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Review: *The Shape of a Bird* drives home the enduring power of fairytales

by Akshita Nanda

Through folded paper and fantastic puppetry, *The Shape of a Bird* drives home the enduring power of fairytales. A writer locked in a cell scribbles letters to her daughter on the outside, telling the younger woman tales of another mother and child living in an empire ruled by cicadas. The insects detest writing, yet neither woman can deny the stories waiting to burst out and reveal a history forgotten and forbidden.

The same blend of pathos, affection and comedy that won playwright Jean Tay a Life Theatre Award in 2006 for *Everything But the Brain* repeats in *The Shape Of a Bird*, her newest treatment of the relationship between parent and child. The succinct power of the script is magnified by a stellar cast and superb staging via co-directors Mei Ann Teo and Benjamin Ho, assisted by Thong Pei Qin.

The play augurs well for the future of new ensemble Saga Seed Theatre. It is a masterclass in how to do a lot with very little - and very, very effectively. Sound designer Kenny Png and lighting designer Xing Ying Peng aid Ho's wizard hand with puppets. The Esplanade Recital Studio is transformed from prison cell into a troubling fantasy landscape where birds folded from newspaper fly or jigsaw paper limbs rearrange into the semblance of a hidden truth.

Costumes by Joy Cheek are simple, flattering and fit for each part. Isolated on the set of black platforms and tidal waves of paper, designed by Melpomene Katakalos, Tan Kheng Hua wears white and writhes convincingly between maternal instinct and duty towards the truth. Her opposite number is a brilliantly cast, black-clad Brendon Fernandez. He slips easily between the roles of inhuman Cicada Chairman, lonely puppet and also the writer's guard, who loses his electronic aloofness and turns out to be as trapped as she is by reality.

The Shape Of a Bird is not the only exploration of censorship and distortion of history from Singaporean theatre practitioners. Wild Rice's most recent Christmas pantomime *The Emperor's New Clothes* did the same, as did Tan Tarn How's *Fear Of Writing* in 2011, presented by TheatreWorks.

The Shape Of a Bird is not subtle in its treatment of the topic - Tay acknowledges this wryly in the script - but it is a charming new telling, perfectly pitched for the schoolchildren who made up the majority of Friday night's audience. They gasped as the parallels between real and imagined events became more obvious, they responded with touching sighs to the romance prettily played out in dance and gesture between the author's daughter (a riveting, athletic Jean Toh) and the Cicada Chairman's nephew (Thomas Pang, striking in even this small role).

It is no accident that the writer in the play has been locked up for writing children's stories. These sink into the hearts of the young, they teach lessons that are very easily remembered by adults. Their power is in their simplicity - and in the case of this play, in how beautifully they are told.