

'Beijing Ren': Impeccable acting on impressive paper set

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The vast ramshackle house on stage is crafted from off-white, creamy paper in a dramatic reflection of emotional vulnerability. Now, imagine this house positioned at a 15-degree tilt toward the audience, so that they could relate to the low and depressed feelings of people in the story.

It was an intriguing set, and of course, it was not the only element that captured the audience's attention in the *Beijing Ren* (Peking Man) theatrical performance held June 22-23 as part of the 2007 Singapore Arts Festival.

Set in 1937 Beijing, *Beijing Ren* was written by Cao Yu — or the "Shakespeare of China" — and tells of the declining feudal Zeng family, as they descend from prosperity to an absolute breakdown.

Their formerly golden days of civility are replaced by visits of bloodthirsty debt-collectors, and the family is torn apart by egoistic hearts, internal discord and failed love. Yet its members are unable to flee from this entrapment.

Known among Chinese theater fans for other influential plays such as *Thunderstorm* and *Savage Land*, Cao Yu strikes viewers with his incisive perception of human behavior in plays set against a climate of great social and political change.

A sold-out hit in Beijing last year, this version of *Bei-*



courtesy Singapore Arts Festival

Made from paper, the set of *Beijing Ren*, directed by Li Liuyi, is tilted toward the audience to evoke a sense of lowness and smallness, reflecting the emotions of the story's characters.

Beijing Ren is directed by Li Liuyi, who is known to handle representative works such as *Zhuang Zhou Tests His Wife*, *Military Train* and *Sunshine After the Rain*.

The Singapore audience was slowly led to discover the decay eating away at the Zeng family through superb acting from players of the Beijing People's Art Theatre. Founded in 1952 and helmed by the drama master himself, Cao Yu, this national theater company has showcased more than 300 plays of different styles since its establishment.

What was amusing was that the 185-minute performance was performed in

authentic Mandarin Chinese, accents and all. So, as a viewer who had never seen any play in an unknown foreign language, it took a while to get used to the whole English subtitle business.

During rapid dialogues, my eyes juggled from the translation to the scene and back. But it is easy to imagine how enjoyable it must be for those who speak the language.

As audience member Kim Lien remarked: "I enjoyed everything in the play, especially their language. It's a stylish Mandarin they are speaking. The performance is great, I think each of characters played their roles very

well, especially the lady who played Siyi. She could deliver her emotion strongly."

Speaking of emotion, Zeng Siyi (played by Zhang Pei), undeniably stood out. A graduate of the Central Academy of Drama, Pei made the audience fall into shock and laughter with her "drama queen" moments — that is, a controlling madam.

Her remarkable performance was equally matched by Shanghai Academy Theater graduate Fu Yao, who played Sufang, or Miss Su. The two raise tense conversation to a high art, delivering one of the most powerful scenes in the drama.

Another memorable char-

acter was Uncle Jiang Tai, played playfully by Xue Shan. His incredible eloquence while speaking rapidly with an unpredictable, amusing intonation brought joy to the Esplanade hall.

A personal favorite was the presence of "Old Master" Zeng Hao (Chao Xiaoguang), whose charisma and strong aura calls to mind the "dons" of Italian mob flicks.

In terms of acting, the entire cast undoubtedly presented flawless skill.

Contrary to the eye-catching set, the music stayed subtle and light during the play. Only at dramatic moments — such as when Zeng Wenqing goes into hysterics as he watches his father, Zeng Hao, die — did the music go wild to heighten the emotion.

Lighting was likewise simple and soft, casting a gloom that reflected the emotions, moods and the theme of the drama.

This was impressed even further as the drama neared its end, when the paper house set was tilted at a more acute angle toward the audience.

It must be said that this year's Singapore Arts Festival, which ran from May 25-June 24 and marked its 30th anniversary, really spoiled art enthusiasts with an abundance of art and cultural events, from moving dance performances to reimagined, mind-opening theater and soul-enriching music.

As festival director Goh Ching Lee said, "Whether you are a current or a previous

festival-goer, the 30th anniversary is a good time to deepen your association or to renew your acquaintance with the Festival."

Art lovers should take heed that, out of all the great events held in Singapore throughout the year, this is the one not to miss.



Fu Yao as Sufang (left) and Zhang Pei as Zeng Siyi created an aura of tension with their impressive performance in *Beijing Ren*. The drama by China's "Shakespeare" Cao Yu was staged from June 22-23 at the 2007 Singapore Arts Festival.