

THE LADY OF SOUL AND HER ULTIMATE 'S' MACHINE by Esplanade's The Studios: fifty

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“Tan’s Soul-Searching Play Still Relevant Today”

Reviewer: Isaac Tan

Performance: 7 May 2015

With the nation’s jubilee celebrations a few months away, the organisers would definitely pull out all the stops to show Singapore at its best, most energetic, and most vibrant.

But what does a vibrant nation look like? That is the same question facing Derek, a civil servant in Tan Tarn How’s *Lady of Soul and Her Ultimate ‘S’ Machine*. Through a madcap journey in search for what provides a nation its soul, Derek has to choose from three extreme choices.

In the end, he is left with his own choice: should he propose what the authorities want to hear or what he thinks is right?

Unlike previous plays with political themes, the sophistication of Tan’s writing lie in his ability to deliver hard-hitting criticisms without having its characters engage in ponderous debates. Additionally, the satire which pokes fun at bureaucratic inefficiency and the government’s tendency to prescribe something that develops organically still resonate today.

Director Zizi Azah showcases her creative soul by restaging this classic in a heightened reality with a slight sci-fi feel. Despite the small space, she manages to contain all the larger-than-life characters with their various antics well.

This reviewer also appreciates the updated references in the play that make the production current. “Father, the Son, and the Holy Goh” is changed to Ho-Lee” done with a huge nod and wink. Also, Derek informing the minister that the various sub-committees will take a break during Thaipusam, rather than Deepavali, is a cheeky reference to netizens petitioning the government to recognise it as a public holiday.

While the characters are not meant to be fully fleshed out, kudos go to Prem John (Derek) and Crispian Chan (Paul, minister of state and Derek’s lover) for having an onstage chemistry which makes their shared past and covert relationship believable. That said, Prem John does have a studied approach to his character which occasionally results in a monotonous delivery of his lines. This is most obvious when he is trying to convince the Minister of Culture to accept his proposal.

Gene Shah Rudyn is absolutely comfortable in his role as the Minister for Culture. Every wide smile and snappy wave of his hand to silence everyone is on point. While Lian Sutton (Alban, the communist who thinks propaganda is what gives a country its soul) and Farez

Najid (Sham, the artist who proposes absolute freedom) have great stage presence, their portrayals of the stock characters are not consistent.

Of course, Rizman Putra's Madame Soh is unforgettable with a gold sequined dress, giant angel wings, and one too many pelvic thrusts. His musical background helped to keep the otherwise unpolished vaudeville sections afloat.

While Paul's suggestion of telling the public that "soul is very difficult to cultivate" is meant to reinforce the status quo, it has a kernel of truth. It has been almost twenty-five years since the play was written but its message is still very relevant today.

Hence, it is most fitting that Tan's soul-searching play opens on the same day as the publication of Corrie Tan's [article](#) calling for our arts policies to "win hearts."

Do you have an opinion or comment about this post? Email us at info@centre42.sg.

ABOUT THE PRODUCTION

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7 – 10 May 2015

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.