

House: Complex work that traversed cultures

By Stephanie Burridge

HOUSE

School of the Arts, Drama Theatre

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Inspired by Federico Garcia Lorca's *The House Of Bernarda Alba*, local playwright Joel Tan's script focuses on an indomitable Peranakan matriarch. Music led by Spanish guitarist Jorge Padilla and local violinist-composer Yong Kailin add another East/West layer.

Five women wearing black kebaya danced within the timber frame of a house where they are incarcerated for three years to mourn their father's death. The matriarch, Bernada Neo (Viviana Bernard), has unquestionable authority condemning her daughters to an austere life.

Through the chit-chat of two maids, Tan weaves an evocative path of metaphors that are played out in this multi-disciplinary work. He adds an invaluable touch of humour such as in a scene with the sisters seated around a sewing machine listening to a lewd story in Singlish about the maid's boyfriend. There are also references to local fruits in a phrase such as "her breasts are like ripe persimmons" to describe the feisty daughter Adela.

Flamenco Sin Fronteras brought mature performances to the stage working the familiar flamenco combination of rising and falling, wrist turning, skirt tossing and complex foot syncopations and rhythms. Tilly Wong was superb as the free-spirited Adela - rebellious and unafraid, she flaunted the period of mourning by donning a red, sexy dress and taking a lover, Poo Choo, played by Ng Yin Ling. Wong's dancing traversed many moods and expressions providing Daphne Huang Vargas as her sister Martha with an excellent foil.

Martha's jealousy and hatred of Adela came through in thunderous foot stomping solos and an erotic, contemporary dance where she voyeuristically observed the lovers Adela and Poo Choo through a window clad only in her white underwear - a creative twist for a genre that rarely exposes the legs of the dancers.

She betrays her sister's secret tryst to the mother who feigns shooting Poo Choo, leading to the horrific climax when the inconsolable Adela hangs herself.

Matriarch Neo looked the part, but needed to exert her will through her dancing and acting to dominate the stage and stop the lustful rumblings accelerating in the house. Poo Choo, who eventually brings down the morality of the house in a disastrous spiral of events, needed a stronger physical presence that would indicate his power to subvert.

These central characters counterpointed the group of four sisters, particularly in the second act, where discipline broke and the hot-bed of lust tore the family apart. The transition from the traditional Peranakan-inspired black costumes for the first act into the white of the second, where the women wore shorts and danced barefoot, was liberating for the Flamenco genre and subversive as it physically and symbolically freed the dancers to express themselves beyond the restrictions of family ties.

Artistic director Antonio Vargas has created a complex work that traversed cultures, reflecting on tradition and modernity, society expectations and individual needs, suppression and freedom.

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Flamenco dancer Yuriko Kurose in a Peranakan costume that has a flared bottom to accommodate the dance steps in The House, a dance drama by Flamenco Sin Fronteras. -- ST FILE PHOTO: KUA CHEE SIONG