

SINGLE MOTHERS by Dwayne Ng

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“The Plight of *Single Mothers*”

Reviewer: Isaac Tan

Performance: 20 December 2019

With Singapore’s drive to increase birth rates while retaining the traditional notions of a nuclear family, single mothers have often been overlooked in our domestic welfare policies.

As such, playwright Dwayne Ng’s attempt at highlighting some social struggles that single mothers face is much needed, but audacious. Unfortunately, his text skims the surface, while certain oddities in Isaiah Christopher Lee’s direction are distracting.

The play features three single mothers. Kar Leng (Rachel Linn Braberry) is a divorcée with three middle-aged daughters. She only has her youngest daughter for company as the others are busy with family and work. While she is eager for her daughter marry, she faces the threat of loneliness.

Jessica (Jessica Isabelle Tan) is a pregnant teenager who is kicked out of her house and abandoned by her boyfriend, so she stays with her best friend and works at a café.

Sunitha (Alia Alkaff) is a widow who balances between work and taking care of her son, who constantly gets into trouble at school.

With these pithy descriptions, one could immediately think of a few concerns that would weigh on these women. But Ng’s script does not flesh them out and only portray the surface tensions the characters face.

Take Sunitha’s case for example. Her lunch with an obnoxious colleague (also played by Braberry) is interrupted at one point as her son has gotten into trouble. We then see confrontation with her son, and the unlikely instance of the teacher blaming her for her son’s disciplinary problems without any build-up. But the guilt or pressures of work are neither apparent in the text, nor in the performance.

While the other characters have quite a lot of witty quips that elicit laughter, these do not reveal more about the relationships between the characters or about the women themselves. It is as if Ng employs banter just to make the sombre issues palatable. Worse still, he later includes melodramatic plot twists to move the story forward.

There is a similar lack of detail in Lee’s direction.

Jessica is seen carrying a small empty tray that could only fit two cups of tea, but she mimes serving Sunitha and her colleague two plates of food as if she is merely laying out coasters on the table. After a disagreement, Sunitha then leaves the table and stands in

one corner of the café while looking out, as if she is in her own home.

There are some effective choices, such as the interchangeability of the shroud and wedding veil, or scattering of red sand. However, such symbolic elements should not be left on stage in the next scene, which has nothing to do with the scene before.

As for the acting, despite their valiant attempts, the actors fail to go beyond a certain mood or emotion. Some emotional outbursts seem to come out of nowhere.

The plight of *Single Mothers* is that it is blighted by various inconsistencies that ultimately distracts us from understanding the struggles of what single mothers face.

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ABOUT THE PRODUCTION

SINGLE MOTHERS by Dwayne Ng

20 – 21 December 2019

The Arts House, Play Den

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.