

[Review] Normal Makes The Grade

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Normal

Checkpoint Theatre

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Drama Centre Black Box

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It is rather difficult to write a play about education.

On one hand, much has been said about the problems of our education policies and there are various portrayals of the difficulties students, who do not excel, face. On the other, the education debates are the domain of those who succeeded in the system and the extant portrayals are either pseudo-inspirational stories of a teacher helping a difficult class or observations from the outside.

Drawing from her personal experiences as a normal academic student, Faith Ng's *Normal* plays on what we are generally familiar with yet giving normal academic students a clear and distinct voice by placing them at the centre. What makes *Normal* different is that there are no easy feel-good solutions to the problems in the play.

Wilfully confident Ashley and Daphne, who is artistic and hardworking, are in their final year at Trinity Girls' School. Being in the normal (academic) stream, they stand out as the oldest students while the others, from the special and express streams, have graduated a year earlier. With little expectation of them passing their O levels, things takes a hopeful turn when the idealistic teacher Sarah Hew takes over the class. But it is still a complex and uphill task for the students.

The script ambitiously balances the students' struggles, student-teacher dynamics, and staff room politics to show that the problem is more complex than just deeply entrenched prejudices. The writing is equally complex as Ng crafts her characters to various degrees of realism. Furthermore, the interesting and sometimes ambiguous relationships between the characters keep the audience intrigued.

Ng's keen ear for dialogue manifests in the subtle changes in tone and register of the characters depending on their intentions and whom they are talking to. To top it off, there are a couple of well-chosen metaphors that recur and develop throughout the play which give the anguish of the students much more depth and poignancy.

The cast must be congratulated for being able to take on this complex piece. Audrey Teong definitely gained the audience sympathy in her earnest portrayal of Daphne who keeps failing despite her best efforts. Teong manages to be consistent with some of Daphne's quirks without overplaying it.

Claire Chung (Ashley) is a nice counterpoint to Teong with her defiant and smug attitude and uses every trick in the bag to annoy her teachers. She possesses a keen sense of timing as she nailed some of the comic moments such as questioning her teacher about her boyfriend. While having a great energy on stage, there are times when some of her words are unclear especially when she confronts her form teacher.

Oon Shu An delights us once again with her portrayal of the form teacher, Sarah Hew. It is interesting to watch how the character change from being bright eyed and a little naïve to someone who is determined to help her students but faces some pushback from her superiors.

Director Claire Wong should be commended for getting the ensemble to experiment with vocal soundscapes. This charges the whole show with more energy as compared to playing recorded effects of the clock or announcement bells. Hymns and campfire songs are used in the transition of scenes and the variation in the way it is sung heightens the atmosphere of certain scenes. The vocal chops of the ensemble also made it all the more impressive.

That said, marks must be deducted for certain protracted scenes which caused the show to run out of steam. This is most unfortunate as the wonderful monologues towards the end seemed to be slightly lost on the audience. The final line should also be cut as it is jarring and anti-climatic.

It would be remiss of me not to mention Eucien Chia's minimal but functional set comprising three rectangular structures to frame the stage while doubling up as a scrim for the ensemble. Lim Woan Wen's light design certainly complements Chia's set. I was most delighted by how she angled her lights on the set to cast a shadow of a hipped roof on the back wall which creates the illusion of an outdoor morning assembly.

Unflinching in its honesty, *Normal* makes the grade not by having the right answers but by asking the right questions.