

When the *Poop!* hits the fan

Death, suicide and illness are tackled with quirky humour and gentle grace in The Finger Players' revival of popular play

By Helmi Yusof
helmi@sph.com.sg
@HelmiBT

IN *Poop!*, the stage brims with whimsical touches such as squares of coloured lights and unexpected objects. Right in the middle of it all is a toilet bowl, central to the idea of, well, pooping. The black light theatre piece by The Finger Players has fluorescent costumes, puppetry and even a floating head.

But despite these quirky visuals, *Poop!* deals with the most sobering of subject matters – death, illness, suicide and grief. When a person chooses to take his own life, his family members can be so racked with sadness and incomprehension, their own relationships with each other suffer.

Written and directed by Chong Tze Chien, *Poop!* begins with the suicide of a family man (Julius Foo). He leaves behind his wife (Janice Koh), mother (Neo Swee Lin) and eight-year-old daughter (Jean Ng). Each of these female characters handles grief differently: the wife finds it hard to keep going, the mother trades on superstition and the idea that the dead never really go away, while the young daughter revels in childish escapism.

Chong throws another spanner in the works: the eight-year-old girl is diagnosed with cancer and is unable to pass motion. Both her mother and grandmother must now cope with a fresh tragedy, one even more protracted than the previous.

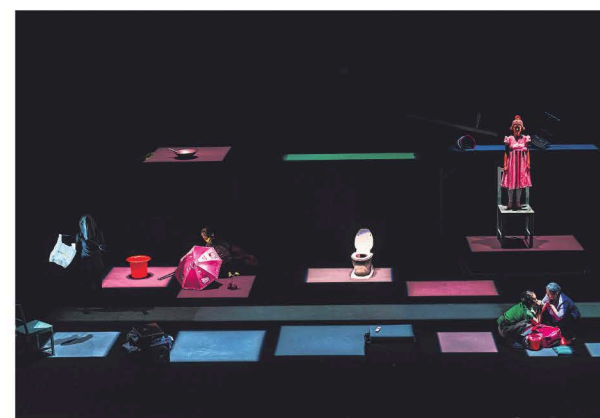
Poop! is one of Chong's more popular plays, and has been staged twice before at the Esplanade black box. This revival takes place at the much-bigger venue of the Victoria Theatre – though, arguably, a large part of the original production's appeal is the beguiling magic, beauty and intimacy it could convey in the small black box.

This new production feels somewhat dwarfed by the bigger venue, despite efforts to expand the action and design to encompass the whole stage.

Audiences used to longer, bigger productions at the Victoria Theatre might also be disappointed by *Poop!*'s relatively short



Above: (In the foreground, left to right) Janice Koh and Jean Ng star in *Poop!*, a play about death and suicide. Left: Written and directed by Chong Tze Chien, *Poop!* tells the story of death and suicide through live action and puppetry. PHOTOS: TUCKYS PHOTOGRAPHY



one-hour running time.

Notably, the cast has taken to the space well. Playing the little girl, Ng – who is already in her 40s – magnifies her character's childish naiveté and shines an unusually bright light once more on the gloomy

story. Koh acts as a counterpoint to Ng, presenting a very convincing picture of bereavement. From the moment she steps on stage, she appears weak and exhausted, so overwhelmed with grief that all she really wants to do is sleep her life away.

The entire production is, in fact, built on sharp contrasts – the darkened theatre versus the bright fluorescent props and costumes, the heaviness of the themes versus the playfulness of their execution, the bleakness of confronting reality versus the comfort of self-delusion.

And it is this fine balance between light and dark that makes the play fascinating.

Poop! also manages to relay various views on death, from the Buddhist idea of rebirth to the atheist concept of death as the absolute end. But ultimately the play is most concerned with those still living and struggling to continue. Like the poop one must expel from one's bowel to stay healthy, the painful past must be let go so that we may move forward.

■ *Poop!* is part of The Finger Players season of contemporary classics. This week, it is staging *The Spirits Play* written by Kuo Pao Kun and directed by Oliver Chong. Tickets are available from Sistic