

Review: *Triple Bill*
By Festival Youth Reporter, Ang Kia Yee

While the *MI Peer Pleasure Youth Theatre Festival 2016* offered primarily student-led productions, this year's edition of the festival opened up to a more diverse group of theatre-makers based outside of the school campus. The festival's *Triple Bill*, an energetic and heartfelt selection of three plays, comprised *Nonsense* by the Down Syndrome Association (Singapore), *The Box* by St. Anthony's Canossian Secondary School, and *How Did I Mess Up This Bad: An Analysis* by UNSAID. Alongside *The Box*, a piece more familiar in format and range of performers, *Nonsense* and *How Did I Mess Up This Bad: An Analysis* stood out as two surprising plays that tugged at the conventions of Singapore theatre. They brought the marginalized to centre stage with grace and honesty.

Nonsense was an exploration of the refugee crisis performed by young people with Down Syndrome and other intellectual differences. Directed by Jean Ng and Julius Foo, the show was an unflinching presentation of nonsensical play. Performers sang, walked across tightropes placed on the floor, juggled invisible balls, and masqueraded and danced as Jennifer Lopez. Amidst the nonsense, clips of refugees played, and performers read snippets written by themselves as well as refugees in response to the crisis. It was a beautiful and heartbreaking show.

However, one wonders if the play was really about the refugee crisis. Although the issue was touched upon, it didn't move much further than video clips and text that was partially overtaken by the delightful playing. The portions where performers acted as refugees also felt rather limiting and potentially reductive. Is it problematic to act as someone whose experiences and trauma ultimately remain distant and in many ways concealed to us? Is it enough that the refugee is rendered most thoroughly in video clips, in various states of vulnerability and destitution? (One wonders also if the refugee's pain should be thus displayed without their consent, but that is perhaps more a question for the media than *Nonsense*.)

These questions aside, it cannot be denied that *Nonsense* is a step forward in many ways. In safe, insulated Singapore, war is rarely examined or addressed by the general public, and even crises as real and as pressing as the refugee crisis remain distant problems that we largely ignore. *Nonsense* placed on stage a group of performers rarely seen in Singapore, providing them as well as the audience an opportunity to meet with and talk about the Other.

While *Nonsense* presented youthful play with euphemisms and circus tricks, *How Did I Mess Up This Bad: An Analysis* was a blunt, direct, and witty examination of depression and anxiety. An original play written by Syafiqah Nabilah, inspired by crowd-source stories, *How Did I Mess Up This Bad: An Analysis* follows anxious and depressed Rachel, played by the natural and delightful Sharmaine Goh, who attempts to cure her mental illness in 24 hours.

We are led through a series of self-help tips from exercise to meditation, and meet with Rachel's family and boyfriend. Nabilah and director Serena Ho paint a vivid and detailed snapshot of her life, allowing us to draw our own conclusions as to the causal relationships between Rachel's illness and the various factors in her life. Importantly, answers are not offered, and no one factor is marked out as the key driving force for Rachel's emotional breakdowns and suicidal thoughts; the play acknowledges the complexity of mental illness that defies simple chronology and progression. Humour is also a powerful force in the play, acting both as a mode of coping in the face of pressing despair, and as a tool in humanizing the person suffering from mental illness. Despite the sometimes absolute, unrelenting weight, there can be lightness, even laughter.

Ho's skilful direction elevation a strong and elegant script, which was carried forward by a talented cast. Although it comprised numerous monologues, the play never dipped in energy; it was tight, engaging, and exuded fervent, albeit self-deprecating, hope, even as it arrived at a dark, elusive ending. It offered much needed honesty to a country where mental illness is still stigmatized. *How Did I Mess Up This Bad: An Analysis* is a place where we can begin to understand the human behind the illness, and perhaps conceive of better ways to help one another on an individual level.

Finally, *The Box* by St. Anthony's Canossian Secondary School was a polished, confident performance about the popularity contest that social media, particularly Instagram, has evolved into. It is a funny and despairing look into the 'rules' that govern such spaces, and the ways in which we have become a generation of self-image curators obsessed with portraying ourselves perfectly online. Against the backdrop of a dystopian influencers' instructional course, the play revolves around two friends, one of whom is sucked into the curated life, while the other remains grounded, genuine, and disinterested in masquerading for an online audience. The goal of these wannabe-celebrities is 'the box' – a reward for and symbol of social success. Eventually, the seemingly benign but ultimately conflicting difference between the two friends pulls them apart. The reward of 'the box' stacks up, swallowing the person entirely.

Although *The Box* is a satirical exaggeration that comes with a medley of caricatures, perhaps it's not as unreal as it seems; actual courses for potential social media influencers have emerged, promising to teach participants about creating effective content and crafting lovable social images. *The Box* is present, and deeply relevant to young people trying to discover who they are in an age of self-curation. It updates the age-old reminder to stay true to yourself against the ever-present web of social media.

The selection of plays for the *Triple Bill* was wonderful. How rare it is that a selection as small as three offers such diversity in styles, social issues, and voices, while pushing the bracket in bringing the Other from the periphery to the centre. The *MI Peer Pleasure Youth Theatre Festival* has made a big leap within a year, and I look forward to more.