

DESCENDANTS OF THE EUNUCH ADMIRAL by Esplanade's The Studios: fifty

 centre42.sg/descendants-of-the-eunuch-admiral-by-esplanades-the-studios-fifty-2

“Jeff Chen’s Retelling Mutes Kuo”

Reviewer: Isaac Tan

Performance: 3 May 2015, 3pm

Kuo Pao Kun’s *Descendants of the Eunuch Admiral* is known for using Zheng He’s maritime voyages as a complex and ambivalent allegory.

The eunuch admiral drifting at sea serves as a metaphor for rootlessness and the knowing or unknowing acceptance of castration. Such an allegory gets us at the gut as it is a searing socio-political commentary that still rings true.

Director Jeff Chen’s re-interpretation relegates all that to the periphery.

It is not because none of his actors said a single word from the text. In fact, the choice of playing a recording of the text voiced by several theatre makers is a brilliant one. It presents the theatre canon as a collective collaboration amongst all its practitioners past and present.

Rather, it is his bag of party tricks, tableaux, and non-sequitur sequences that lead one to question the relevance of Kuo’s text in this production. While well performed by the ensemble (Koh Wan Ching, Jean Ng, Timothy Nga, Nora Samosir, and Najib Soiman), the relation between the sequences and the text is incredibly tenuous.

Chen’s irreverent direction may be read as a rejection of existing structures or Kuo’s legacy. That in itself is a fitting response to the play’s commentary. However, Chen’s insistence on adhering to his own artistic temperament runs the risk misleading and misguiding the audience.

The audience laughs either out of amusement at the incongruities or at the occasional low-brow references. The laughter hijacks the sombre moments in the text, replacing them with a series of subverting responses. The decision to drop a punching bag several times to emphasise castration effectively nullifies the most crucial speech about how castration can be pleasurable. This is an example of how Chen’s focus on putting his artistic stamp on the piece drowns Kuo out altogether. It is no wonder that, with corresponding irreverence, three audience members walk out midway of the show.

Chen mentions that one of his aims is to “update the text to make it appealing to contemporary audiences.” If so, the new generation would see this classic only as an incomprehensible but oddly funny play with a phallus obsession.

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

ABOUT THE PRODUCTION

**DESCENDANTS OF THE EUNUCH ADMIRAL by Esplanade's The Studios:
fifty**

30 April – 3 May 2015
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.