

SIFA 2015: A labyrinth of mixed dreams in Taiwan

Dreams



Taiwan Dreams Episode 1: Dream Hotel. Photo: Kevin Lee.

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SINGAPORE — Dream Hotel, the first episode in Wei Ying-chuan's Taiwan Dreams project, tells the story of hermaphrodite photographer Tu Nick, who checks into Xixia Hotel in search of his identity and the estranged father who abandoned him when he was 15.

Interestingly, the lead character of Tu Nick was played by an actor and an actress, who interchange roles or sometimes co-exist within the same scene. The themes of identity and duality extend throughout the play as its two acts function as yin and yang versions that cast different perspectives of the same piece of memory.

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I've always liked the experimental vibes of the performance space at 72-13, which suited this performance very well. Audiences sat facing each other in opposite rows, separated by a long carpeted walkway. The photo of a female torso framed a doorway while banners of a spliced montage of faces line the wall. A bamboo roof structure and projection canvas loomed overhead.

The strong ensemble cast was enthralling to watch as they switched seamlessly between characters, from tormented lovers to over-the-top hotel staff to adorable goats (you can't, pardon the pun, bleat that!). The latter was a funny parody of Nick's ill-fated parents by a cross-dressing, cheongsam-clad granny and seven goats with names that poked fun at Chinese and Taiwan political figures. Between light-hearted and serious scenes, the video projections of photos and animation complemented the historical and sociopolitical innuendoes. The cast alternated well between melodrama and naturalism, and Nick's parents, in particular, were able to portray tender, tragic moments.

The director used the camera as a motif, where a shot would metaphorically terminate a character. Occasionally, the protagonist Nick will also snap photos of the audience or sit amongst them to observe reenacted scenes, blurring the fourth wall of theatre.

What had seemed like a promising premise at the start of the play became increasingly convoluted in the second half with more switches, flashbacks and layers introduced. It was almost as complicated as the word riddles of the Western Xia people.

A dream within a dream, a hotel within a hotel — it felt somewhat like a theatrical version of the movie Inception, minus DiCaprio and special effects. Perhaps this was in part due to the play being condensed to 160 minutes from its original six-hour staging. Overall, the strong ensemble delivered good dramatic moments as the piece played on political and gender themes. However, I did spot some audience members looking pretty lost in its labyrinth by the end of the evening. And oh boy, for once was I glad that this hotel did not grant me a late check-out.

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