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"A word is not a crystal, transparent and unchanged, it is the skin of a living thought and may vary greatly in color and content according to the circumstances and the time in which it is used" - Oliver Wendell Holmes

February 23, 2019

LATE COMPANY

by Jordan Tannahill

PANGDEMONIUM

Victoria Theatre, Singapore

Debora (Janice Koh) and Michael (Edward Choy) are setting the table for dinner. He brings out the wine. She fiddles with the music. Everything looks civilised except that tonight's agenda is not about food. The couple are finally, after one year, about to meet Curtis (Xander Pang), the bully allegedly responsible for the suicide of their son Joel, together with his parents Tamara (Karen Tan) and Bill (Adrian Pang). They want answers. They want to know what caused their funny, talented sixteen-year-old boy to take his own life in the bathroom.

This blistering drama by Canadian playwright Jordan Tannahill interrogates the world of cyber bullying, teen suicide and modern parenting. It's a brilliant start to PANGDEMONIUM's 2019 season themed around 'Present Tense/Future Perfect', reflecting the uneasy relationship we have with the world of today - a world where, more than ever, institutions and individuals struggle to understand each other.



Inspired by the suicide of a gay Canadian teen in 2011 who himself was the victim of bullying, *Late Company* comes from a deeply personal place. As the guests take their seats, barbs, like ripples, break the surface of middle-class morality. When Debora serves a starter of shrimp, Tamara is all passive aggression. Curtis is allergic to shellfish; surely she's mentioned this many times before. Has Debora forgotten?

PANGDEMONIUM has carved out a niche in presenting plays that tackle social issues, never shying away from controversial topics that do not get spoken about enough. Teen suicide has been increasingly getting attention in the media; the hit Netflix show *Thirteen Reasons Why* showed us how negative remarks can slowly destroy a child's self-esteem, making one feel like they simply have no way out. The issue is even more poignant closer to home; studies have shown that Singapore has one of the world's highest rates of school bullying, an ugly side effect of a nation that has constantly striven for academic excellence and sought to prioritise hardware over heartware.

Tannahill reminds us that it's not just a lack of empathy for those that dare to be different. So much of this play revolves around modes of parenting and how the adults interact reveal volumes about the impact this can have on their children. Michael, the busy politician, is barely aware of what his children are up to. Contemptuous banker Bill seems to think his son has not done any wrong; it's only normal to endure a bit of name-calling and teasing in a boys' school. Tamara, the infuriating do-gooder, just wants to achieve a nice sense of closure rather than to get to the root

causes. All these individuals are in some way flawed.



Photo Credit: Crispian Chan

Debora is perhaps the most amorphous of the characters. It's obvious that she's orchestrated the entire dinner, right down to asking Curtis to write a letter to her about the incident. She appears to have moved on but it becomes apparent as the play progresses that what she really wants is to lay blame. For a parent who seems to have pored over every detail of the incident, it's staggering to learn that she has no idea about her son's widely publicised YouTube videos or never told her husband about details of his life. Koh delivers a truly outstanding performance as the broken mother so desperate to seek answers that she has not allowed herself a chance to heal.

I had rather hoped to delve deeper into the psyche of Curtis, the sullen teenager who spends most of the play saying very little. Was he under pressure to act in a macho way and put boys like Joel in their place? Were his actions a cry for attention? Holding his own in this group of immensely talented performers, Xander Pang is perfectly adequate as the reformed bully caught up in a minefield of words. One gets the sense that he is ultimately being held back from expressing his real emotions and maybe, just maybe, this boy will grow up to be a better person.



Photo Credit: Crispian Chan

Director Tracie Pang, no stranger to poignant family stories, allows the ninety-minute play to unfold with a quiet ferocity that keeps us rapt. There's a lot that is said by the end but it's what remains unsaid that rings in our ears. Flashes of rage catch one almost by surprise while tender moments, like Debora gazing lovingly at old photographs of her son, leave one fighting back tears. The decision to localise the setting is also terrific and provides us with a thoroughly relatable snapshot of upper middle-class Singapore with casually entitled kids and their emotionally vacant parents.

Petrina Dawn Tan, working for the first time with PANGDEMONIUM, conjures up a stylish, fully-realized set filled with Debora's metal sculptures and expensive furnishings, complete with imposing artworks and a greenery-filled outdoor deck. The production is sensitively rounded out with Jing Ng's soundscapes and James Tan's lighting. It's a home whose quiet elegance cannot mask the emptiness within: an absent father, an indulgent yet oblivious mother and a son pouring his heart into the depths of cyberspace.

Late Company is a fine example of how text and performance fuse together to create truly compelling theatre. At the end of the day, the play is a clarion call for understanding - reminding us of the importance of taking time to really connect with one another and to create safe spaces where our kids can be their authentic selves. Everyone needs some company before it gets too

late.

The Crystalwords score: 4/5

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