

RED by Blank Space Theatre

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“A Faint Pulse With Red“

Reviewer: Isaac Tan

Performance: 12 July 2014, 3pm

“What do you see?” asks artist Mark Rothko of his assistant, Ken, when both characters first meet. Rothko then goes into his first (of many) lectures about his paintings compelling the viewers to feel them pulsating. If this mirrors what playwright John Logan was trying to achieve, the pulse I felt was very faint.

Logan structures his play by confining his characters in an art studio as issues of creation, viewership, art, and consumerism are explored through their heated arguments. Undoubtedly, this makes the actors’ job extremely demanding.

Daniel Jenkins portrayed the verbose Rothko rather well. Despite having huge chunks of text, he managed to deliver it clearly without the need to alter the speech pattern when speaking to Ken; as opposed to him launching into a tirade of what art should be. He also displayed a great deal of sensitivity in his physicality as his heavy gait was effortlessly maintained throughout the show.

Gavin Yap (Ken), on the other hand, was no match for Jenkins. It seemed that Yap took Rothko’s lines about Ken finally existing, only after the latter lashes out at the former’s pretentiousness, literally. For most of the play, Ken felt like a talking robot whose sole purpose was keeping Rothko company. It did not help that Logan under-developed the character of Ken. One has no insight into Ken’s stance on art and he appears to be nothing more than a convenient device to create conflict for Rothko.

As for the text, Logan certainly displayed his knowledge by making various philosophical references but that was all he did. This left me cold as Rothko’s rants became more of an intellectual pageant rather than a frustrated exposition in aesthetics. The only merits of the text were his occasional wordplay and meta-theatrical references about the lights creating the illusion for the viewer.

Had it not been for Jenkins’ performance, the meta-theatrical reference would be prophetic as the technical elements would have been the only thing worth watching.

Wong Chee Wai excelled in creating a gritty set with rather simple elements. It was interesting how a few windows, piping, boards, shelves, and a table could create a claustrophobic art studio yet allowing ample space for the actors to execute the scene changes.

James Tan’s light design complemented the set by enhancing the mood of each scene while depicting different times of the day and seasons of the year very persuasively.

Jeffery Yue managed to achieve an impossible balance between his discordant soundtrack and the occasional jazz or classical music that was put on the phonograph.

It was really the production team, who had evidently put in a lot of thought into their craft, that held the production together.

To return to Rothko's question, all I saw was a lovely set, awesome lights and sound, and actors entering and exiting.

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ABOUT THE PRODUCTION

RED by Blank Space Theatre

10-13 July 2014

Esplanade Theatre Studio

ABOUT THE REVIEWER

Isaac Tan is a current contributor to The Kent Ridge Common, an NUS publication, and an aspiring poet whose poems have appeared in Symbal, Eunoia Review, Eastlit, and Malaise Journal.