

Empowerment: The Journey to CHACHAMBO! Taking Flight

In a historic first for Singapore, the disability arts scene is finally ready to present a professional production that seeks to break new ground. "CHACHAMBO! Taking Flight" is performed by a pan-disability cast who will grace the stage of the Victoria Theatre, one of the most recognizable landmarks in downtown Singapore. This marks a watershed moment for the Singaporean D/deaf and disabled community, which has long fought for the right to equal opportunities in the arts.

Amidst this sea of superlatives, all eyes are on the cast and crew of "CHACHAMBO! Taking Flight", and the main actors of the production are not taking any chances. A gruelling schedule awaits for the rest of July as the main actors of the production seek to polish their performance in the rehearsal space at ART:DIS Bukit Merah. Now in the final few weeks before the show opening, rehearsal has taken on a new meaning as a time for experimentation and risk-taking as the actors dig deeper into their craft and reach beyond their perceived limits.

After all, it is this very process that results in growth and progress, and there is no room for stagnation in ART:DIS. In three parts, this article explores how empowerment is an integral part of the rehearsal journey for "CHACHAMBO: Taking Flight", by offering a front-seat view of how eight of the ten performers with disabilities learn to interact with each other on stage, as a play which has earned the right to call itself Singapore's landmark pan-disability theatre production.

Metaphors and Imagination: How two autistic actors are guided to act as a couple

Choo Jun Wei knows this well. As an autistic person, he faces a unique set of challenges with expressing himself on stage and coping with emotional crescendos in the play. However, the accomplished actor-musician has ample stage experience as a French horn player with the Purple Parade, and eagerly approaches his craft with determination and fearlessness. To help Jun Wei strengthen his performance, Director Peter Sau workshops the lines and directions with Jun Wei by minimizing human interaction, and adopts a calmer approach so that the budding actor is not pushed over his emotional limits in the rehearsal process.

Jun Wei plays the young Lucky Liu alongside the 26-year-old avatar of the entertainment club lady boss Bao Yu, played by Luo Mang. In the play, Bao Yu meets Lucky Liu and initially rejects him out of fear that he would betray her just like her past experience with love, but she eventually warms up with him after being touched by his sincerity and persistence. In real life, Jun Wei's personality shines through just like his onstage persona. He offers a fistbump to anyone whom he considers a close friend, and after just two meetings, I was readily included in that list of people.

Meanwhile, 21-year-old Luo Mang is an actress-dancer-musician who was diagnosed with moderate autism at the age of 3. A seasoned performer who is trained in ballet and Chinese folk dance as well as playing the violin and piano, Luo Mang is one of five Goh Chok Tong

Enable (UBS Promise) Awardees in the main cast, alongside Claire Teo, Jaspreet Kaur, Ammar Ameerzy and Timothy Lee. For Luo Mang, playing a young couple in love with Jun Wei is a huge step out of her comfort zone, but Peter Sau finds a novel method to coach the two autistic actors so that they can portray their characters more truthfully.

“Luo Mang is not used to eye contact,” Peter notes as part of a text exchange. The approach was to draw heavily on texture and metaphors that the young actress can access through her imagination. For her dance number in *All I Want To Do Is Dream*, Luo Mang combines her technical abilities in dance with the expressiveness and characterization of Bao Yu by using the image of a purple velvet peacock, which conveys mysteriousness, soft elegance, and proud showmanship. For her scenes with Jun Wei, Peter encourages the both of them to “look at each other like cute animals, a cat and a dog”, and it is those affectionate metaphors that empowers the actors to push past their discomfort of looking into another person’s eyes, and to rationalize the logic of the storyline and play. With the groundwork completed, they may then deliver the right emotions and mood for the particular scene in the play such that it ties the moments before and the moments after of the story together.

Strengths and Assets: How neurodivergent actors explore love and desire

The storyline has been determined, and the actors have already been through multiple full runs of the show, but it is the little changes and finishing touches that propels this stellar theatre production into even greater excellence. “CHACHAMBO! Taking Flight” endeavors to be a historic milestone in the timeline of Singapore’s arts scene, and it has a lot to prove to its audience, while setting the standard for professional disability arts in this country.

This message resonates with Jaspreet Kaur in particular. As a highly passionate representative and advocate for persons with Down Syndrome, the 42-year-old is a perfectionist who seeks to deliver to the best of her abilities with every performance. The prospect of being able to change the perceptions of a new audience by depicting radical portrayals of love and desire on stage is a very exciting prospect, and Jaspreet gives as much as she can in her portrayal of Rosy Rose, one of Bao Yu’s employees who decides to flirt with the older Lucky Liu, played by visually impaired actor-musician Ivni Yaakub.

From script to stage, Peter’s technique of directing Jaspreet is a fascinating process. As analysis and logic confuses her, Peter uses soft and light silk scarves to encourage Jaspreet to sense the texture of the material. This is effective as a metaphor as she gradually gains the seductive quality of movement, to substantiate the inner life of her character. Furthermore, he uses an unconventional method of helping Jaspreet get into character, through big moods and simple words such as “Want” and “Fierce” in the seduction scene, where Ivni has also been directed to give Jaspreet big reactions that she can read and react to.

