

Fog is Nostalgia

Buyou *Southern People Weekly*

The annual Beijing Fringe Festival invariably manages to cause a few hubbubs in this vast city. Performers come from all over the world, whereas the quality of the works is varied. The greatest pleasure is always being able to bump into a few familiar faces. Certainly, if I'm lucky, I am able to come across a couple of good shows too.

Landscape In the Mist by Theatre Ronin from Hong Kong is precisely the kind of show that requires a bit of luck. Unlike overseas troupes from places like France and Germany that enjoy the promotion of overseas cultural organisations despite their small size or Beijing local groups that would run around to spread the word among their friends in the field to boost attendance, Theatre Ronin's low profile is almost inevitable.

A seaman born and bred by the sea returns to his hometown and realises the people have become strangers in a familiar place. As if water droplets in the fog hitting the face and clinging onto the skin, the memories are tearing apart – the play is adapted from Hong Kong writer Shu Hong-sing's novella *The Fog*. Active in Hong Kong in the 1950s and 60s, the writer wasn't a big name either. Yet, he focused on writing about the people and things in old Hong Kong, as well as the love and care among poverty-stricken families, retaining many people's precious local memories, including the play's director.

The stage design is the most imaginative part of the play. The artistic representation of fog is created by the flowing and creasing of a piece of disposable plastic tablecloth, which simultaneously represents the sea – the huge waves that nurture and kill. In addition, the light projected on the cloth is the means to display flashes of memories. The designer said that piece of plastic tablecloth is the same one used in the Hong Kong premier in 2006. The ones sold in supermarkets nowadays are too thick and non-translucent, which fail to create the lightness of fog. This is thoughtfulness, similar to the effort of inviting a puppet master to make the life-like seagull and cat. It's not hard to make them life-like, yet it takes such thoughtfulness to do so. Young people these days are prone to immersing in thrill given by form in their theatrical productions, overlooking the adhesion to the content. In fact, muscles are attached to tendons and skin is enclosing bones. The stage is a space where details are exposed. The audience is able to see any specks of blemish or sloppiness. In this play, the acting, props, lighting and music all stress the notion of 'nostalgia'. Each of them

emerges and submerges at the right place to create a fitting and delicate text. Yet, it is not sentimental. No exaggerated body language or verbal language is used – only at times Hakka is spoken or a narrator ignites a cigarette while singing a song, letting the past return.

The original novel is set in the 50s, older than the age of all main creators. Yet, these young people haven't made things unnecessarily mysterious. They have brought into play their own life experiences to perceive the script. This is one most of direct ways to reconstruct the sense of history in an increasingly one-dimensional era, which is also one of the meanings of drama. The actress grew up in Yuen Long and once learned Hakka with an old lady. The actor has been nurtured by his father, who is a Cantonese opera enthusiast, since he was small. He always thinks about the past. He said every generation would be lonely and sorrowful. The only difference is the depth. Those unhappy memories are all buried very deep; they are black in colour.

It's just that most people who have left would not return. They wouldn't even turn their heads, especially in a place like Hong Kong that has been through thick and thin and has undergone dramatic transformation. As the ending of the play suggests, the most painful moment isn't reminiscence but nostalgia, where one directly confronts the old place. Only until then would one understand 'nostalgia is the basic form of love'. Just like the 'fog' shrouding the whole play, it blocks our senses, veiling our eyesight. Nevertheless, it's formless and indissipable.