

NOT IN MY LIFETIME? by The Finger Players

Theatre Reviews

“Special Education teacher’s exasperation or a call to action?”

Reviewer: Amanda Leong
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Not in My Lifetime? is a play about many things. It is about the love two Special Education teachers have for their students, which drives them to continue their seemingly futile efforts to push for educational reforms. It is also about the emotional exhaustion and vulnerability that comes with teaching children with special needs, when their improvement may not be measured by Singapore’s KPI-obsessed culture. Ultimately, this nuanced performance provides a space for Special Education teachers to embrace the entirety of their experiences – the good, the bad, and the unanswered questions.

At Gateway Theatre, the stage is bare apart from a human-sized dice, toddler-sized chairs and an ominous figure lurking at the back of the stage. At the start of the play, it is explained that the figure is Mr. Wrinkle, a mysterious mentor figure who is referenced throughout the play. We never get to see what Mr. Wrinkle looks like; we only get to see the back of his large wooden chair, which is draped with his coat. However, we hear him through the disembodied voice of Timothy Nga.

The two main characters of the performance arrive on the stage. Inch Chua portrays a bubbly and optimistic teacher who, at the start of her journey as a Special Education teacher, is full of hope. She looks up to an older and more experienced teacher (Evelyn Chye) as a mentor figure, who is portrayed by actress Evelyn Chye. As the play goes on, the younger teacher becomes more jaded and tired. These two teachers are not particularly complex characters, but they are familiar and compelling.

The play succeeds in conveying the frustrations of Special Education teachers through simple and effective examples, making the play’s message accessible to everyone. For instance, the fact that students in regular schools were given proper thermometers during the SARS epidemic, while students in Special Education schools were given unreliable disposable fever strips, shows the unequal treatment of the two groups.

In a more physical and embodied scene, we see the teachers’ despair as a student experiences a breakdown, which is enacted through the violent wringing and crumbling of an unseen actor covered by a blanket. I find this dark and heartfelt scene especially poignant, as I can see both the teacher and the student in their irreconcilable emotional frustrations.

The play does not shy away from its message. The uphill task of pushing for change is portrayed as a climb up a ladder, while the unique challenges of educating students with special needs – which should be carried by the whole society – is portrayed by the actors carrying a sewn amalgamation of bags and cloth. But while these metaphors allow the message to be portrayed succinctly, I wonder if the emotional and moral weight is truly conveyed.

Not in My Lifetime? seems to be a story that’s told out of exasperation. However, it is clear that despite the exhaustion, these teachers still hope for changes that would make our society truly inclusive.