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Illuminating the heart of local literature

An overview of Singapore writing over more than six decades ends with a hopeful glimmer



Jean Ng (left) and Serene Chen read extracts from academic journals, book reviews and news reports about writers, publishers and the books industry in Rant And Rave II. PHOTO: SINGAPORE WRITERS FESTIVAL



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REVIEW / THEATRE

BETWEEN THE LINES: RANT AND RAVE II

The Finger Players

Singapore Writers Festival

School of the Arts, Studio Theatre Last Friday

Rant And Rave II makes two things very clear. The first is that the future is bright for Singapore literature.

The second is that writing about writing is not always meant to be read aloud.

Playwright and director Chong Tze Chien culled academic texts about literature as well as news reports and book reviews for the script of Rant And Rave II. The production was commissioned by the Singapore Writers Festival and had three shows over the weekend. It was meant as an overview of Singapore literature in English over six-odd decades of local history.

Rant And Rave II is a follow-up to Chong's 2012 work, Rant & Rave, which condensed critical writing about Singapore's theatre history into a single stage performance. Rant And Rave II follows a similar format.

Two performers - this time, Jean Ng and Serene Chen - don different hats and various pairs of spectacles as they read extracts from academic journals, book reviews and news reports about writers, publishers and the books industry. The idea is clearly to provide various perspectives, but makes the production heavy-going in parts.

Then the performers begin to enact bits from the works themselves. They recite the self-conscious mash-up of English and Malay in Ahmad, a poem by Wang Gungwu from the 1950 book Pulse. A little later, they take on the 1980 poem by Arthur Yap titled 2 Mothers In A HDB Playground. The Singlish is airy and confident. Singapore writing has found its voice.

Rant And Rave II is most engaging when it tunes into the heart of local literature. This includes creative works as well as the people who make and read them. Early focus on academic texts about the evolution of local literary

canon leads one to believe that early literature from Singapore was self-conscious and boring.

Then come the poetry recitations. Then the sketches about True Singapore Ghost Stories publisher Alex Chacko, still Singapore's bestknown publisher of B-grade fiction, and the late Bonnie Hicks' tell-all memoir, *Excuse Me, Are You A Model?*. The audience is shocked into attention and exhilaration.

The closure of Borders bookshop wins laughs and tears as performers quote mournful readers. Frustration over official clampdown is mutual amid the withdrawal of a picture book from local libraries for telling the true story of two male penguins hatching an egg and the withdrawal of a grant for Sonny Liew's *The Art Of Charlie Chan Hock Chye*.

Then, there is a hopeful glimmer of light - literally, as book-shaped lanterns designed by Lim Woan Wen are unfurled. Liew's graphic novel goes on to win the Singapore Literature Prize. Its publisher starts a new book prize to spur on novelists.

More and more book-shaped lanterns are fanned open. The golden light signals the end of the performance and illuminates a set of bookshelves turned into a pop-up bookstore for just 30 minutes. Cash payment only. The performance ends and the delighted audience surges on stage to touch the pages of Singaporean literature.

Books are magic, stories illuminate our lives. This is not the main point of the 90-minute performance, but it is the most memorable point that was made.