

Review of *The Return*, *Lovepuke*, and *Impenjarament*  
Flipside Arts Series, Singapore Festival of Arts

***The Return*** by Theatre Company Nottle

Adaptation & Direction: Won Young Oh

Lighting Design: Yoon Kwang Duk

Sound Operation: Lee Eun A

Cast: Lee Jih Yeon, Kim Dae Geon, Teerawat Mulvilai, Lee Jae Eun,  
Jee Sun Hwa, and Chae Jin Soul



*The Return*, shown on the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> June in Theatre Studio at Esplanade, Singapore, was part of the Flipside Arts Series in conjunction of the Singapore Festival of Arts 2005. Flipside consisted of arts performances that offered a twist to the arts. The theatre productions were different from what Peter Brook would classify as the *Dead Theatre* (Brook 1990). In addition to *The Return*, based on Brecht's epic, *Legend of the Dead Soldier*, other performances in the series included *Lovepuke*, a TheatreWorks production, and *Boxing Cabaret*, an Action Theatre production. *Lovepuke* was another performance with the Brechtian approach, certainly a good choice for unconventional theatre performance for Asian audience.

*The Return* began with six people holding lit cigarettes in dim lighting. As the actors smoked sequentially, the cigarettes sparkled into glowing points on a dimmed stage, offering an image of dim-to-bright-to-dim oscillation. The scene itself formed the sign of a withdrawn

society in wait of the fatalistic arrival of the war. The sombre and depressing mood of departure arrived with the actors running around in the empty space of the stage.

It was not difficult to understand the scene with a male actor carrying a signboard with the word *bus* chasing perpetually with other actors. The depiction reflected the mass departure of people fearing the worst in their homeland. The scene lasted a good 8 minutes with a male actor who later acted as the (dead) soldier asking the different actors in separate intervals of the scene, “Where are you going to?” in Korean English, Thai, and Korean. No answer was offered in return because obviously no one cared about the destination any more than the need to leave the place immediately.



Another scene depicted the man chosen as soldier, who must be part of the nation’s heroic effort to fight for the country. He was brainwashed to serve, he must always be in, and he must please the top military man. The actor succeeded in drumming literally to these verses repeated in various manners. He drummed with zest and commitment at the beginning and repeated the messages with sadness, desperate, fearful, and oppressed emotional expressions. It was in this instance that Bentley’s point that Stanislavsky’s approach to acting could be incorporated into Brecht’s plays (Bentley 2000: 41) rang a bell. After all, there are no Brechtian actors but actors attempting to depict Brecht’s scripts on stage.

War was indeed the time to show the true colours of human characters. The scene showing that none of the three actors wanted to manage the dead soldier sadly depicted opportunistic characters in troubled times. The actors mocked the deceased by searching for valuables and money, but refused to honour him with basic respect until the general who recruited the soldier arrived at the scene. Failing to convince them to do it for goodness, he threw a stack of money in the air to the screaming elation of the three actors who immediately rushed to put the dead soldier into the cart. The trademark scene in the Brechtian epic *Mother Courage* came across vividly with the miming of cry re-enacted by the female actor while pulling the cart.

Although the production was Brechtian in nature, the scenes flowed from one to the other in a linear development and the actors portrayed their emotions well in the scenes. The comical expressions along with French music succeeded in commenting on the glorification of the dead soldier. The medal and the posthumous celebration of the dead soldier's sacrifice to his country was contrasted with the parading of the deceased in mocking manner through disco and techno dance steps when the background music transformed from sombre opera tune to hip and funky rhythm. The audience indeed laughed as the actors cried and empathised when the actors laughed (cf. Brecht 2000:26).

Epic theatre requires a thinking audience. There were many learning points on the contrasts of music with theatrical acting to create discomfort as well critical humorous expressions in sombre events for the audience to ponder. The audience has to be familiar with basic theatre literacy in the Brechtian style in performance to reap the full entertaining return.

*Lovepuke* by Theatre Works, Education & Outreach Singapore

Writer: Duncan Sarkies; Director: Jeffrey Tan

Cast: Chu Enlai, Brendan Fernandez, Rajesh Krishnamuti, Ravi Raoj Marimootoo,  
Janice Koh, Chermaine Ang, Denise Tan, and Annie Lee.



TheatreWorks (Singapore) Ltd., an international performance company established in 1985, is Singapore's pioneer for professional English theatre production. *Lovepuke* is a production from the Education and Outreach of TheatreWorks programme in the Singapore Arts Festival's Flipside performance series. The cast of eight local talents, under the direction of Jeffrey Tan, the Associate Artistic Director of TheatreWorks, put on a raunchy but intelligent performance.

