



M1 Peer Pleasure Youth Theatre Festival Plays Reviews

FESTIVAL
YOUTH
REVIEWER:
Ang Kia Yee

Photos by: Zinkie Aw

The theme for *M1 Peer Pleasure Youth Theatre Festival 2016* was Home. Try envisioning it as a source of light refracted through the eyes of the youth - a kaleidoscopic snapshot that is unique, beautiful and heartfelt.

The six Festival Plays spanned a bold range of topics and styles. Each programme encompassed three plays which delighted, challenged and brought audience members to tears.

HOUSING GAMES

Performed by: CHIJ Katong



Housing Games touched on a myriad of Singaporean issues, from censorship to socio-economic class divisions and competition. Set in 2065, the play envisions a Singapore of neon facades in which three families are seemingly selected at random to participate in a reality television competition. If they win, they are allowed to continue living in their housing units; if they lose, they are exiled to Pulau Semakau. Satirical and larger-than-life, *Housing Games* is a veiled criticism of competition, particularly competition that is founded upon the superficial, be it knowledge of Singapore trivia as

an indicator of “belonging”, or marriage as a requirement of convention and therefore status in society.

The costumes, hair and make-up were a visual delight, offering a hyper-real neon pop facade that contrasted sharply with the dark themes, while the sound design complemented and completed the fantastical reality of the play. The two students playing the snarky show hosts also put up particularly convincing and committed performances. (I also have a soft spot for their wonderful neon wigs.) Perhaps what might improve the piece is some trimming of the issues such that there is greater focus on a select few, thereby providing room for deeper exploration. Nonetheless, it was a commendable original work given the complexity of themes involved.

True to the dissonance that persists through the play, *Housing Games* concluded cynically, echoing the enduring notion that competition is a relentless cycle with no true winners. However, *Housing Games* is not without its glimmers of hope. In a few small moments, it proposed kindness and generosity as salves that can warm others and effect change.

Something I noticed throughout *Housing Games* was that a genuine playfulness shone through the ensemble. It helped lighten the weight of the themes, and reminded me that despite all the

anxieties we may vocalise and highlight through a show, theatre brings us back to our beginnings as children learning through play.

SUNDAYS

Performed by: Singapore Polytechnic



Sundays was a devised piece that revealed an honest snapshot of troubled families. As *Sundays* unfolded on stage, it became quickly evident that it came from a deep, painful place harbouring a strong desire to be loved.

The play focused on two families – one of a single mother and two children, the other of an only child and her parents. It was a story

told plainly and sincerely, incorporating relatable, modern elements such as texting, which was projected as multimedia on a screen. While *Sundays* highlighted the responsibility of parents to care for and make time for their children, it also laid bare some of the struggles faced by parents, such as a lack of income to fund more expensive endeavours and growth. It was simultaneously an expression of hurt and longing and an earnest attempt to understand and forgive.

The four actors put up truly earnest and vulnerable performances, which were supported by the minimalistic set and costumes. Actor Muhammad Zulfikar Bin Iskandar in particular should be commended for his clean and committed physical work at the section of the play where Rayqal runs across the stage, over and over, yelling the phrase, "blood is thicker than water" to the point of degeneration. It was powerful and without vanity. Another wonderful element of *Sundays* was the use of Malay by the Malay characters, which further grounded the play and added texture both aurally and textually. Strong performances and heart aside, *Sundays* might have done well with a tightening of transitions, which were often too long. The weighted, slow movements might have worked meaningfully for a few transitions, but when repeated they became too draggy and affected the overall tempo of the play.

Ultimately, *Sundays* was an artless, no-frills piece that tugged at the heartstrings of audience members and left a number of them in tears. I believe it made many of us feel far less alone in our struggles as sons and daughters, mothers and fathers, serving a true testament to the power of theatre to reflect, unite and heal.

