

# Creative spin on the plight of dementia sufferers



Sebastian Tan as the titular Itsy, who has in his grip the bedridden Xavier, played by Oliver Chong. PHOTO: TUCKYS PHOTOGRAPHY



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PUBLISHED MAR 30, 2017, 5:00 AM SGT

## REVIEW / THEATRE

### ITSY: THE MUSICAL

**The Finger Players/Victoria Theatre/Tuesday**

Itsy is a showcase of the originality, creativity and purpose of Singapore theatre-makers.

Scriptwriter and director Chong Tze Chien's solidly conceived evocation of the plight of dementia sufferers is brilliant on many levels - from the satisfaction of good stories told well to clean, simple choreography that complements the spoken word, with the cast's oftjerky movements a nod to The Finger Players' puppetry beginnings.

Chong weaves together two story threads.

The first has a grandfather, Gong Gong, played with subtlety by Lim Kay Siu, fretting over his ill grandson Xavier (Oliver Chong), who is in a coma. Xavier, however, has a vivid imagination and, in his dreams, he is free of pain and rules the land of nursery rhymes as Young King Cole, a merry lad who is loved by all.

Unfortunately, he is in the grip of Itsy (Sebastian Tan), the not-sobitsy spider who has been shunned by everyone for gumming their lives up with his sticky cobwebs.

The second story thread is Itsy's. Grown up and ravenous for revenge, he unleashes his minion-like spiders on Jack and Jill (an impressive Tan Shou Chen and Jo Tan), Humpty Dumpty (an assured Ebi Shankara), The Three Blind Mice (Audrey Luo, Ann Lek and Zee Wong) and scores of other imaginary friends from childhood.

Only water can wash ambitious Itsy out, with Jack and Jill hoofing it up and down the hill with their pail for Sisyphian splashes at the spider.

Itsy's minions nip at the necks of the nursery rhyme characters, with each nip erasing more of their memories.

Into this crisis comes Gong Gong, in search of Xavier, who is ageing rapidly under Itsy's evil gaze.

The nursery rhyme characters soon see the frantic yet peaceable Gong Gong as having the wits to defeat Itsy.

Gong Gong cajoles them into singing their respective nursery rhymes over and over again to keep themselves intact. But his exhortations are directed at Xavier too, who seems content to wallow in his painless fantasy world. "How can pain fight pain?" Xavier demands of him defiantly.

Director and scriptwriter Chong's use of the spider motif is inspired.

Those who suffer from dementia or childhood anxiety often think they see giant shadows of spiders on their bedroom walls.

There is also the recent study in Britain that suggests that spiders can be coaxed into using their silk to spin protein structures to correct the deformed protein pathways in the brains of Alzheimer's sufferers, which gives them hope of a cure.

Bolstering Chong's smart script of short, sharp lines is Wong Chee Wai's set design. When the curtains first open, the centre of the stage is the giant orb of a spider's body, complete with eight crane-like legs that flick menacingly.

Wong's attention to detail serves the story throughout. In Act 1, for example, he hangs huge wispy cobwebs from the ceiling, left to right. When Act 2 commences, he attaches the silvery fronds from right to left, denoting the passage of time.

As Itsy, Tan owns the stage, which is no mean feat considering how imposing Wong's set is. Tan, better known to theatre audiences for his oft-florid Broadway Beng persona, delivers a forceful yet nuanced portrayal of thwarted innocence.

As Twinkle, the titular star from the nursery rhyme, Frances Lee outshines Wong's fairy-light lair for her, lifting a role that could have been twee to heartrending heights.

There are no earworms in songwriter and sound designer Darren Ng's uncomplicated tunes, but his deft, soothing melodies are crooned sweetly throughout by the cast. What a treat.

The third and final act is the poorer cousin of the first two, with its rush to tie every skein up. There are damp squibs aplenty as everything turns farcical.

No matter. By then, Chong and his accomplished cast and crew have wowed with their skilful tempering of melancholia with mirth.