

CHINATOWN CROSSINGS by Drama Box

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“Well-Packaged Promenade“

Reviewer: Isaac Tan

Performance: 18 July 2018

If 2017 was the year of the musicals, then 2018 is the year of theatrical tours.

On the surface, *Chinatown Crossings* has little going for it when compared with other theatrical tours presented this year. And can the piece offer anything new, given that there are already countless tours of Chinatown being conducted by various groups?

Furthermore, despite Drama Box’s established practice of creating thought-provoking site-specific works, one can’t help but notice that the Singapore Tourism Board gets top billing in the list of supporters. Would the show, as Corrie Tan puts it in her [criticisms of another theatrical tour](#), “feel like a well-made public service broadcast for the Singapore Tourism Board”?

But despite my reservations, Drama Box does succeed in creating a tour that educates the general tourist, offers a heartfelt theatrical experience to the theatre-goer, and subtly challenges the official narrative of the place.

The main premise of the tour involves Kunalan (Pavan J Singh) wistfully telling his story of living in Kreta Ayer (as Chinatown was once known as to the locals) as a son of Indian immigrants. He recounts his friendship with the landlord’s daughter Ting Ting (Sabrina Sng), and Fong Cheh (Jodi Chen) – the *ma jie* (Chinese domestic helper) who brought up both of them. Ting Ting then picks up part of the tour and we soon see a slightly different perspective of the past.

What immediately makes this promenade theatrical performance different is the lack of demarcation of the pitstops where the scenes take place. We have to weave through the crowd, and most passers-by are unaware that a theatrical performance is going on, as they often walk into the performance area.

Add the fact that we are constantly plugged into a transmitter – which broadcasts what the actors are saying, soundscapes, or news broadcasts – and we find ourselves having to deal with the juxtaposition of the world of the play vis-à-vis “reality”. We are also presented with a palimpsest with aspects of the past and present coming to the fore at various points.

Jean Tay’s gentle text not only brings out the depth of the relationships amongst the three characters, but the social realities of various demographics, such as what the *ma jies* had to sacrifice. Additionally, Tay resists being a broadcast for Singapore Tourism Board through subtle lines, such as when Kunalan remarks that he has never seen so many

lanterns in his life, or that the famous Lai Chun Yuen opera house is now a hotel that keeps changing management – criticisms of the excessive exoticisation and commercialisation of Chinatown.

Kudos must go to the cast (on top of those mentioned, Aadi and Muhammed Izzan bin Jagafer Sadiqq take turns to play the young Kunalan, while Lu Jiayi and Toh Yun Woon play the young Ting Ting) for being able to balance the role of tour guide and actor at the same time. They also managed to create an intimate atmosphere, despite the tour group spreading out during scenes that take place outdoors.

If anything, *Chinatown Crossings* is proof that institutions can collaborate with art groups to create meaningful experiences. One hopes that Drama Box would uncover more stories in future seasons, and expand to other areas of Singapore.

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ABOUT THE PRODUCTION

CHINATOWN CROSSINGS by Drama Box

22 June – 18 August 2018

Various locations around Chinatown

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.