

EXCAVATIONS by Singapore Art Museum

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“If Walls Could Speak“

Reviewer: Isaac Tan

Performance: 15 April 2018

Including *Excavations*, we have already had three theatrical tours in the first quarter of this year (the other two being *State of Motion: Sejarah-Ku* by Asian Film Archive; and *Four Horse Road* by The Theatre Practice), where actors play tour guides or re-enact certain scenes at various pit stops.

What makes this sort of tour different from one led by a professional guide?

An immediate response is that it is more immersive. But what makes it so? Surely, with a sizeable budget, any museum can hire technical wizards to revamp the space and create soundscapes. So what is it about having trained actors that makes it immersive?

That question lingers in my mind for the first 20 minutes of *Excavations* as I follow Sabrina Sng, who plays an architect tasked to convert St. Joseph’s Institution (SJI) into Singapore Art Museum. She puts on a slightly comical Singaporean accent as she explains the architectural features and the original functions of certain rooms.

The answer becomes clear when we hear a siren and our silent tour guides, clad in SJI uniforms, beckon us into a lift to descend a few floors. The sense of uncertainty is made more unnerving when we see the SJI students visibly shaken. The lift hatch rises and we see a beaming Japanese officer (Tan Shou Chen), inviting us into his bunker. What follows is a heartfelt monologue about his tacit involvement in the war, and his apprehension about the intentions of the Japanese army.

Apart from the actors’ ability to hold an audience captive – quite literally in Tan’s case, as we are tied up together for a couple of minutes – what makes this particular tour immersive is the dynamics of the relationship between the audience and the performers.

On a usual tour, there is a passive reception of information. But here, we are afforded more agency as the guides merely hint at where we should go, and we are also able to interact with the characters at various points. The relationship thus becomes interactive rather than transactional.

Of course, this is only possible with the stellar performances by the cast (in addition to those already mentioned, we have Moli Mohter, Jaisilan Santhiasilan, Julius Foo, Budy Hartono, Desmond Soh, Keith Lee, Khyan Kotak).

Chong Tze Chien should be congratulated for his script, which covers a broad sweep of history without fetishising the past. It is also moving and entertaining at times, with a little love story added in.

Kudos should also go to Ctrl Fre@k, Han Xue Mei, Puny Life Form, and Liu Yong Huay for the excellent production design, and pinpoint accuracy of the cues despite there not being a technical crew member in sight.

As one of the last few audience members to bear witness to the stories excavated on this tour, I cannot help but wonder what other untold tales these walls have witnessed. I look forward to seeing what new chapter one would encounter when the museum reopens after renovations in 2022.

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

ABOUT THE PRODUCTION

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6 – 15 April 2018

Singapore Art Museum

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.