

PISSED JULIE by Nine Years Theatre

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“Trite Julie Leaves One Pissed“

Reviewer: Isaac Tan

Performance: 18 May 2018

With his reinterpretation of August Strindberg’s *Miss Julie*, director Nelson Chia goes back to Nine Years Theatre’s tradition of staging Chinese adaptations of Western works, while also starting a new trend. The trend of leaving his audience in limbo.

In *Cut Kafka!*, he intentionally does so in order to immerse the audience in the Kafkaesque. But in *Pissed Julie*, one is left in a tedious state, wondering if there is anything more to say beyond the idea that identity, culture, and gender are social constructs.

Chia constructs a house of placards through multiples of threes: motifs of a waltz through movement sequences and sound design; three actors playing one character; and approving a set design by Wong Oi Kuok, consisting of three flats tilted to one side.

Furnish that house with other clever props like a microwave to give a modern nudge-and-wink, impose the whole structure on Strindberg’s original work, and we get a very glib production that lacks meaty characterisations.

In his bid to explore the complexities of identity, Chia thematically assigned lines to the three actors playing each character. In the case of Jean the valet, Leong Fan Kai (from Macau) delivers lines when Jean is being chauvinistic, Timothy Wan is Jean when he is being clinically rational, while Hang Qian Chou plays Jean at his hopeless moments.

Once the audience gets the conceit, seeing all nine actors [Miss Julie: Kate Leong (from Macau), Mia Chee, and Jean Toh; Christine: Flora Ho Chi Lao (from Macau), Mandy Cheang (from Macau), and Neo Hai Bin] criss-cross on stage and occasionally form tableaux supposedly manifest the idea of flux and possibilities of plot development. This is meant to enhance the struggles of class, gender, religion, and social mores in the story, where Miss Julie, a count’s daughter, sleeps with Jean, her father’s valet. They then have to decide on how best to minimise the scandal, which is intensified by the very religious Christine – Jean’s beau and maid of the household.

Unfortunately, all this results in a sort of morality play, with each actor representing a particular element or personality. Having eschewed a naturalist staging, but still remaining faithful to the script, the ensemble – while excellent in the synchronicity of movements – offers an otherwise flat performance due to the disjointed nature of the set-up.

What could have been two unpredictable animals taking turns to be predator and prey – in cycles of manipulation, seduction, and persuasion – turns out to be a masterclass in dancing the box step.

Furthermore, the juxtaposition of Mandarin and Cantonese has a lot of potential, but it ends up being merely a hat tip to the fact that this is a collaboration with the Macau Arts Festival.

After 90 minutes (even the show's duration is a multiple of three!) of plodding about, one is ready to snatch the wine bottle off Jean and get pissed.

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ABOUT THE PRODUCTION

PISSED JULIE by Nine Years Theatre

17 – 20 May 2018

KC Arts Centre

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.