BODY OF LAND

Performed by: School Of The Arts (SOTA)



How does one begin to address the immensely complex and beautiful *Body of Land*? Weaving together texts by Natalie Henedige, Kuo Pao Kun, Haresh Sharma, Jean Tay, Ovidia Yu and Zizi Azah, *Body of Land* was a sensory feast involving not only actors

but musicians, dancers and multimedia. The performers were strong and committed, coming together to produce a multi-layered and professional show, while the music complemented the text wonderfully, offering both comic and emotional moments an added dimension.

The text was beautifully curated and directed; each scene or extract was not an island in isolation but linked up with the others to form a sort of large continent that flowed and was enhanced by unification. That being said, it was a little difficult to connect with the piece at some points, probably because certain portions of the text were dense with complex imagery. It became quite easy for the audience to get lost amongst the words. This difficulty was perhaps exacerbated by the interspersing of extracts, which, while helping to weave the separate texts together and producing the unique texture of the play, required the audience to leap from reality to reality, one set of characters to the next. The links were present and transitions flowed neatly, but *Body of Land* was definitely a piece that demanded particular focus and effort to access.

That being said, *Body of Land* was a spell-binding piece that stood out from the rest of the Festival Plays for its finesse and artistry. The combined efforts of the performers produced something truly spectacular that raised the bar for youth theatre. Unlike the rest of the Festival Plays, as well, there is a sense that *Body of Land* comes

least from a personal place. It's not without heart, but seems to comparatively emerge more from the mind and a body trained in performance. Nonetheless it has its unique and specific place amongst the more personal pieces, and signals a greater development of youth theatre beyond its usual narrative forms and styles. *Body of Land* showcases the capacities of young practitioners to produce artistically-complex, high-quality pieces with a medley of existing literature. It demonstrates how far young people can reach beyond themselves to collaborate and interact with other art forms to produce an extraordinary piece of theatre.

IN THE CRACKS WE FIND

Performed by: Raffles Girls' School (Secondary)



In The Cracks We Find, framed primarily through the eyes of an only child, was a strong ensemble piece that examined troubled family dynamics. Through the conflicts that come between father, mother and daughter Tessa, it questioned the conventional idealistic and idyllic notions of family, and demonstrated how pride and lack of empathy can have debilitating effects on the family and on the psyches of its individual members.

Interestingly, despite its framing, the play offered ample room for the voices of the parents, a choice that culminated in an

illuminating and terrifyingly real argument between Tessa's parents. It was refreshing and heartbreaking to watch, leaving you anguished for all three parties. Special props to the actors playing the parents for giving such strong performances, especially for this emotionally-raw scene. The script and execution were both highly believable and very impressive.

There were numerous beautiful ensemble moments in the piece. A particular image that returns even now is a tableau with each member of the ensemble lining up in a chain, depicting the various stages in the growth of a child. The use of height and clean execution produced a particularly stunning visual. The main portion of the set, comprising four wooden slope pieces, was meaningfully employed, and served as a physicalisation of the uncertain, emotionally-tumultuous terrain of the daughter's family life.

However, the screens standing on both sides of the stage seemed to be potential unrealised. When employed, the light from above was insufficient illumination, causing characters behind them to be only partially seen. It was difficult to ascertain if the audience was meant to see a silhouette, clear figures, or nothing at all. Perhaps lighting the screens from the front or the back would have produced a better effect.

Technical comment aside, *In The Cracks We Find* was a powerful and emotional piece of theatre about family. It offered an honest and

raw glimpse into a family starved of meaningful communication and empathy.

PULL UP

Performed by: Clementi Town Secondary School



Pull Up was an exploration of suicide and the power of friendship set in our very present reality of planes going missing mid-journey. Captain Lee, a pilot who accidentally causes his close friend's death in an aviation accident, considers suicide as he flies a passenger plane over the site of the crash. Distraught and riddled with guilt, he ultimately attempts to fly the plane into the sea, only to be stopped by what appears to be the ghostly figure of his friend.

