

# CUT KAFKA! by Nine Years Theatre & T.H.E Dance Company

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## “The Nightmare of Changing and Conforming“

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**Reviewer: Isaac Tan**

**Performance: 1 March 2018**

How does one stage a work inspired by Franz Kafka? Rather than a straight-laced adaptation of the writer’s literary works or life story, artistic directors Nelson Chia (Nine Years Theatre) and Kuik Swee Boon (T.H.E Dance Company) instead focused on immersing the audience in the Kafkaesque – a nightmarish quality that has a sense of a lingering oppression and the illogical.

With the help of writer-researcher Neo Hai Bin, a selection of Kafka’s short stories, diary entries, and letters are carefully curated to be presented in *Cut Kafka!*, while Chinese folktales and original scenes are infused to add a unique stamp to the Kafkaesque.

The innovativeness of this collaboration – a first for both companies – is seen from the get-go. The performers sprawl on the floor, trying to morph into something different so that they are free to go to work. Despite inverting Kafka’s *Metamorphosis*, it remains true to the spirit of his stories. It also sets the theme for the rest of the show: the nightmare of changing and conforming.

Later on, the performers tries to save a cat in the heavy rain, and the authorities are of no help. This brings to mind Kuo Pao Kun’s *Mama Looking for Her Cat*, in which the cat represents something intangible that is lost; and *The Coffin is Too Big for the Hole* – a critique of bureaucracy. The absurdity of *Coffin* is also apparent when the performers have to stop the rain or shrink the cat in order to save it.

Performance-wise, the directors clearly played to the strengths of their performers (Nine Years Theatre: Mia Chee, Hang Qian Chou, Neo Hai Bin, Jean Toh, and Timothy Wan; T.H.E: Anthea Seah, Brandon Khoo, Billy Keohavong, Lynette Lim, Ng Zu You). This is best demonstrated in a scene where the actors play the Monkey King, while the dancers complement them by physically embodying the lines being delivered.

Impressively, the ensemble has such strong synergy that one stops differentiating the actor from the dancer after a while. This is evident when the performers are clambering on the giant chair as Kafka’s letter to his father is recited. The inter-disciplinary exchange between both companies have clearly paid off.

Similarly, the design elements are meticulous. Adrian Tan and Pek Limin (lighting and spatial designers) had a red scaffolding built on top of the lighting rig, which resembles an insect’s legs. Various lights are hung on the “legs”, allowing the possibilities of carving or

partially revealing the space with light. As the performers enter or exit the space from four corners of the room, the performance has a sense of infestation.

Thankfully, *Cut Kafka!* does not veer into excesses of existential lament, but leaves us in limbo. We have to grapple with the equally unsavoury prospects of changing and conforming in a society quick to erase memories for the sake of “progress”, and equally quick to nudge deviants back in line.

Like the beetles, we have to change to conform to a certain societal logic. What that is or how do we go about it, no one quite knows.

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## **ABOUT THE PRODUCTION**

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**CUT KAFKA! by Nine Years Theatre & T.H.E Dance Company.**

1 – 4 March 2018

Esplanade Theatre Studio

## **ABOUT THE REVIEWER**

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**Isaac** 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 has a passion for acting and flamenco dancing.