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From a historical figure to a seminal literary one

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THE weight of the text in *Starring Hitler as Jekyll and Hyde* felt as heavy as the ton of books written about the demagogue. All the historical facts and political theories mixed with mindplay, art theories, psychological analyses, dramatic possibilities and some creative licence - all were thrown into the text-heavy play.

It felt like playwright Chong Tze Chien wanted to squeeze all of his research on Hitler into this play, trying to turn the looming historical figure into a seminal literary one.

The saving grace was the film noir staging with the sophisticated shadow play - *The Finger Players'* forte - which broke up the weight of the play and gave it its punches.

The play started with Eva Braun (acted with aplomb by Edith Podesta) being interrogated in a courtroom, and she - as the narrator - then paints a picture of Hitler starting off as an insecure art student.

Braun's path crosses Hitler's when he applied for a place at a prestigious art academy but keeps getting rejected. Braun turns out to be the one patron who likes his art, and he gets drawn to her.

In the meantime, a parallel story was unfolding - featuring a high ranking commissioner (Julius Foo) and his male lover, a junior officer, and he comes head to head with a police inspector (Joshua Lim) who's harbouring his Jewish "nanny" (Jo Kukathas). The inspector is tasked to uncover the true identity of Hitler and stop his killings. The inspector's romantic relationship with his nanny is revealed later in the play in a surprise twist. Every time their paths cross, it becomes clear that Hitler's pogrom is picking up speed and getting wider in reach.

Daniel York plays a convincingly menacing and maniacal Hitler, even though the split personality debates became tiresome after a while. *Starring Hitler* is a modern parable about the rise and return of fundamentalism and fanaticism in society, but the execution was akin to throwing a heavy book at the audience.

The ensemble cast is to be praised for holding up their roles well, and moving the play at a steady clip. In the dark stage, lighting designer Lim Woan Wen pulled off a monumental task, while sound artist and music composer Darren Ng also did his part to create the high tension. The costumes were sleek black and blood red - an excellent juxtaposition that mirrored the characters of the play - both dark and sinister - because in this play, there's hardly any room for sympathy.