

DARK ROOM x8 by Edith Podesta

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“Dark Room Sheds Light on Prison Life“

Reviewer: Isaac Tan

Performance: 5 July 2014, 3pm

It seems that there is a rising trend for docu-plays where the script is based on extensively edited interview transcripts. In this case, Edith Podesta (director and writer) interviewed several former inmates of Changi prison and transformed their experiences to the stage.

For a work-in-progress, it was hugely effective. In fact, the indications that this was a work-in-progress showcase were the free admission, the actors holding scripts, and no set. Apart from that, the showcase was polished, well thought out, and deeply affecting.

I was surprised to learn that all the actors only had access to the interview transcripts and not the recordings. Despite that, all of them delivered nuanced performances: capturing the speech quirks of the interviewees very well. Additionally, they picked up on each other's cues seamlessly despite not having memorised the script fully.

As the presentation went on, my initial reservations about whether a docu-play could match a documentary film faded away. Seeing eight men huddled together in a square lighting plot (designed by Adrian Tan) or to exchange looks in tender moments of friendship, made it a profoundly visceral experience. This is complemented by the fact that the audience is huddled together in a confined space which gave them a vicarious experience of the whole process.

The strength of this production was that it only presented the voices of the former prisoners. There was no authorial or directorial slant to portray the prison in any way apart from what was said. This resulted in a complex production that illustrated prison life in a very human way – its harsh realities, sorrows, and simple joys: the audience were left to form their own opinions.

I strongly believe that this play is a step in the right direction confronting the stigmatisation of former prisoners. I have always considered myself open-minded and accepting. At the end of the play, I realised that I was as judgemental as the next person – do their crimes and sentences really matter? Isn't it more important that these people have served their time and have turned over a new leaf?

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ABOUT THE PRODUCTION

DARK ROOM X8 by Edith Podesta

5 July 2014, 3pm & 8pm

Esplanade Theatre Studio

ABOUT THE REVIEWER

Isaac Tan is a current contributor to The Kent Ridge Common, an NUS publication, and an aspiring poet whose poems have appeared in Symbal, Eunoia Review, Eastlit, and Malaise Journal.