

Review: Great Art with Few Blots

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Art

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Esplanade Theatre Studio

Mr Nelson Chia is a cunning fellow. By staging a play that explores the turbulent nature of friendship that unravels due to disagreements over an artwork's merits, any critique – from friend or foe – can be easily called into question. However, I am sure he would not mind me applauding his latest production.

While the painting in contention has a white background with diagonal lines, the actors' performances were anything but monochromatic. Well, save for a few blots.

Peter Sau excelled as the over-domineering, sardonic yet internally insecure Marc. His bullying presence and derisive laughter grated on my nerves for all the right reasons. Yet, as Marc revealed his insecurities in the final moments, Sau managed to evoke a sense of pathos which made me slightly charitable but never wholly sympathetic towards Marc as a character.

Liu Xiaoyi paled in comparison as Serge who unwittingly sparked the downward spiral of a tempestuous friendship. His performance in the first 30 minutes was bland which befitted the monastic decor of Serge's house. Serge's personality only began to show later but it was not fleshed out to its fullest potential. Luckily, Liu's uneven performance was saved by the strong rapport he had with his fellow actors.

Oliver Chong's portrayal of Yvan, the jester and failed peacemaker, was simply a treat to watch. He rewarded the audience with a wide range. From naïveté to slapstick – or merely bearing the uneasy grin on his face – his portrayals truly made the show a comedy. He impressively transited across portrayals without going overboard. This resulted in him successfully milking the laughter the show deserved without making it a Punch and Judy Show.

The creative team also deserves some mention. Wong Chee Wai did a great job of designing an economic yet functional set. It consisted of five off-white panels, a black sofa with a brown side table centre stage and a cushioned stool and wire mesh chair flanking the set. It is really clever that the different houses of the characters were created by merely turning the panels around.

This was complemented by Lim Woan Wen's light design which helped create vastly different atmospheres despite the relatively static set. The claustrophobic and pent up inner realities of the characters were evoked through an intense wash of blue light and enhanced by boxing the characters in white light. This is in stark contrast to the gentle treatment of the light when the characters interacted which creates a breezier atmosphere.

Gong Baorong must be commended for the close textual translation. Unfortunately, certain cultural elements were inevitably lost in translation. This is exacerbated by the fact that it is based on an English translation of Yasmina Reza's original French text.

Yet, what is lost in cultural distinctiveness is definitely compensated by a brilliant production that made the audience howl with laughter and, at the same time, consider the friendships that they have.

Time to go through my list of friends.