

# THE SPIRITS PLAY by The Finger Players

Theatre Reviews

## “The Spirits Play”

**Reviewer: Jocelyn Chng**

**Performance: 28 October 2017**

Recently staged in 2015 at the Drama Centre Black Box, The Finger Players brings back its production of *The Spirits Play*, with director Oliver Chong making some changes to this production since the 2015 version.

An obvious difference would be the current production's staging at the Victoria Theatre, a much larger, proscenium space. To this end, the set design with two levels, and the spirits' voluminous, abstract costumes create visual interest and certainly help to fill the space. While the overall staging design, including live sound and puppetry, is generally effective in evoking a dark, melancholy yet contemplative atmosphere, the spirits' slightly over-the-top costumes may have detracted slightly from that contemplative mood.

*The Spirits Play*, one of the last pieces by playwright Kuo Pao Kun's plays, deals with the horrors of war – the waste and despair that it brings for all involved, regardless of whose side they are on. The play is a challenging one to perform, not least because of the heavy subject matter. In this version, a lot of focus is also required for the almost one hour and forty-five-minute running time, during which the characters of the General, Man, Mother and Girl never leave the stage.

They begin almost as if at an annual gathering, remarking on the weather, enquiring after one another; but their awkward, stilted tone tells you something is not quite right. As the play progresses, we hear from each of them their stories, told in overlapping vignettes – weak and injured soldiers abandoned by their own commanders, a wife searching for the dead body of her husband knowing full well the futility of the undertaking, a female nurse violated by members of her own army. Against the backdrop of all this, the General expresses no remorse for his actions.

As the spirits search, accuse, reflect, and mourn over the course of the play, it becomes apparent that their questions have no answers.

The cast is strong on the whole, managing well the emotionally charged text and shifts in intensity. Where the performance is less strong, however, is in the movement. Near the beginning and end, the spirits glide around the stage in choreographed sequences – while this bookending is a clear directorial strategy, it does not feel like the relatively long movement sequences are crucial to the performance. In addition, the movements of the three characters dressed in black (who function as a chorus of sorts) can be more precise; moments of non-synchronicity detracted from the otherwise arresting visual picture.

Nevertheless, we are left with a haunting final image: the five spirits returning to their graves, falling snow, and a blackout revealing a blood red full moon. This is one of the few hints of the play's cultural context – although the spirits are ostensibly Japanese, in this staging there are few identifiable markers of setting. All the better to reflect on the universality of the play's underlying message; all war is cruel, no matter where or when.