*Lovepuke* portrays the love(-hate) relationships of four couples in metropolitan Singapore, who fall in and out of love due to sexual excitement, fantasy, and hedonism. The show, rated RA, was a Restricted Artistic performance for viewers above 21 years old only. The performance on 12<sup>th</sup> June 2005, at the Esplanade's Theatre studio, had the audience,

packed to an almost full house with the front row vacated for last minute walk-ins, re-examine the notion of love.

The technique of this performance is Brechtian with projections on screen indicating the sequential-thematic division of the performance as well as placards used by the actors at the beginning and the end of each scene of the performance. Couples flashed cards in various sequences surrounding the key words of *Sex*, *Argument*, *Break-up*, *Make-up* before the first scene. At the ending of each scene were displays of cards by the couples showing the key word, *First*, *Second*, *Not Participating* or *Unfinished* after moans of sexual elation or frustration.

One can visualise the development of the scene prior to the various combinations of these cards. A couple flashing cards with *First* and *Second* represented an I-win-you-lose situation, whereas a couple flashing cards with *First* and *Unfinished* represented a bipolarity of satisfying-doubtful situation. A couple flashing *Not Participating* and *Unfinished* cards represented a situation of sexual depression on both sides for reasons like discontentment and disillusion with an uncommitted partner.

The performance was quite a hilarious exhibit of different characteristics of lovers that went through the discovery experience of their partners and themselves. There was the *sex was never enough* caricature, the *low esteemed* caricature, the *am I gay identity* doubt, the *she looked like my ex-girl friend* character, the *need him to look good in front of my ex-lover* character, and other interpersonal relationship stereotypes. These various roles were enough to keep the audience laughing as the actors cried, and empathising when the actors laughed (cf. Brecht 2000:26).

*Lovepuke* depicted the typology of relationships in a post-modern middle class Asian society that seemed to be typical of those shown in the mass media of popular media. There seemed to be little room for simple family oriented love foundation in the world of this

particular social class and very little focuses on the communal good. Although there was a card saying *Having Children*, the card was not the thesis of the scene but rather a by-product of the sexual preoccupation of the characters. The card in question had many cards with *Sex* and *Minor Squabble* as the key words preceding it.

The theme in *Lovepuke* concerns narcissistic relationships that unfortunately required a second party to confirm, affirm, and re-affirm one's worth and desire. While in the first instance, the dialogue of the actors might sound like love to many people, Tan managed to use the Brechtian alienation effect and epic style to show the selfish desire in each character through the actor's commentary. These commentaries offered a subplot that engaged the audience in an intelligent and critical way to view *Lovepuke* as a social critique of the current society in a post-modern macrocosm.

***Impenjarament 'Imprisonment'*** by Teater Ekamatra  
*Performed in multiple languages with English surtitles.*  
*Post-show dialogue with Aidli 'Alin' Mosbit on 25 June (Matinee)*

Written & Directed by **Aidli 'Alin' Mosbit**  
 Choreography by **Gani**, Music by **Zubir Abdullah**  
 Performance by **M Saffri A Manaf** , **Muhd Kunju Noushad** (India), **Muhammad Najib Soiman (bijaN)** , **Mohd Hatta Sulaiman** , **Noor Effendy Ibrahim** , **Paulus Simangunsong** (Indonesia), **Peter Sau** and **Sulaiman Ismail Batri**

The title of this theatrical production is iconic, as the affix and suffix is meant to 'imprison' the Malay word *penjara* 'jail', designating imprisonment. In response to the enquiry of an audience member after the performance, Aidli, the director, asked her audience not to read into the play but "just enjoy it". However, the performance contained many layers of entrapment. There was the physical confinement of the criminals doing time for their crime. This aspect was what struck the audience as they walked into a studio filled with steel cell-like structures, squatting toilets, CCTV cameras, a space surrounded by the familiar structures of a prison with metal cases lifted up to a triangular platform used for caning. There were many of signs indicating an internal replica of a prison

The multilingual approach offered heightened the experience of those who speak the languages. The Mandarin monologues of a son recalling his mother's angst and sorrow were effective signs of performance to Chinese speaking audience. The Indian actor aptly portrayed the feelings and dispositions of an immigrant from Madras in his mother tongue, adding a naturalistic flavour to the viewing experience. The promises to his mother might be opaque in terms of semantics but it was definitely resounding in terms of pragmatics.

The acting style was a mixture of Brecht, Brook, Stanislavski, as well as Bangsawan, and classical Indian with the extra turn of musical performance. In between was an interlude segment that vaguely resembled Indian Khatakali indicating a zestful Indian in his native land

preparing to earn good wages in Malaysia. But to his dismay, he was cheated and scorned by the agent and ended up in jail with three strokes of caning. The caning procedure was comically introduced by an inmate in Mandarin but contrasted with tragic response with loud and painful shouts.

