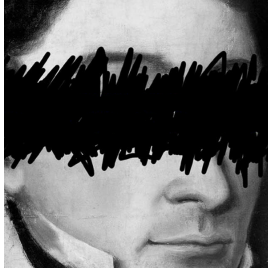


Light



OzAsia Festival. Nexus. 18 Oct 2019

As a new work based on the story of this city's founding planner, OzAsia's production, *Light*, has been highly anticipated and a pre-booked sell-out.

It tells not only of our own Colonel William Light but of his father, Francis Light, the man attributed as founder of Penang, or at least the man who claimed the island for the British. Both Lights have complex histories much of which is familiar to the people of Adelaide. So, Australian writer/director Thomas Henning has bitten off a huge chunk of well-examined culture which, in this production

produced and designed by Malaysia's TerryandTheCuz, has had to be culled into two hours of performance.

An eager audience crammed into bleachers in the cramped Nexus space for the production's opening night which, they were told, was to be more of a tech run since the sets had been delayed by customs and were newly-arrived.

Interesting sets they are. For the Francis Light narrative, they are dark-floored and austere with a strange shallow grave-like pit in the centre. Dates and places are identified as flash cards on a pinboard. Linked by Gavin Yap as narrator, facts are delivered as a hot peppering of information, guns and opium, colonial imperialism, racism, and sexism. Martin Blum plays Light as a fairly low-class English adventurer against Junji Delfino as his Penang wife, Martina Rozells, a woman who was purported to be of aristocratic blood but whose true ethnicity was mysterious. She is depicted as proud and elegant by Junji Delfino, a truly splendid actress whose presence onstage in various characters throughout the two bio-tales is quite magnetic. As her story tails off, she's seen in widow's weeds and the floor rises up in dramatic denouement. It's not a happy story, but the company gives the whole show a smattering of somewhat incongruous levity with revue-like punchlines and some zany anachronisms.

William Light's story is not a happy one, either. Gavin Yap plays him as a handsome loser, blighted by opposition and health. At times, his despair and frustration is heartbreaking, and well contrived by Yap.

Delfino embodies his wives and the fascinating Maria Gandy, his stalwart partner and companion in Adelaide. Blum struts and manipulates in the spirit of the other so-called founding fathers of this city.

Here, the stage is bright and white. A TV monitor plays newscasts on one side and a Light watercolour landscape features on the other. There is a desk and the floor is adorned with neat stacks of loose papers, symbolising Light's plans. But it is the bleak little bed with its white sheets which sings the song of poor Light who, rather oddly, is costumed in white underwear throughout.

Again, the company has devised a striking climax to the play. No spoilers except to say that playwright Thomas Henning's research uncovered reports of Maria Gandy's last years with an entourage of arrogant spitting dwarves and one contemplates that this strange piece of history is worthy of a whole new work.



Henning's premise in this double-barrelled work is that history is malleable, always partially recalled in different ways through different eyes. Hence, he offers a scattergun of known facts and an imagining of underscoring impressions and influences.

If one is looking for a history text book, one will not find it here. What one does find is an off-centre sketchpad of black and white, light and dark human dramas.

It is more a piece of art than conventional theatre. And, as one processes its emotions and imagery, it stands up as a defiantly original and provocative creation; just the sort of thing that festivals should be about.

Samela Harris

When: 18 and 19 Oct

Where: Nexus

Bookings: bass.net.au

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