

Review: Lukewarm Reception at Bernarda's Abode

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The House of Bernarda Alba

W!ld Rice

15 March 2014

Run: 12-29 March 2014

Esplanade Theatre

Open the beautiful programme booklet and you will read Ivan Heng (artistic director/costume designer) and Glen Goei (director) eagerly welcoming you to Bernarda Alba's house. I did not feel welcomed and it was a rather lukewarm reception for me.

Written by Federico Garcia Lorca and adapted by Chay Yew, the play revolves around Bernarda Alba declaring that her household, consisting of five daughters, a mother and two maids, shall mourn the death of her husband for eight years. As with any oppressive situation, the passions and motives of her daughters threaten to upset the balance.

While W!ld Rice was keen to emphasise that they have adapted it for the Singaporean audience, I felt alienated simply because Goei changed it to a Peranakan household. Nothing in Chay Yew's script indicated anything distinctly Peranakan and all the characters retained their original Spanish names. It is my strong opinion that Singaporeans are cosmopolitan enough to appreciate the themes that Lorca was touching on even if it were set in rural Spain. Such localisation is merely cosmetic.

As for the casting, it is really rare to see so many accomplished actresses involved in the same production. Any frequent theatre goer would be able to list some memorable roles that these women created. The general monotony of the performances came as a big surprise to me and I found myself constantly referring to the programme – I refused to believe that the names inside and the reputation that comes with it would tally with what I was watching. None of the actresses playing the daughters stood out for me.

While Claire Wong (Bernarda Alba) had an unmistakable presence on stage, her portrayal of the tyrannical matriarch soon became a tiresome mixture of *Downtown Abbey*, *Little Nonya* and *Masters of the Sea*. Furthermore, the lack of variety in portraying anger resulted in her hitting a plateau early on in the play. This was such a waste as the last scene could have been really powerful and Wong was more than capable to be able to handle it.

The only exception was Jo Kukathas as the feisty maid, Poncia. I was struck by her ability to maintain the tenuous power play between challenging Bernarda and remaining grudgingly subservient so as not to be thrown out. Additionally, Kukathas' performance

kept portions of the play from falling apart such as the scene in which Poncia is knitting with the daughters. I felt as if I were a member of the household, privy to the juicy gossip and rushing to the windows to see what was going on outside.

Thankfully, what was disappointing performatively was compensated by the work of the creative team. Ivan Heng proved that he could wear a different hat and still look good in it. His costumes were intricately designed and were far from boring despite it being black. It is unfortunate that the audience were unable to appreciate the full extent of his design and one hopes that it would be reused for a television production some day.

Adding to the spectacle was Wong Chee Wai's opulent set design. From the giant doors in the background to the rooms demarcated by platforms and dressers, one wonders how he managed to create the illusion of grandeur with relatively simple elements. A marvellous feature is that while the set is austere and oppressive, it was also porous as the audience could partially see the backstage area. This gave the household a sense of vulnerability – people can look in and rumours can permeate.

Yet, excellence in set design can be a double-edged sword. I was distracted by a member of the ensemble as she kept adjusting her veil before coming on stage for the mourning scene.

With all the hype and a great marketing campaign, it is sad to see that this production which is part of the masterpiece series was not masterfully executed.

It is ok, I shall see myself out.