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Mad World

Reading the Director's Note in the programme caused concern rather than comprehension. Giorgio Barberio Corsetti's blow-by-blow description of the labyrinthine plot which criss-crosses continents and cultures made me wonder how anyone was going to ever pull the threads of the play together into a cohesive whole. Essentially, there are two main storylines in *Visible Cities*. One is about Jessica, a Singaporean garment buyer for a departmental store (Ali Ahn) recounting her dealings with Italian businessman Tomaso (Gabriele Benedetti) in his factory in China to a police officer (Lim Kay Tong); the other revolves around Tomaso's wife Bianca (Fiora Blasi) whose agoraphobia and panic attacks keep her confined to their home in Naples where she lives in perpetual fear of killer birds, falls in love with a fish working as a delivery man for a Chinese takeaway and dreams of having conversations with the conqueror Kublai Khan (Andrea Di Casa) and the explorer Marco Polo (Frederica Santoro). Yet, through the clever machinations of New York-based Singapore playwright Chay Yew, the twin narratives unspool and entangle in a wholly convincing and satisfying manner, as twist follows twist, revelation follows revelation and well-hidden secrets are slowly exposed.

Ambitious in its scope, Yew's play addresses many issues related to globalization such as the clash of cultures and languages and an ever-shifting sense of home. This is resoundingly manifested onstage by the symphony of accents used by the actors: Lim's heavily emphasized heartlander Singlish cadence, New Yorker Ahn's Americanized tones (fitting for her well-travelled cosmopolitan character), Benedetti's Italian-flavoured diction; these are set against Blasi's spoken Italian, the Mandarin used by China-trained Zhao Si Han to tell her tale as Liang, a worker in one of Tomaso's sweat-shops, and the gibberish used by

Production: Visible Cities

Company: Fattore K, Singapore Arts Festival 2009 and Fondazione Campania dei Festival - Napoli Teatro

Reviewer: Kenneth Kwok

Date: 23 May 2009

Time: 8.00pm

Place: Drama Centre

Rating: 4.5 out of 5

the various animal characters. The lack of language can also be pointed: at one point, Liang expresses surprise that Jessica is Chinese but does not know how to speak Mandarin.

Yew recognizes, of course, that doing business with, falling in love with and performing acts of cruelty on people who originate thousands of miles away from us is nothing new. Kublai Khan and Marco Polo's presence in Bianca's Xanax-induced daydreams reminds us that cross-cultural pollination, whether violent or harmonious, is as old as time. For better or for worse, our constant need, our common destiny to engage with a world bigger than our own is a primeval part of who we are as human beings. However, our acts of devastating cultural imperialism and exploitation of status and power are now amplified as man, brutal and greedy, expands his reach further and further beyond his natural habitat and has under his employ, tools and structures to systemically crush everyone in his path.

This is most clearly expressed in the tragic story of Liang who is trapped, both figuratively and literally, under the wheels of big business: she works in unsafe conditions and yet receives no compensation from the company when she is injured by a machine because the company says it is her own fault. Like the other factory workers, at first she has no human face, being completely hidden behind a rat's mask. To tell her story of oppression and injustice, she lifts her mask to speak to us and finally we see her face - but what else can she do except put the mask back on at the end of her tale and rejoin her anonymous compatriots in suffering? "Such is life," she says - she needs the money. As does her husband, Fish (Lim in a second role, wearing a fish's head), who has moved to Naples to work as a delivery man. Here, he is looked down upon because of his inability to speak the language, the smell of his body and how he looks like a "monster" but at least he is paid well. Their sorry plight and tender tale of sacrifice (movingly presented by Lim and Zhao especially in their final moments together onstage) are contrasted against the opulent lifestyles of the jet-setting Tomaso and Jessica, the gangster tactics of the mafia-life Birds who control rather than be controlled and the constantly fretting Bianca, a woman who does not realize that her ability to check out of life is itself a great privilege only available to those who have the luxury of not needing to work in the first place.

Yew's script is rich and complex not only in its themes but also in its presentation. He does not allow the play to bogged down by menace, pessimism and desperation. The play has many comic moments: sometimes the comedy is gently witty or sweetly silly ("I don't speak Fish," says Bianca innocently to the delivery



"The twin narratives unspool and entangle in a wholly convincing and satisfying manner, as twist follows twist, revelation follows revelation."

man; "We are packed like sardines", says Fish about his humble living quarters), other times, it is ridiculously over-the-top. In one scene, for example, Mrs Zanetti, Bianca's nosy neighbour (Santoro) describes her carnal lust for Fish with such squeamishly succulent language that it is unclear if she wants to cook him or have sex with him – and then she turns around and melodramatically accuses him of trying to take advantage of her.

Cities is also lifted by Corsetti's marvellous flair for the dramatic, ably assisted by costume and mask designer Marina Schindler and video designer Angelo Longo. Unsurprisingly for a production inspired by Italo Calvino, famous for his fantastical works and celebration of the magic of stories, another one of the themes that runs through *Cities'* human dramas is the challenging of the dichotomies of truth and lies, reality and illusion. This is symbolized in the play most explicitly through the motif of counterfeiting and the double dealings rife throughout the play, and further emphasized by Corsetti's spectacular staging: large glass panels reflect the action onstage but can also be seen through to ominously reveal actors behind the glass; surreal masks transform human actors into partly metaphorical, partly literal fish, birds and rats. Most memorable is the use of multimedia which incorporates blue-screen technology. Live action onstage is performed against a blue screen and a separate video screen shows us how things would look like if real life could be enhanced by video technology. When post-coital, Jessica tells Tomaso the story of how Singapore was founded by Sang Nila Utama, on the screen besides the two actors, we see them not on a bed but swimming in the ocean and encountering a lion in a tropical jungle - with police officer Lim's giant face suddenly intruding on the action from across time and space. Similarly, this theatrical device allows us to enter Bianca's dream conversations with Marco Polo and Kublai Khan in the lush and verdant paradise in which they live though onstage I only see the three actors sitting around a blank space.

