

TARTUFFE by Nine Years Theatre

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“Tartuffe Entertains in Mandarin”

Reviewer: Isaac Tan

Performance: 5 February 2015

By now, Nine Years Theatre has carved a niche in staging mandarin adaptations of classic western plays; and their signature appears to be having the actors stand around as the audience enters. Given the configurations of the gallery theatre, it feels like I am about to watch an amateur show put up in someone’s living room.

Thankfully, that feeling goes away the moment the show starts.

Written in 1664, *Tartuffe* is a satire that exposes the hypocrisy of religious figures who don a pious exterior only to gain favours and financial benefits.

Orgon, a French nobleman, pities the downtrodden but ostensibly religious Tartuffe and invites him to live in his household. His admiration turns into blind devotion at the expense of his family and wealth. Meanwhile, his family must find a way to expose Tartuffe before it is too late.

As with most comedy, it is the witty servant that carries the show and this one is no different. Jalyn Han as Dorine brings on the laughs with her keen comic timing and energy. She also strikes a balance between the exaggeration needed in the comedy and the quieter moments when she is a keen observer.

Darius Tan’s Orgon, is a wonderful foil to Dorine. They play off each other well and the actors’ energies are well-matched. However, Tan plays Orgon’s folly without the concordant gravitas of the head of the household. This reviewer wonders why his family should take him so seriously in the first place.

Mia Chee as Orgon’s wife, Elmire, starts on shaky ground but she steadily grows into her role; especially during the crucial moments when she is needed in order to expose Tartuffe. Koh Wan Ching plays Cléante, who is another moral anchor in the play. She manages to temper the sombre moral expositions with comic physicality which is a delight to watch.

Unfortunately, the actors playing the children and the titular character do not quite match up. Jean Toh as Marianne leaves no strong impression. Neo Hai Bin’s Damis (Orgon’s son) and Valère (Marianne’s fiancé) are not sufficiently differentiated beyond the different costumes.

Hang Qian Chou (Tartuffe) excels in putting on a pious affectation but is unable to shift convincingly when he reveals his true colours.

Perhaps, the jitters—as mentioned by Mayo Martin— has not fully worn off as most of the actors garbled their words on occasion. Also, a chronic problem with productions of Nine Years Theatre is that the English surtitles reveal the punch lines before the actors deliver them. Director Nelson Chia should consider timing those lines with the actors' delivery.

Tartuffe is not without its kinks but the comedy does translate well into mandarin. While the show clocks in at an hour and forty-five minutes, it is not tedious and provides enough entertainment for those seeking a little after-work light diversion.

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ABOUT THE PRODUCTION

TARTUFFE by Nine Years Theatre

4 – 8 February 2015

National Museum Gallery Theatre

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.