

Co-presented with Gateway Academy

Black Box, Gateway Theatre Last Thursday

In 2003, when students islandwide were being screened daily for fever caused by the Sars virus, half-a-million students - from mainstream schools - each received an oral digital thermometer from the Ministry of Education (MOE).

However, since special education schools do not fall directly under the MOE, the 4,400 students of those schools received a fever-strip thermometer each and had to share the more accurate oral digital thermometer. The Straits Times reported then that one school shared two such thermometers among 250 students.

This is the reality reflected in the opening scene of *Not In My Lifetime?*, a play scripted by a teacher who used to work in special education. "Special" means "different" but not in the sense of preferential treatment. Quite the opposite at times.

Special education schools are funded by the Government but run by volunteer welfare organisations. This means that unlike teachers in mainstream schools, special education teachers are employees of these organisations and not of the MOE. These teachers are not necessarily on the same salary track or professional development journey of teachers in mainstream schools. The consequence? *Not In My Lifetime?* begins with a young special education teacher (Inch Chua) ready to switch to a mainstream school for the associated perks. The holy glow of doing good deeds wears off soon enough, just as the halo around Chua collapses into an orange rubber hose.

Not In My Lifetime? makes viewers confront their assumptions about inclusion and diversity on multiple levels. Production designer Lim Chin Huat seats the audience on different kinds of seats and the system ensures not everyone finds a comfortable position - just as the current system ensures that one student receives certain opportunities and another does not.

RELATED STORY

[Making Singapore theatre accessible for different audiences](#)

RELATED STORY

[Making children's theatre more inclusive](#)

The cast, which includes Myra Loke, Nix Sang and Evelyn Chye, roll a giant die to emphasise the chanciness of the learning journey special education students embark on. And these students are intelligent enough to demand parity with their mainstream siblings and friends. They, like the audience at the end, are dissatisfied with the status quo.

Special education students are represented as adorable puppets made of household objects, in the signature style of director Tan Beng Tian and in a neat summation of the current situation. Overlooked items such as rollers, pans and mops can become so much more when seen through a different perspective.

There have been a few recent productions pointing out that we could be better nurturers of the young. Pangdemonium's ongoing [Late Company](#) and Teater Kami's recent restaging of [Anak Melayu \(Malay Child\)](#) both featured adolescents failed by the system. *Deaf and Fourteen*, the 2017 and 2018 plays by Split Theatrical Productions, highlighted teen confusion and the pressure on teachers to deliver a syllabus, rather than nurture their charges.

Not In My Lifetime? outlines the problem in the system and shows the solution by including and thinking about those who might well have been students of Special education schools here. Like last year's ground-breaking *And Suddenly I Disappear: The Singapore 'd' Monologues* by Access Path Productions, *Not In My Lifetime?* was created with the input of artists with disabilities and is also designed with accessibility in mind.

Audio description is available for the visually impaired. There are captions for the staging and live captioning of the post-show dialogue. The latter serves as a welcome reference for all when questions from the audience were long and complex.

Not only is inclusion possible, it ensures a better theatrical experience for all. Not In My Lifetime? cites a seemingly hopeless case but in design and execution embodies hope for a better future.