

Roots (2014), Review

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REVIEW

Out on a Limb

Roots, based on director/playwright Oliver Chong's personal experience of going back to his great-grandfather's hometown in China to "trace his roots," is an impactful, touching and succinct one-man show. First produced in 2012 and winning the Production of the Year and Best Script awards at *The Straits Times*' Life Theatre Awards, *Roots* was staged this time as part of The Finger Players' 15th Anniversary Season.

Although the words "simplicity" and "spectacle" would not usually be used in the same breath to describe the staging of a performance, in the case of *Roots* they certainly could be. On entering the black box theatre, one encounters a raised platform covered entirely with uncooked rice where most of the action will take place. An antique radio playing Mandarin tunes from the 1920-30s is on one side of this platform, and a rice cooker, which keeps steaming throughout the duration of the play, is on the other side, completing the stage picture.

A simple enough set-up, but the spectacle of the performance lay in the rice-filled platform, as would quickly become obvious once the performance started. Rice holds a special place in Chinese culture and tradition, where it is symbolic of family togetherness and the hard work required to produce it, both of which make it preciousness. The play's central visual motif was undoubtedly a nod to the above ideas.

The story narrates how, guided by the name of his paternal grandfather's sister (the only clue that his grandmother could remember, or would reveal) Chong traced his family's origins to one of seven possible towns in Guangdong province in China. What follows is his account of his visit to a particular town that was likely to be the birthplace of his paternal grandfather - although he was never able to establish with certainty that he had found the right town. The captivating account also included his encounters with the villagers there, and a visit to the home of what were likely to be his long-lost relatives, the cousins of his father. Throughout the play, as Chong told his story, he drew in the rice with several implements to create visual aids, such as Chinese characters and maps of the places that he visited.

His narration is at once earnest, humorous and thought-provoking. Near the start of his story, Chong tells of a rude email he received from someone from Hong Kong, in response to his posts on a forum for the Chinese diaspora. This email, Chong stresses, was written in traditional Chinese script - as opposed to Chong's own emails in simplified Chinese, which Singaporean Chinese generally

PRODUCTION

[Roots \(2014\)](#)

BY

[The Finger Players](#)

PERFORMANCE DATE & TIME

17 October 2014, 12:00pm

REVIEWER'S SCORE

4.0 out of 5

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REVIEWER

[Jocelyn Chng](#)

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use. In the email the writer snarkily tells Chong that there is no point searching for his roots, as they have been “castrated” long ago. Language politics aside, many Singaporean Chinese may well be too far removed from their ancestral hometowns for such an undertaking to be fruitful or meaningful. As the writer of the email said, even if Chong were to find out where his ancestral hometown was, so what?

Chong’s experience also opened up the tricky ethical issue of such an investigation into one’s roots possibly stirring up painful memories for others. His account of his visit to the home of his father’s cousins was particularly moving – he recounts how his uncle was obviously emotional at having discovered a long-lost relative; while towards the end of the play he reveals his grandmother’s discomfort and pain at the digging up of memories she preferred to forget. Chong mulls over the fact that she was probably aware of the missing pieces of the puzzle regarding his family history, but he did not have the heart to probe further.

That the exact facts of his family history are never made clear to him makes for a poignant ending. But on a broader level, it is perhaps a comment that coming to terms with and accepting such uncertainty is all part of gaining the confidence and maturity that our predominantly diasporic nation still lacks. Although identity is usually associated with one’s “roots”, perhaps we do not need deep roots to build a strong identity... which makes me think of the late Kuo Pao Kun’s concept of Singaporeans as “cultural orphans.” Kuo coined the term in the 1990s to describe Singaporeans, who, being largely from immigrant backgrounds, did not have a coherent, deeply-rooted “culture” to call their own. Instead, Kuo suggested that the distinctive feature of Singapore was its multiculturalism, which could perhaps be the soil in which to root our culture and identity.

Performing a monodrama is never an easy feat, and Chong’s execution was almost impeccable – one could not help but admire his natural charisma, and his skill at portraying the many different characters he met along his journey, switching between them with amazing agility. The only doubt I had was regarding his choice to sometimes speak in English amidst a story mostly told in very fluent Mandarin or Cantonese. Chong was obviously more comfortable with the latter two languages, and the English parts did not appear to have been chosen to make a particular point. Thus I felt that a story as personal as this would be more effectively delivered in whatever language(s) came most naturally to the performer. However, this is a small gripe to make about an otherwise remarkable performance.

Works of such a personal, reflective nature sometimes risk self-indulgence, but at around 70 minutes without intermission, *Roots* said what it needed to say without my feeling the urge to fidget in my seat from boredom or discomfort. What made this work so endearing was the very humble and genuine account of Chong’s experience – no fireworks needed (just a lot of rice!). A meaningful close to The Finger Players’ 15th Anniversary Season, *Roots* certainly has its place in Singapore theatre and hopefully will remain relevant for generations to come.

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

Like the pot of rice steaming merrily in a corner of the stage, Oliver Chong’s *Roots* envelops us with a warm, comforting aroma. This engaging monodrama, restaged as part of The Finger Players’ 15th anniversary

celebrations, is written, directed and performed by Chong and was staged to critical acclaim in 2012, snagging awards for Best Script and Production of the Year at last year's Life! Theatre Awards.

Roots explores Chong's personal quest to learn about his ancestors in China. Armed with only the vaguest of clues and cryptic anecdotes from his grandmother, he takes advice from online forums before planning a journey to his ancestral village near Taishan in the province of Guangdong.

Chong has a unique gift for storytelling: he slips into a multitude of roles as he recounts his adventures to find his hometown, morphing effortlessly from an evasive, absent-minded grandmother to a kindly hotel clerk to a host of whispering village elders. Throughout the seventy-minute performance, Chong pads around in a large trough filled with rice grains sketching shapes and patterns, literally drawing and redrawing the lines of his history as he discovers secrets and stories that have remained hidden for years.

Moments of laugh-out-loud hilarity are balanced with quietly affecting scenes. In a particularly touching moment, Chong describes the simple joy of his father when the latter learns of a long-lost cousin in a small village, reminding us of the eternal power of the family to transcend physical boundaries.

The performance is delivered in a fluent mélange of Mandarin and Cantonese with a smattering of English although it is the use of English that I found to be the most jarring, seeming to be thrown in as an afterthought and making the flow of the surtitles less smooth.

Many of Singapore's iconic monodramas such as Stella Kon's *Emily of Emerald Hill*, Huzir Sulaiman's *Occupation* and Haresh Sharma's *Best Of* are ultimately tales about finding oneself which are both deeply personal and wonderfully universal in their reach. *Roots* is no exception and it's impossible not to be swept along in the sparkling narrative. We all recognize traits of ourselves in Chong: the culturally dislocated modern Singaporean who wants to get a sense of his family history and understand the journey which has led him to where he is today.

And the power of *Roots* is that it reminds us that sometimes it is that journey which makes all the difference, whatever the outcome may be. We all just want to find a place to call home.

3.5 out of 5 stars, Naeem Kapadia, 18 Oct 2014

PRODUCTIONS & STAGINGS

Roots (2014)

The Finger Players

31 March 2021