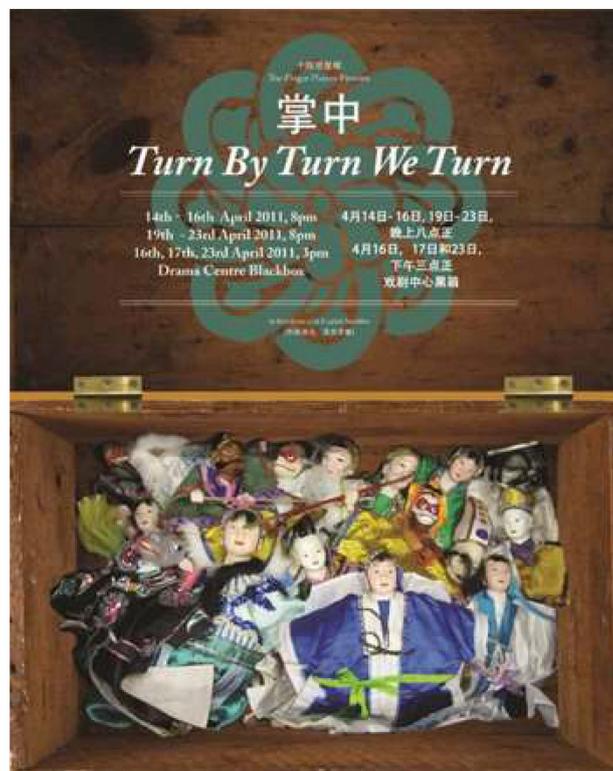


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## Candid Theatre Reviews in Singapore since 2010

### “Turn By Turn We Turn” by The Finger Players

APRIL 17, 2011  
by Jeremy



*Event: “Turn By Turn We Turn” by The Finger Players*  
*Venue: Drama Centre Black Box*  
*Run: 14th Apr – 23rd Apr 2011*

*“Master said...in our world, there are two levels: one that is above us, where the gods and deities, heroes and emperors roam. The other is the level below, where we are. All that the audience pays and wants to see is right above our heads. They are not interested in what goes on below.”*

And just like that, with these few opening lines, the play “Turn By Turn We Turn” had me at hello.

“Turn” is the latest offering from The Finger Players, and is written and directed by the talented Chong Tze Chien.

The play makes heavy use of Chinese puppetry, and this plays very nicely into the strengths of The Finger Players, as the company has had its roots in traditional hand puppetry since its inception.

“Turn” was written as a result of a surprise gift of a whole collection of hand puppets from the son of a collector two years ago, and most of the beautifully ornate puppets used in the play are from that particular collection.

The source material for the play was largely based on puppet master Li Bo Fen's personal life experiences and accounts, and it was Master Li and his son Li Yi Xin themselves who were instrumental in training the cast in the fine art of Chinese hand puppetry since September last year.

One can imagine that the training must have been rigorous, because the cast of eight managed to put up a highly-convincing display in hand puppet dexterity throughout the entire performance, as if they had been puppeteers all their lives.

"Turn" attempts to be an epic play that chronicles the life and times of a traditional hand puppetry troupe that spans from 1920s China till the present day...all in 90 minutes.

And while this would sound like a mean feat, you could probably say that Tze Chien just about managed to pull it off.

And it is perhaps due to these very parameters that result in "Turn" being generally very pacey, and not having many moments which felt draggy or long-drawn.

The story often switches back and forth between the stage puppet act and the real-life portrayal of the troupe members, and it is apparent to the viewer early on that the story of the Monkey King being enacted by the puppeteers would closely parallel the circumstances of their lives.

And through the course of China's 20th century history, the plight of the troupe is portrayed as they go through wars, change of leadership, the Cultural Revolution, and so on.

The part that struck me most was towards the end when Master Li lamented the fact that many of the former troupe members no longer saw the need to retain their puppetry skills, and queried why it was that when they were extremely poor and living from day to day in the old days, they could give their life's devotion to the troupe and the artform, but ironically, in the modern age of relative abundance, none of them saw the need to preserve the precious artform any more.

And this perfectly captured the essence of many a modern day lament – the sad decay of precious traditions and heritage as a result of modern capitalist ideals.

I felt the directing by Tze Chien was crisp, and I loved the seamless sense of flow throughout the play.