

UpFront! with Faith Ng, Playwright of Normal

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Education has always been a hot topic as most societies struggle to find the best way to educate their citizens. From focusing on particular subjects in order to create a certain type of workforce to toying with the idea of scrapping some national exams, Singapore's education system has undergone several permutations. In the midst of these changes, one often overlooks the social and personal implications that such policies have on the students.

Faith Ng's latest play, *Normal*, attempts to explore the implications of categorising students into Express, Normal, and Normal Technical streams in secondary schools. Recently, I caught up with her to find out more about her play.



Faith Ng (1)

What made you decide to write *Normal*? Did you always want to write a play which addresses the education system?

As a former Normal Academic student, I can't begin to tell you the number of times I was called 'slow', stupid, lazy or defiant – to the point where I started to believe in those labels. Even now, I still wrestle with a lot of self-doubt. I wanted to give voice to Normal students and show their struggles, hopes and dreams.

The thought of writing a play about the education system never crossed my mind. It was probably because I spent so much of my life in the system that it had become such an unquestioning and ingrained part of me. When I left Singapore to do my Masters in Creative Writing (Scriptwriting) at the University of East Anglia however, the physical and emotional distance from my country allowed me to view my life with an entirely different lens. I thought about the fatalistic despair that I (and many other Singaporeans) experienced over results and became aware that it was actually not normal to base to one's success in life solely on the outcome of those results.

What is the biggest takeaway from the rehearsal process thus far?

The generous feedback and questions from the actors and Claire Wong, the director, on the various drafts of *Normal*, enriched my worldview as a playwright and helped me to flesh out the characters further. I go for rehearsal each time and come away surprised by

the ways in which the world in my head has come to life and how it continues to grow wider and deeper than my own imagination. It has been such a privilege and a great learning experience.

What does being normal mean to you? Feel free to interpret this in any way you wish.

It means realising that everybody has a different definition of what it means to be 'normal'. You don't have to follow everybody else's. You can make up your own. It means accepting yourself—your quirks and eccentricities, your flaws and strengths—for who you are.

While some progress has been made, what do you think can still be improved in the way we educate our young?

I feel that the race for success in Singapore can be very brutal. Students who lag behind are slotted into EM3 in primary school or the Normal stream in secondary school. A lot of discrimination takes place and labels are placed on them. Often, they begin to listen to those voices that say that they are never going to be good enough and they give up on themselves. It is important for schools to teach students that you are more than the grades on your paper, and to take joy in the process of learning rather than focus only on the end result.

What is your advice for students currently in the normal stream?

I want them to know that they are not alone; that they are not failures; that they are more than the sum of their grades; and that they should never, ever give up on themselves. When they grow up, they will realise that results are not everything—it doesn't tell you how good a person you are, how genuinely you love another human being, how much effort or passion you put into your work, or how much of a difference you will make in the life of others.

Tickets to Normal are sold out. Many thanks to Checkpoint Theatre for arranging this interview.