

# TRIBES by Pangdemonium! Productions

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## “Tribal Triumph”

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**Reviewer: Isaac Tan**

**Performance: 5 June 2015**

We think we know what it entails — ear-piercing screeches from a misaligned hearing aid, having to shout out words, and the dexterity of one’s fingers in using sign language. But our feeble attempts to be inclusive which is expressed through simpering coos of sympathy often silence them altogether.

Yes, *them*: the hearing impaired – the deaf. You may have seen them but Nina Raine’s *Tribes* will make you listen and Pangdemonium must be thanked for bringing this British gem to the Singapore stage.

“Join in, have an argument” says Christopher (Adrian Pang) as he goads his deaf son, Billy (Thomas Pang). In this highly dysfunctional family, quarreling is the main form of communication. Being born deaf in a hearing family, Billy can only pick up bits and pieces through lip reading and none of his family ever stopped and relay the details to him.

However, when he falls in love with Sylvia (Ethel Yap), a girl who is going deaf and born into a deaf family, he learns to sign and gains a sense of independence. Tensions rise as the family has to deal with this independence while Billy and Sylvia come to grips with the differences their impediment brings.

Being proficient in sign language is no mean feat. But being able to speak as if one cannot hear one’s voice while maintaining the nuances is another skill altogether. Here is where Thomas Pang (Billy) and Ethel Yap (Sylvia) are brilliant. The audience is also rewarded with a sensitive performance that is heartfelt and poignant as the actors navigate a vast range of complex emotions.

At the play’s climax, Billy signs furiously while Sylvia translates it to his family to little effect. Through this rising intensity, it feels as if Billy is letting out a primal scream of yearning, desperation, and indignation caused by a breakdown of communication.

The effect is, quite simply, stunning.

Billy’s parents, Christopher (Adrian Pang) and Beth (Susan Tordoff), articulate the spectrum of views that society has towards the deaf community. Pang excels as the stiffly prejudiced academic while Tordoff delights as the sympathetic but protective mother.

Even though Billy’s siblings, Ruth (Frances Lee) and Daniel (Gavin Yap), are not fully fleshed out characters, the two actors must be commended for the energy that they bring to the stage. This drives up the tension and enhances the juxtaposition between Billy and

the rest of his family. Yap must be commended for the transition from being obnoxious to a broken man.

Director Tracie Pang must be commended for coalescing the different strands of the play. Tapping into multimedia designer Brian Gothong Tan's talents, the choice to include projections which tells us the setting, the characters' thoughts or what Sylvia and Billy, is signing is a clever one. At times, it feels as if one is being talked down to – a common experience for the deaf – while, at other times, it provides one with the much needed information to understand what is communicated.

Having been accustomed to expressing ourselves through sounds, silences are often uncomfortable and we would break it in an instant. Yet, the silences in this play are pregnant with the full dearth of human emotions. Uncharacteristically, the audience lets the silence dominate. Fittingly, no mastery of English could encapsulate what that feels like and it must be experienced for oneself.

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## **ABOUT THE PRODUCTION**

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### **TRIBES by Pandemonium! Productions**

22 May – 2 June 2015  
Drama Centre Theatre

## **ABOUT THE REVIEWER**

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**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.