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THE STRAITS TIMES

The Spirits Play by The Finger Players is a haunting and skilfully choreographed anti-war work



The cast of The Spirits Play rehearsing. PHOTO: THE FINGER PLAYERS



Lee Jian Xuan

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Review / Theatre

The Spirits Play

The Finger Players

Drama Centre, Black Box/Thursday night

The Spirits Play by The Finger Players is an unvarnished take that stays true to the spirit of the late theatre giant Kuo Pao Kun's bleak 1998 anti-war work, which explores man's natural tendency to violence, and the killing one undertakes in the name of nationalism.

For the most part, director Oliver Chong adheres to Kuo's original script, which was inspired by the Second World War but still resonates today, in a world roiled by terrorism and civil strife. Five Japanese spirits in limbo - The Mother, The General, The Girl, The Man and The Poet - tarry at their resting place on a secluded isle, and recount the wartime atrocities they have each experienced.

But Chong, who has carefully studied the play's previous stagings, succeeds with the liberties he takes.

For instance, his decision to introduce three phantoms (Jo Kwek, Myra Loke and Jasmine Xie doing some first-rate physical theatre) enlivens the set with fluid, sinister movement. Moving as one entity, they whisper, hiss and coil around the characters like serpents at various points, personifying the demons and moral ambivalence that continue to plague these departed spirits.

The soundscape designed by Darren Ng is dream-like, going from the lush swoosh of waves which opens the play, to abrupt discordant crashes which mark turning points in the play.

Praise should also be accorded to lighting designer Lim Woan Wen, who opts for a stark, minimalist style, bathing the characters in ominous glows, which heightens the eerie, ethereal quality of the production. The use of shadow puppetry lend some much-needed texture to the backdrops as well.

With the acting, one sees Chong's firm directorial hand. His cast (Johnny Ng, Tay Kong Hui, Alvin Chiam, Doreen Toh, Tan Wan Sze) deliver powerful, controlled performances which thankfully never erupt into histrionics. They also show incredible discipline by lying still on stage, enveloped in paper leaves, for a good 20 minutes before the show begins.

Ng, a theatre veteran who has acted as The Man in two previous stagings of the play, is sterling as The General in this production, capturing perfectly his hubris and blind fanaticism to the Motherland's cause, to the very end.

Tay, Toh and Tan are spellbinding to watch, respectively as The Man, The Mother and The Girl, especially in a scene where they tell of how their roles in wartime exposed them to the Pyrrhic nature of war.

What starts as a calm, matter-of-fact narration builds slowly but devastatingly into accounts of unimaginable loss, starvation, rape and death. Lips quiver, faces crumple and bodies heave uncontrollably, racked by shuddering sobs.

I also agree with Chong's call to splice the accounts instead of presenting them individually, as it leads to a more dramatic climax, and expresses the characters' collective suffering as a sum greater than its parts.

One of Kuo's darkest works, *The Spirits Play* is not easy to sit through - it can feel ruinous and oppressive. But Chong's revival is a skilfully choreographed and executed piece that will haunt its audience, even after the lights come back on.

Book It

THE SPIRITS PLAY

WHEN: Till Nov 15, Tuesday to Saturday, 8pm; Saturday and Sunday, 3pm, no shows on Monday

WHERE: Drama Centre, Black Box

ADMISSION: \$35 from Sistic (call 6348-5555 or go to www.sistic.com.sg)

INFO: Go to www.facebook.com/Fingerplayers

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