

FORKED by The Finger Players

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“The Many Prongs of Forked”

Reviewer: Isaac Tan

Performance: 18 August 2019

Under Chong Tze Chien’s direction, the latest staging of *Forked* by Jo Tan has evolved into a monodrama, performed by the playwright herself.

Inspired by her experiences in Paris when she was learning clowning, Tan’s play is centred on Jeanette, who goes to London to study drama. She struggles with her sense of identity as her school mates from various countries have certain expectations of her, while her crusty French acting teacher demands for her to be natural and speak in her “native language”.

There is a sense of normative determinism with this play. The search for identity places *Forked* well within Singapore’s tradition of monodramas, while the plot is in tune with the recent crop of plays that feature the acting profession in various ways.

Additionally, the displacement that Jeanette feels on a personal level mirrors that of Singapore in the international arena. Jeanette finds herself resisting both the residual colonial ideas of orientalism and her mainland Chinese school mate Yum Yum’s outlook that “Chinese people should help Chinese people.”

Yet, when there is a casting opportunity for a television series by a director looking for a bilingual East Asian actress, Jeanette is not beyond asking Yum Yum to coach her in Mandarin, or play up to certain stereotypes. But that ultimately leaves her feeling hollow, bringing the show to its climatic moment.

Tan’s versatility as a performer is well known within the theatre scene. Her ability to run through the gamut of accents and her comic physicality in embodying various characters have been much fêted. Her doing that with a toe injury intensifies the praises.

For me, the true mark of her versatility is her ability to continue the trajectory of the scene through her intentional play-acting without letting it become a full-blown vaudeville act. She also manages to inject pathos or bathos immediately when she changes character and deliver a smart quip or revelation.

That said, the presentation of the supporting characters in broad stereotypes does lose its comic novelty, even though the patient viewer is rewarded by discovering that they are also presenting a version of themselves to the world towards the last quarter of the play.

It would be remiss of me not to mention the wonderful design elements that enhance the play. Darren Ng’s cinematic sound design echoes Jeanette’s idealised version of England as presented by popular British movies. This is complemented by Chan Silei’s set, which

has only the top frame of old English street lamps suspended at the sides of the space.

Also, there is a cleverness to Lim Woan Wen's lighting design with standing lamps casting Tan's shadows of varying sizes, or the flashing of boxes of light on the walls to create the illusion of the passing Underground train.

Thematically and aesthetically, *Forked* has grown into a complex play that leads us down many roads of discovery and contemplation. With the director admitting that the piece is still a work-in-progress, one cannot wait to see the next incarnation of the piece.

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ABOUT THE PRODUCTION

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15 – 18 August 2019

Drama Centre Black Box

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.