The central thrust of the play is a reminder that sometimes, what's past is past; we must forgive ourselves and keep moving forward. Significantly, Captain Lee's attempted suicide involves the lives of more than two hundred people on the passenger plane. It demonstrates how no man is an island; harming or punishing ourselves inevitably harms other people, whether our loved ones or strangers.

Accessing and rehearsing for *Pull Up* must have been difficult given these rather distant notions of anguish, guilt and helplessness. Nonetheless, the ensemble put up an earnest performance that was engaging, entertaining and moving. The set and costumes were also well done, helping to pull together the reality of a plane and a press conference. The large blackboard with details about the missing flight was especially eye-catching and effective. Another particularly strong image was that of three model planes equipped with LED lights travelling through the air at the start of the play.

All in all, *Pull Up* was an earnest piece about forgiveness and the strength of the human spirit. It seeks to tell us that no matter what, we mustn't give up. We must keep moving forward.

DANCING IN THE DARK

Performed by: Buds Theatre



Dancing In The Dark was a quirky, playful monodrama that examined social anxiety through the story of an anonymous girl who lives alone but is afraid to leave the sanctuary of her house to venture out into the world. She is visited by a cat which becomes a companion, a friend with whom she shares her thoughts, and ultimately the strength that propels her to step outside.

The piece was heartfelt and pained, characterised by nostalgia in the form of references to old television shows and songs. The realist set was in many ways also of an earlier vintage, comprising items

such as a slightly faded but colourful blanket and a typewriter. This realism and nostalgia, along with Anonymous' youthful energy and the poetic nature of the text, gave the entire play a rose-tinted, romantic sheen.

This sheen worked both for and against the play. While it drew the audience in aesthetically and made it relatable, it was also alienating because the context, setting and even daydreams of the main character were often difficult to access and imagine unless we had watched or listened to the same shows and songs that were referenced. The romanticisation of social anxiety was also a little troubling to see, especially in an age where the romanticisation of mental illness is already so rampant.

Additionally, perhaps something to work on directorially would be the texture and rhythm of the play. Despite the engaging and energetic performance by Sarah Supaat, certain points got rather draggy due to a lack of change in tempo, causing the overall energy to fall and the play to feel sometimes monotonous.

Nonetheless, *Dancing In The Dark* was an impressive monodrama performed by a tenacious and talented actress. Although the text was often dense with images and got quite wordy at points, Supaat executed the lines with grace. There were certain moments that would have benefited from greater voice projection, but as a lone body on stage she did spectacularly given how spread out the

audience area is in the Esplanade Recital Studio. The other members of the cast, Rishi Vadrevu and Michaela Hay, also put up impressive and polished performances.

Ultimately, *Dancing In The Dark* was an intimate piece that managed to fill the Recital Studio with its small ensemble and big heart. It demonstrated quite beautifully the strength of the human spirit, as well as the importance of connection and courage.

The 2016 edition has offered a broad range of plays spanning different styles and issues, from the deeply personal *Sundays* and *In The Cracks We Find* to the intricate *Body of Land*, from the emotional and relevant *Pull Up* and the larger-than-life *Housing Games* to the intimate and poetic *Dancing In The Dark*.

It has been an illuminating experience not only to see the beautiful work of young theatre-makers, but to also feel myself expand with them as an audience member. It brings to mind what Kenneth Kwok, National Arts Council Director of Arts & Youth and Strategic Planning, said at the Festival Launch - "Just watching a lot of theatre, allowing it to transform you and help you to grow as a human being - that's just as important [as making theatre]."

This is what we need to do, not only for young theatre-makers but all young artists, scientists, entrepreneurs. We need to give them

the space to tell their stories, to show us how they see the world. We need to give them opportunities to make and share work that resonates with people young and old. Most importantly, just as the *M1 Peer Pleasure Youth Festival* has been doing for two years now - we must believe in them.

May the 2017 cycle be even more diverse, rich and bold.



Ang Kia Yee is a young writer and theatre-maker. Earnest and passionate, she is the co-founder of Make Space, a theatre collective. Her writing can be found <http://ofsunflowers.wordpress.com>