According to Aidli, the trigger behind the creation of *Impenjarament* was the response to the loss of her friends, who were caught in legal complications for various reasons and wound up in jail. The pain incurred by the family and friends was included as another form of entrapment in the performance. Three actors role-played as wives and mothers in two sequences of the jail visit scene. The cross-dressing as pregnant wives was executed with a focus on the issue of lost husband and missing father. Comical comments lightened the burden of their wives and downplayed the stressful dilemma entrapping the expecting mothers. The five sad mothers funnily wailed in chorus about bad diet, abandonment of fiancée and any other mundane issues, avoiding direct reference to the traumatic experience and pain inflicted to the family.

The setting included an isolation cell big enough for an inmate. The audience could watch the prisoner from three CCTV cameras fixed outside of the cell. The actor showed the mental torture of being held in a narrowly confined space under a glaring bright light. He was physically and emotionally bounded where he could not stretch his arms and remained captive in isolation. The double entrapment had him lose his sanity and (symbolically) smattered his faeces all over himself at the squatting toilet.

Mental entrapment was another theme as there were various forms of abuse that cause irreversible consequence to the inmates. Rape in the male prison was presented creatively through the recitation of *syair*, a form of Malay poetry. The sense of fear and helplessness were two major signs that came across through the prolonged vocalisation in the representation of the experience of being raped. The pain of the victim reflected in the poetic



rendition was innovative and potent. The jail slang used in the performance for bottoms was *stor kunyit* 'tumeric store' in Malay. *Air sabun* 'soap water' used as the lubricant was another pointer of male sexual violence in the *syair*. Although the English surtitles for the Malay poetic rendition on the screen seemed comical, the ritualistic oral performance coupled with the apt emotional expressions successfully instilled a traumatic effect in the audience.

Other Malay slang terms used in the performance included *kes cermin* 'mirror case' to refer to a heterosexual rape case. At the beginning of the performance, a jailbird seen performing masturbation was referred to comically as sending Short Message System (SMS). Two terms used to categorise the prisoners in *Impenjarament* were *sin khek* and *lao khek* 'new guest' and 'old guest', respectively. These terms have a Hokkien origin (Hokkien, or Fujianese, commonly spoken among Chinese speakers in Singapore, is a dialect of South-eastern China).

The final rhythmic performance was innovative as the inmates compare imprisonment with daily routines. The breakfast, work, lunch, exercise, dinner, and the tiredness, silence, and inner conflict over occupational stress were compared in parallel to sequences of imprisonment. The steps were well choreographed through encircling movement among the eight actors to symbolise the rotating life cycle of nothingness as each returned to start. Using a towel as the minimal prop, the simplicity of the rendition was instantly striking to the audience.

There were two types of human sound highlighted separately in the performance, namely the burping orchestra and the whistling band scenes. These seemed to be safe favourite pastimes in the prison as there was literally little meaning in the human sounds hence socially neutral as entertainment. The racist remarks completed the reality of prison life. The true colours of human nature were explored in prison. In the hard prison

environment devoid of common social mores, one would not expect the inmates to exchange more refined phatic communion in their daily face-to-face encounters.

The fear of leaving the prison was another theme that shows dependency entrapment, induced from the formulaic life sequence in the institution. The abundance of food and the existing accommodation made livelihood convenient to the point of being attractive. The inhabitants did not need to worry about the next meal, the utility bills, or the clothes they needed to wear. Ironically, in the performance, the inmate supposed to leave the prison cried his head off the night before. The outside world seemed more fearful to him than the prison. Having to re-learn modern living and secure his dignity had a crippling effect on a man after the experience of a settled living standard.

The show was an eye-opener to audience members who had little inkling about a prison life. The actors were versatile, playing multiple roles and having to switch from alienated expressions to emotionally imbued lines concerning their personal reflection that made some audience members teary. They were fearful, pitiful, comical, dreadful and most entertaining to watch in their roles. Together with all her crew and cast, Aidli created an innovative performance that showed the different aspects of imprisonment among the jailbirds as well as their family members. Indeed, the performance can be likened to a bowl of delicious mixed Malay dish of pineapple, cucumber, peanut, thick soy sauce, and bean sprouts that blend into a sour sweet Asiatic mound.

## References

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## Jyh Wee Sew, MA

*CHIJ ST Theresa's Convent*

160 Lower Delta Rd. Singapore 099138

Apart from written work in *Dewan Bahasa* and conducting Drama Workshop for Malay Teachers in 2006, Jyh was involved in the Yellow Ribbon Project that coordinated Convent student's letters in Mother Tongue languages for the Prison inmates to encourage them during their difficult moments. Jyh was selected by Marquis, New York as Who's Who in Asia 2007.