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Theatre review: Revival of Oliver Chong's Roots still warms the heart



Actor-director Oliver Chong in Roots, a solo show about tracing his family's roots. -- PHOTO: TUCKYS PHOTOGRAPHY



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Actor-director Oliver Chong is stuck. He has decided to track down his ancestral hometown in China. But with scant, oblique clues from an evasive grandmother, he realises he has no idea where it is, and he roams through online forums, trying to look for leads.

Eventually, someone from Hong Kong replies, in traditional Chinese script, and with great disdain: "My surname is also Chong. But my 'Chong' is different from yours. Yours has been castrated. So why bother to find any roots? You don't have roots any more."

Here, in Chong's present-day one-man show, is an echo of pioneering Singapore dramatist Kuo Pao Kun's *Descendants Of The Eunuch Admiral* (1995). We Singaporeans are cultural orphans, the late playwright-director lamented, the 'children' of a castrated admiral (Cheng Ho), separated from our cultural homelands, yet unable to identify with them as our cultural homes, cursed to wander and search at the margins.

The power of Chong's intimate, compelling *Roots* lies both in that anxiety over ancestry, but also the ability to lay it to rest - to embrace it as part of our history and soldier through it to find an identity of our own. And while *Roots* is very much the story of one man trying to figure out his family's tangled past, it also tells the larger story of an immigrant nation, whose ancestors forsook their families and forged new ones, leaving behind pockets of emptiness in their wake, but also creating the narrative that is now ours.

This is my second time watching *Roots*, which was first staged in 2012 and has been revived for The Finger Players' 15th anniversary season. It won Production of the Year at last year's Life! Theatre Awards, and also gave Chong the trophy for Best Original Script. And it still gleams with both heart and finesse.

Perhaps it is because of how close this autobiographical story is to Chong's heart that he fills the stage with a virtuosic performance, drawing from every emotional reserve to create a blazing cast of memorable characters, himself included.

When Chong has a conversation with his grandmother on stage, there is nothing quite like seeing him become her, his fluid face molding to her every wrinkle and her toothy grin - just as he morphs into a sweet hotel receptionist, a gruff village chief or a kind-hearted elderly gentleman, making the extraordinary look effortless. Despite a rather breakneck rhythm and a momentary surtitle black-out (the show is performed in a mix of Cantonese, Mandarin and English, in that order), *Roots* still packs a huge emotional punch.

Throughout the show, Chong sketches out words, symbols and images on a stage covered thickly with grains of rice, and eventually, the Chinese character for home, 'jia', becomes a many-legged creature of its own, its limbs unwinding across the floor, just as Chong's family history unfurled across half a continent all those decades ago.

Chong doesn't try to teach us anything, a wise decision that doesn't condescend to its audience. He instead allows us to come to our own conclusions: even as we look forward, perhaps we should also pause to look back, tracing the lines of a 'home' that has made us who we are.