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# The Collectors is like an indie, impromptu festival of puppetry

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## **The Collectors**

### **The Finger Players**

#### **Centre 42 (site specific)/Friday evening**

The Collectors might be billed as a single theatrical production, but it feels like an entire festival. Director-performer Tan Beng Tian has crammed an assortment of puppetry-themed events into a single evening: traditional and contemporary performances, a documentary film screening, exhibitions and Q&A sessions.

The whole show has an indie, impromptu air. It begins as Tan rides into the courtyard on the back of a lorry, from which her assistants unload equipment; she apologises for her lateness before describing her tutelage under the Chinese hand puppet master Li Bofen.

Over the course of the night, she leads the audience through different spaces in the building, including the inner courtyard, the rehearsal room, the foyer and the black box theatre. There is a rather delicious thrill to this process of exploration. This may well be the first time so many spaces in the venue are being put to use since Action Theatre's 42 Theatre Festivals, held in 2000 and 2001.

The main attractions, of course, are the puppet shows. China-based traditional puppeteer Zhuang Lie is particularly impressive. She displays her latest innovation in the craft: manipulating a marionette in the guise of the moon goddess Chang-er to write calligraphy with a real ink brush.

The Singaporean works are more self-reflexive. Tan performs a monologue from the point of view of a hand puppet she inherited from her master, pondering what she has gained and lost by leaving home. Shawn Chua animates his mother's old baby doll, letting him swim through the darkness, pondering whether he, too, has a right to call himself a traditional puppet.

Not all the acts are winners. Bani Haykala's poetry performance feels shallow and under-rehearsed, while Lim Chin Huat's elegy to the late local mime artist Christina Sergeant seems out of place in a show so focused on puppetry.

The informality of the event also has its downsides. Tan's chatty persona, as she guides us from room to room, somewhat dissipates the intensity of the production as an aesthetic experience. One also wonders if her lengthy expositions are the reason why the show lasts two and a half hours.

Yet the work clearly has purpose. Tan seeks to affirm the value of tradition, while acknowledging that all heritage is subject to change: both erosion and growth. She quotes pioneer theatremaker Kuo Pao Kun, saying that modern Singaporeans are "cultural orphans", cut off from our roots. Like baby dolls in the dark, we float, searching for who we are.