The use of blue-screen technology has much comic potential and indeed it generated peals of laughter from the audience who was constantly being taken unawares by how it would be used. At the same time, it confronted head-on the question of what is fact and what is fiction. What can we trust in in this mixed-up world where none of the narrators is reliable and nothing is as it seems?

This is a world where truth is hidden under layers upon layers and meaning is caught within wheels within wheels: Marco Polo and Kublai Khan (played by Santoro and Di Casa with wickedly funny zaniness) are portrayed as lovers but Marco Polo is played in a very effeminate manner and obviously by a female actor; the mighty Kublai Khan, the grandson of Genghis Khan and the great warrior who conquered all China, is meanwhile portrayed as a purring housecat. There is rich dramatic irony when Marco Polo looks at Bianca and jealously asks Kublai Khan if he is "into women now" and also when both men ask Bianca how they have been remembered in the modern world. What is real if everything can be reinterpreted and re-imagined?

And what makes sense if the facts are constantly shifting? - by the close of the play, for example, those we think are heroes are villains and those we think are weak somehow find the strength to rebuild their lives despite disappointments

Credits

Playwright and Lyricist: Chay Yew

Director: Giorgio Barberio Corsetti

Translators: Lee Cheng Kee and Giorgio Barberio Corsetti

Costume and Mask Designer: Marina Schindler

Lighting Designer: Gianluca Cappelletti

Music: Fabian Obispo

Ensemble Choreographer: Ricky Sim

Set Designers: Giorgio Barberio Corsetti and Mariano Lucci

Video Designer and Technician: Angelo Longo

Property Master and Assistant Set Designer: Francesca Rossetti

Assistant to Director: Fabio Chertisch

Cast: Ali Ahn, Gabriele Benedetti, Fiara Blasi, Andrea Di Casa, Lim Kay Tong, Frederica Santoro, Zhao Si Han, Rekha Amarasuriya, Sara Caputo, Lez Ann Chong, Carla Dunareanu, Sharda Harrison, Chris Jensen, Amanda Tee, Cara Whitehouse, Rummana Yamanie

and the death of those they love.

Ultimately, are we all just objects? Units to be traded, our lives fodder for stories, whether comic or dramatic? – Jessica points out that we all love our Sang Nila Utama story but how many of us have ever asked how we can be a Lion City when lions are not native to Singapore in the first place? Did Sang Nila Utama see a tiger or an orang utan in reality and only a lion in mythology? - and does the distinction between the two really matter? "We replace the truth with something we can live with," says Jessica.

Is there a way for us to ever find anything authentic, genuine and pure? The play remains ambiguous on this to the very end, only hinting at the possibility of hope in a world where all artifice and lies are stripped away - and in doing so, perhaps reflects the greatest truth of all.

First Impressions

Invisible Cities with its labyrinthine plot which criss-crosses continents and cultures is a rich, ambitious work addressing issues such as globalization, trade and commerce and the inequities of power, especially in terms of class and money. Nowhere are these concerns more affectingly confronted than in the heartbreaking tale of Liang, a cruelly exploited sweat-shop worker. There are few words to describe the moment when the story of her sad, ruined life comes to an end and with tears in her eyes, she quietly her mask back on, one shaped like a rat's head and which completely covers her head, her face, her identity - and you know she will simply swallow her tears and return to being another of the desperate, helpless and anonymous working poor among the sea of garment factory workers all donning the same symbolic rat's head.

Unsurprisingly for a work inspired by Italo Calvino, famous for his fantastical works and celebration of the magic of stories, there is much in the spectacular staging of *Cities'* human drama to challenge the dichotomies of truth and lies, fact and delusion, actuality and hallucination: giant glass panels that reflect, reveal and can be projected on in unexpected ways; surreal masks that transform human actors into metaphorical fish, birds and rats, and multimedia which incorporates blue-screen technology that interacts with live action onstage to show us how reality and dream can co-exist side by side with both seemingly as true as the other.

What can we trust in in this mixed-up world where nothing is as it seems, heroes are revealed to be villains, and, in the end, two disparate stories are revealed to be only too painfully inter-woven?

Nothing, except for the simple belief that, somewhere out there, there can be some human connections which are indeed genuine and pure.

This brutally funny, toweringly tragic and outstandingly clever work by playwright Chay Yew and director Giorgio Barberio Corsetti (and starring an

international cast from Italy, America, Singapore, etc. including Lim Kay Tong) is a marvellous feast not only for the eyes but also the heart and soul.

4.5 out of 5, Kenneth Kwok, 23 May 2009

Productions are rated out of 5, based on practitioner's vision / reviewer's response:

5 = transcendent / rapturous; 4 = crystal / appreciative; 3 = transmitted / thoughtful; 2 = vague / unsatisfied; 1 = uncommunicated / mystified.
