

AYER HITAM: A BLACK HISTORY OF SINGAPORE by Sharon Frese, Ng Yi-Sheng, and Irfan Kasban

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“Reclaiming a Sober History”

Reviewer: Isaac Tan

Performance: 17 January 2019

“Fraser was a well-known figure in Singapore [...] and there are many stories of him, but not fitted for this sober history.”

In her lecture-performance of *Ayer Hitam: A Black History of Singapore*, Sharon Frese recites the quote above from the book, *One Hundred Years of Singapore*. Fraser was a Caribbean butler who came to Singapore from the West Indies in 1887 when his master, Sir John Goldney, brought him along.

While the original context meant that anecdotes about Fraser are not relevant in an account of Singapore’s colonial legal history, the phrase “not fitted for this sober history” is emblematic of any record of people of African descent in our region.

Researched and written by Ng Yi-Sheng, directed by Irfan Kasban, and largely performed by Sharon Frese, *Ayer Hitam* is an attempt to retell a sober history.

Featuring local and regional personalities who are largely forgotten; contributions of the African diaspora to world events; and interspersing the show with African myths, Ng’s script covers a wide range of topics. Ng subtly compels us to confront the complex historical legacies that resulted in the spread of the African diaspora that go beyond slavery, which a simple apology and financial restitution will not be able to put right.

Ng may have charted this historical odyssey, but it is Frese who is our guide. She is thoroughly engaging and shape-shifts across a range of characters with sheer ease.

The constellation of her identities also makes her the perfect person to tell the tale. Being a British national of Jamaican descent who has worked and volunteered in Singapore for the past decade, she embodies certain aspects of the histories that she tells while having knowledge of Singapore.

Throughout the show, I find myself wondering about the choice to use a certain accent during particular segments. Why a crisp British accent to relay historical facts? Is there an added commentary here? I then had to remind myself that it is part of her identity too. Her composite identities make her both an insider and an outsider at the same time, as she reminds the audience that she is not really part of Singapore’s Chinese-Malay-Indian-Others race categorisation.

Towards the end of the performance, Frese expresses her unease that while she feels safe as a black woman in Singapore, she wonders if that is because of her British passport and her middle-class status. While her privilege might play a part, I also had the gnawing feeling that the low number of people of African descent in Singapore means that they are not seen as a threat. What would happen as soon as they are perceived to be disrupting the order, however ridiculous that perception might be?

It is important to note that the narrative of the show has a very general focus on Africa. What if we were to tease out finer-grained relationships between Asia and the diverse countries and cultures within the African continent? This reviewer can only hope that *Ayer Hitam* will continue to unearth more histories that have been buried for far too long.

Do you have an opinion or comment about this post? Email us at info@centre42.sg.

ABOUT THE PRODUCTION

AYER HITAM: A BLACK HISTORY OF SINGAPORE by Sharon Frese, Ng Yi-Sheng, and Irfan Kasban

17 – 20 January 2019

Centre 42 Black Box

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.