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Theatre review: The Book Of Living And Dying makes satisfying return

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Corrie Tan

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Review Theatre

THE BOOK OF LIVING AND DYING

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The Finger Players in association with Teatri Sbagliati (Italy)

Esplanade Theatre Studio/Thursday

The German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche obsessed over the idea of the eterna return in his work - a concept which suggests that the universe has been recurring and will continue to recur.

In the case of Tibetan Buddhism, in which this play is rooted, karma has a pivotal role to play in the shape of lives to come. The idea of return becomes even more potent when one considers the fact that this production of The Book Of Living And Dying is in itself a reincarnation of the work that premiered at the Singapore Arts Festival last year.

It is the same complex and ambitious work that it was the year before - but simultaneously a completely different one from the perspective of this reviewer who, admittedly, did not embrace this work when it first opened.

This time, the quartet who co-created this piece have reinhabited their roles with a grace and quiet confidence that reverberates through this visually stunning work.

Director Chong Tze Chien and actor Oliver Chong from *The Finger Players*, together with performers Antonio Ianniello (Italy) and Nambi E. Kelley (United States), begin the piece on a note of intimate intrigue that soon unfolds into something quite spectacularly infinite in the space of 90 minutes.

The play revolves around a Rome-born, New York-based transvestite Martina (Ianniello) and his adopted African American daughter, Eve (Kelley).

He is diagnosed with stomach cancer and, in his attempt to reconcile with his daughter, traverses through centuries and relationships past.

The lives of Eve and Martina are like concentric circles nested in each other, where the slightest kink in each circle magnifies every time another ring is added to the growing ripple - spelling certain apocalyptic doom.

Eve's cat, played to playful perfection by Oliver Chong, is the only one attuned to the mistakes that Martina has made in this life and the lives before and the fate that befalls this family, but is unable to intervene, given that (a) he is a cat, and (b) he speaks only Mandarin (or hisses and meows, depending).

Whether Martina is experiencing divine visions or hallucinations from his treatment remains open to interpretation, which allows for fact and fantasy to sit nicely together.

The production design is masterful, and there is some truly beautiful work from lighting designer Lim Woan Wen and sound designer Darren Ng, who performs live on stage.

Not everything fits together perfectly. There are several philosophical diversions that point out, a little frustratingly, what has already been laid out clearly on stage.

To return to Nietzsche: His thought experiments are echoed in the work of Czech writer Milan Kundera, who toys with the idea of eternal return in his novel *The Unbearable Lightness Of Being*, in which he describes feeling a disturbing and profound sense of reconciliation with Hitler - a "moral perversity".

Behind me, someone let out a disgusted grunt when faced with the thought that this father-daughter pairing could have been lovers in the past - the same sort of moral perversity Kundera must have felt. But it is a concept that this production wrestles with bravely.

The idea of death is very real, and it is the father-daughter duo's confrontation of death and their eventual acceptance of the fact that form the soul of the work.

And in my re-reading of this Book, I have found it enormously satisfying and heart-rending.