

Citizen Pig (2013), Review

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REVIEW



"The publicity brochure might have been somewhat misleading..."

Two Legs Bad

Citizen Pig, an original play written, directed and played in Mandarin (and a few other dialects) by Oliver Chong and Liu Xiaoyi, is a smart, witty, and engaging piece on the state of our nation. While the social commentary that the play offers never quite manages to be as excoriating as its creators had presumably hoped, it still holds up an unforgiving and honest mirror to the experiences of Singapore's inhabitants in a country that is famed for its law and order but which, on a very real and everyday basis, feels like it is failing the man on the street – whether he is a young entrepreneur struggling to get a business on its feet, or a foreign student trying to put a roof over his head.

The backgrounds of Chong's and Liu's characters seem wildly different at first: the first is a young entrepreneur struggling to get his design business on its feet; the second is a foreign student who is simply looking for a place to stay. But as they interweave and narrate their respective stories, what emerges is a common theme of the desperate (men in hock to loansharks) preying on other desperates (those looking for a cheap place to live) and of ineffectual justice. The police (perhaps a little unfairly at times) do not emerge well from this play at all.

Looking back, the publicity brochure for *Citizen Pig* might have been somewhat misleading. The brightly coloured materials promised cross-dressing! Pinafores! Colourful characters! Policemen! And even Liang Po Po! What the play delivers, however, is a stark stage with two lines of chairs gradually rearranged over the course of the play into a grid: a two-dimensional setting being given gradual depth and perspective. And two actors (dressed only in their t-shirts and jeans) telling us two distinct but similar stories – perhaps, even *their* stories – of petty cheats and pathetic conmen who take advantage of the weakness of others.

It is a simple production – almost too simple in its reliance on nothing but the tradition of oral storytelling (with only the change of tone, voice and action informing us of the change of characters) to convey its message. Both Chong and Liu demonstrated wonderful malleability in conveying the vast array of characters populating their story (Liu in particular, seemed to relish jumping between chairs, checking his nails and stammering as he played three of Chong's

PRODUCTION

[Citizen Pig \(2013\)](#)

BY

[The Finger Players](#)

PERFORMANCE DATE & TIME

29 November 2013, 12:00pm

REVIEWER'S SCORE

3.5 out of 5

FIRST PUBLISHED IN

[The Flying Inkpot](#)

REVIEWER

[Karin Lai](#)

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fellow tenants during a late-night “meeting” about their rental situation). The production’s overall simplicity meant that I was taken aback by the sole “special effect” employed near the play’s end. When the audience seats began to shake and rumble to Liu’s speech about the sound and feel of passing MRT trains, I found myself wondering if the effect was intentional or if there really was a train that just happened to be passing under the National Library at that precise moment.

Yet, in spite of its simplicity, Chong and Liu’s two-hander is remarkably effective – in no small part because the stories they tell carry a ring of truth about them. When Chong’s young entrepreneur bewails how ineffectual the police were in his case, or when Liu’s character muses that people claim that Singapore is a land of law and order but many actually feel it’s full of conmen, you cannot help but feel the sting. From dishonest taxi drivers to ruthless landlords, the play lays bare what many of us are too privileged, or unwilling, to see: a vast underclass of lying, cheating, desperate “citizen pigs” who entangle others in the web of their own desperation. Such people get away with their crimes because they operate at the limits of the law and because both their crimes and their victims are small and marginal – such as the small two-man business trying to get off the ground and the immigrant student whose foreign status means he doesn’t even fulfill the first requirement to get legal aid. *Citizen Pig* serves as a timely cautionary tale that, especially in Singapore, “low crime” certainly does not mean “no crime”.