

## Theatre review: The Spirits Play

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The Finger Players take on Kuo Pao Kun's The Spirits Play. Photo: Tuckys Photography

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**SINGAPORE — In The Finger Players' take on the Kuo Pao Kun classic The Spirits Play, the horrific aftermath of war has a palpably heavy, suffocating quality — every breath taken by the souls of victims is a struggle, the sound of bird wings flapping echoes ominously in this claustrophobic netherworld, and the tragic testimonies are a collective weight that bears down on the audience. Here, director Oliver Chong presents war as an oppressive psychological nightmare.**

In an unnamed limbo, five restless ghosts recall their past lives, all of whom were involved, in some way or another, in an unnamed war and the atrocities that took place at a particular unnamed island, an allegorical nod to Singapore during World War II. There is a soldier (Tay Kong Hui) who helplessly witnessed the massacre of his comrades, a woman (Doreen Toh) who went in search of her soldier-husband, a nurse (Tan Wan Sze) who became a comfort woman to her own countrymen, a blinkered general (Johnny Ng) completely devoted to the cause, and a guilt-stricken poet-reporter (Alvin Chiam) who churned out propaganda.

In tackling the theme of war, there is the tendency of two extremes. On one end, a black-and-white portrayal of victim and victimiser. On the other, a kind of humanist world view where everyone is a victim, everyone is to blame; condemning all and, consequently, none. While Kuo's text seemingly leans towards the latter, Chong shapes these fragments of voices into a cohesive trial of sorts, with the spotlight on the general. Yes, the dead are dead, whether they are collateral damage or active participant, but even as nuances shine in this production, they also effectively hint at accountability despite the complex situation — in short, the buck has to stop with someone.

The contributions of the light-and-sound duo of Lim Woan Wen and Darren Ng should also not be taken for granted: The latter's soundscapes and echoes help give the Drama Centre Black a haunting, otherworldly subterranean vibe, and the former — together with puppeteer-performers Jo Kwek, Jasmine Xie and Myra Loke — combine for shadow puppetry that loom over and surround audiences, with images ranging from planes to a gigantic bird crane to bombs floating up to an entire war-torn landscape. (One minor downside to the excellent and full use of space is that the surtitles screen is positioned high up on a small screen, and for non-Mandarin-speaking audiences, it can be a strain on the neck.)