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## Theatre review: Citizen Pig tackles real estate wrangles but avoids citizen issues



Citizen Pig, a Mandarin play by The Finger Players. One thing is quite clear by the end of Citizen Pig - navigating the world of real estate in Singapore is not too different from swimming through a shark tank. -- PHOTO: THE FINGER PLAYERS



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Theatre

CITIZEN PIG

## The Finger Players

Drama Centre Black Box/Thursday

One thing is quite clear by the end of *Citizen Pig* - navigating the world of real estate in Singapore is not too different from swimming through a shark tank.

Those squeaky-clean, candy-coloured blocks of HDB flats come with shadowy secrets, and thespians Oliver Chong and Liu Xiaoyi have arrived on stage to tear into that dark underbelly of apartment politics.

The arc of the play starts out simply enough. Liu and Chong, playing theatrical versions of themselves, each narrate a single harrowing rental experience in Singapore, which grow in complexity after some rather static exposition. Both stories are based on what actually happened to Liu and Chong in real life.

Liu, a permanent resident originally from mainland China, attempts to secure an apartment for himself and his wife, while the Singaporean Chong and his business partner hunt for an office space to call their own.

Unfortunately, they both end up in sticky webs of legal jargon, deceit, emotional blackmail, actual blackmail and latent violence along the way, all because of their landlords' single-minded pursuit of profit and some awful decision-making.

Liu's landlord has decided to rent out his apartment to multiple groups of tenants at the same time, resulting in some horrendous frictions. Chong's office landlord is essentially a conman mooching off his tenants, with an intimidating ex-triad boss as his hatchet man. Whether immigrant or non-immigrant, they end up on the same helpless plane.

There is such an earnest self-deprecation to this script, created jointly by Liu and Chong, that one is compelled to empathise with them as they struggle to salvage their situations through various means, both over the table and under it.

Their frustrations mount with every new referral to a lawyer or a policeman and back again as they go on wild goose chases and end up stumbling over loopholes and falling through every systemic crack. And what makes their losses that much more affecting is a script cut with both humour and pain.

This confiding style of storytelling, however, might also lead one to draw inevitable parallels with Chong's award-winning *Roots*, a meditative and movingly honest portrayal of family history that swept audiences off their feet last year. This, by comparison, feels more like a wisp of a play, one that cycles through its stories so quickly that it is over as soon as it has begun.

There are echoes of *Roots* in *Citizen Pig* - the stripped-down set with minimal light and sound effects, the raw personal disclosures, the virtuosic chorus of voices and characters.

Both Liu and Chong step into multiple roles with ease and flair, including a convincing impersonation of prominent entertainment lawyer Samuel Seow, whose firm often advises local theatre companies in legal matters.

And while there are wisecracking confrontations aplenty in *Citizen Pig*, the play itself takes a largely non-confrontational stance, careful to tiptoe around the citizen-versus-non-citizen divide.

We are all in the same boat, it declares; this is less about the citizens, and more about the pigs. Liu and Chong are also careful to convey the baddies as flawed human beings rather than inherently evil villains.

*Citizen Pig* may spoon out the laughs, but it leaves a taste of the bitter in your mouth; there are only so many pyrrhic victories one can win until the grind of a dysfunctional bureaucracy wears down those edges. This production holds up the frayed ends to the light and forces you to look.