

LEAR IS DEAD by Nine Years Theatre

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“Fool-ish Interludes”

Reviewer: Isaac Tan

Performance: 26 October 2018

If there is a defining feature in Nine Years Theatre’s 2018 season, it is a greater deal of intervention and adaptation of the source material. The company is no longer content with presenting robust translations of Western classics, and is willing to depart from them through direction or introduction of original text.

In his effort to make Shakespeare’s *King Lear* accessible, director Nelson Chia grooms the king by cutting out various subplots, and using a modern vernacular in the translation and surtitles.

Unfortunately, Chia’s *Lear* ends up over-groomed, as though processed by a beauty photo app, which makes him slightly unrecognisable and less potent as a complex character.

Chia also frames this as a play presented by the fools in the court after Lear’s demise, to commemorate the king’s legacy. As such, the show is intermittently bookmarked with a talk show in which one of the fools interviews her colleagues (every actor doubles up as the fool and one of the principal characters).

The interviews hardly provide any insightful commentary. Most of them bear thinly-veiled references to modern Singapore politics, which elicits sniggers of recognition. What little commentary there is revolves around governance without wisdom, and a provocation that the people should do something. This colours the audience’s perspective, and portrays the descent of *Lear* as the direct result of his unsound governance.

Even if we were to focus on that sole issue, there is no attempt to unearth what wisdom in governance means. Given that there are several dialogue interludes throughout the show, the non-attempt is surprising.

That said, the cast (Mia Chee as Goneril, Hang Qian Chou as Gloucester, Neo Hai Bin as King Lear, Timothy Wan as Edmund and Kent, Jodi Chan as Regan, and Shu Yi Ching as Cordelia) puts up a strong performance that is taut and impactful.

The constant training that the Nine Years Theatre Ensemble undergoes clearly pays off here, as there is a sense of synchronicity amongst the members. An excellent testament to the company’s training pedagogy is that Chan and Ching, who are not part of the core ensemble, blended in very well with the rest of the cast.

Special mention goes to Neo, who embodies Lear’s physicality with nuance, and it subtly changes as Lear gradually spirals out of control. While the meta-theatrical framing of the show, such as the audience seeing the actor putting on and taking off Lear’s costume,

dispels any expectation of a realistic portrayal, it is still an achievement on Neo's part.

Despite the thematic simplicity in its conception, *Lear is Dead* still makes for an excellent introduction for those who have reservations about approaching Shakespeare's original text.

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ABOUT THE PRODUCTION

LEAR IS DEAD by Nine Years Theatre

26 – 28 October 2018

Drama Centre Theatre

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.