

Roots | 4/5



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The Finger Players' Oliver Chong captivates in his one-man show, Roots. Photo: Tuckys Photography,

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SINGAPORE — First staged to critical acclaim in 2012, The Finger Players group has revived their production, Roots, as part of its 15th anniversary season.

I can clearly see why it had people raving — writer-actor-director Oliver Chong's monologue is a masterful piece of storytelling. It says something about the artist's skill when one is completely immersed in a story that seems commonplace plot-wise, to the point you hardly noticed the time.

Essentially an autobiographical piece, it tells of Chong's search for his roots, which leads him to a village in Taishan, Guangdong, where his great-grandfather, Chong Kun Hup, and grandfather are from. It seems his ancestors have got his back and everything falls into place. Nothing particularly dramatic takes place as a rather unusual sequence of fortuitous events conspire to make the whole search rather painless.

But it is in the telling where *Roots* grows into something bigger. Everything takes place on a raised platform layered with rice grains, alluding to the tradition of drying rice grains outdoors which Chong witnessed in Taishan. Using his hands and a rake, it becomes a personal Zen garden, which he shapes and manipulates. Similar to the chalk-drawing methods employed in the group's *The Book Of Living And Dying*, here Chong draws diagrams and Chinese characters, plotting and illustrating his progress as the ground becomes both a map and personal diary.

And then you've got Chong himself. For a theatre group known for its puppetry, there were none used — but he animatedly performs as if he himself was possessed, taking on a handful of roles from a cackling grandmother to a whole group of village elders to a gruff bus driver with such vigour and deftness. The hilarity is punctuated by distinct moments of pure silence giving the piece its steady rhythm.

Roots is a road trip of discovery — Chong's character travels to China and travels back in time, unearthing his own memories and reconstructing his family's from unreliable clues. At one point, he gets dismissed as being rootless and castrated (a subtle nod perhaps to Kuo Pao Kun's *Descendants Of The Eunuch Admiral*) and he refutes this through the act of recreating this search with such imagination, care and love.

Sometimes, it's not the end result that determines one's place in this world but the generous act of taking that first step and reaching out that makes a family. MAYO MARTIN

Roots runs until Oct 26, 8pm, Drama Centre Black Box. With 3pm Saturday matinees. Tickets at S\$35 from SISTIC. In Mandarin, Cantonese and English, with English surtitles.