Theatre Studies as a second major. He started reviewing plays for the student publication, Kent Ridge Common, and later developed a serious interest in theatre criticism after taking a module at university. He is also an aspiring poet and his poems have appeared in Symbal, Eunoia Review, Eastlit, and Malaise Journal.