Much like Jaspreet, Timothy Lee is also an actor with Down Syndrome who seeks to impress and to show his care for others. In 2018, Timothy was cast in Mediacorp Channel 5’s television series KIN, and marks the first time an actor with Down Syndrome has been represented on local television. As a dancer, Timothy favors large movements and simple words, which Peter polishes by adding a strong intention to every gesture and line. In the rehearsal space, it is clear that Timothy delights in assisting others and cherishes recognition

from his peers. Often tasked with guiding Ivni who is visually impaired, his care and sensitivity is unmatched, making him a reliable actor who can be trusted with ensuring that his fellow actors are well taken care of. In his scenes as the Lover Boy who betrays the young 16-year-old avatar of Bao Yu, played by Germaine Goh, Timothy explores his range as an actor as he journeys through the character arc, from the sunny and sweet lover to the shameless betrayal that leaves young Bao Yu without a job and her personal valuables.

As a performer, Timothy is currently challenging himself to introduce precision to his movement, especially when he has to grapple with the beat of the music. "Use the floor," Peter says gently after a particularly difficult rehearsal where Timothy has difficulty hopping on the beat. Peter observes the rhythm of the dance with a trained eye, then offers, "Hop-turn, small, small. It's a half-beat." At last, the creatives of the show realized that Timothy, as a person with Down Syndrome, finds it difficult to rebound at the same height in continuous hops due to his flat foot, which is a common condition for a person living with Down Syndrome. As a result, it necessitated a change of choreography to ensure that Timothy is able to deliver a consistent performance during the final show. Such is the nature of disability-led arts, where the creatives must constantly negotiate with the script and the show in the rehearsal process so that the actors with disabilities can focus on delivering their craft without being hindered by obstacles imposed by the mainstream.

On the other hand, Germaine Goh is an actor-dancer who moves through life with grace and fluidity, to say nothing of how she holds herself to the highest standard of artistry and discipline. At just 19 years old, Germaine exhibits a maturity and professionalism that far exceeds most teenagers her age, and this is particularly evident in her pursuit of ballet, where she achieved a Distinction at the Royal Academy of Dance (RAD) Examinations at the intermediate-advanced level. Being on the autism spectrum, and growing up watching American cartoons and TV shows, she naturally adopted the American dialect as her daily conversational accent. Instead of judging her American accent as unacceptable, Peter affirms that her usual way of speaking is valid, and since imitation is her strength, she can have fun imitating Singaporean speech. Initially stressed at her perceived shortcoming, the youngest member of the cast is enjoying the process of imitating the Singaporean accent to play her role of Dancing Dolly and young Bao Yu with even more authenticity.

Of course, with a dance-heavy role, Germaine is occasionally overwhelmed by the complexity of the ballet steps, particularly when her high expectations of herself do not allow any room for repeated failure. The creative team works with this personality trait, and gives Germaine the positive reinforcement and affirmation she needs to regulate her emotions and go further as a dancer and actor.

Germaine's full range as an actor is put on display in the climax of the play, where she completely transforms the tragic and bittersweet tone with her innate innocence and purity of thought.

Sense and Sensibility: How the D/deaf and visually impaired interact on stage

LASALLE College of the Arts graduate Claire Teo is very much in her element as she moves through the rehearsal space with breathtaking boldness and dynamism. However, the highlight of her performance comes from the intersectional relationships between actors and

characters of different disabilities, particularly between the visually impaired and the D/deaf, where heightened senses and sensing form the crux of interactions between the actors. This is seen between her relationship with two D/deaf actors: the romantic couple with Ammar Amezzy who plays Ming Zhu's boyfriend Ali, as well as being the charge of the amah Tao Jie, played by Grace Ng.

Claire, who has progressive loss of sight, plays entertainment club heiress Ming Zhu, a character with visual impairment. As an actor, this role therefore draws on her ability to intently focus on her sense of touch and sound, where she must instantly perceive the intention of the line or gesture from her scene partner, before adapting her reaction to the energy level of what she has been given by the other actors. As Claire interacts with both Ammar and Grace, she is tested on her ability to discern meaning from her environment through hearing, feeling and sensing her fellow actors.

On the other hand, D/deaf actors Ammar and Grace have the opposite challenge of being able to see but not hear as clearly, and they are tasked with lipreading and feeding off her expressions and visible gestures as much as possible. Their interactions with Claire involve communication through the common languages of touch, trust, temperature and emotional state, as specified by Director Peter Sau, who encourages real touching and authentic exchange between actors.

Ammar Amezzy, who is a Deaf choreographer, performer and filmmaker, appears only in two key scenes in the play. Nevertheless, his portrayal of Ali - boyfriend to Claire's Ming Zhu - epitomizes the essence of unadulterated love even when the characters share only the common language of touch. In their scenes together, the romance is seen from the small details put in by both actors: A loving warm hand on the small of Ming Zhu's back to signify reassurance, the longing soft touch on the face that Ming Zhu gives to Ali as a final goodbye right before she decides to break up with him. Through gestures which can be perceived and acted upon by both Claire and Ammar, they deliver a tale of young love that acts as a foil to the failed bids at romance by Bao Yu.

The real star of the show, however, is the soul-stirring relationship between Ming Zhu and her loving amah, Tao Jie, played by Deaf actress Grace Ng. Faced with a group of mutinying employees who suggested that Ming Zhu sell herself to an old businessman so that they receive the funds to sustain the entertainment club, Tao Jie is Ming Zhu's only pillar of support left. In the rehearsal room, Director Peter Sau and Assistant Director Su Paing Tun guide Grace to deliver her lines in Singapore Sign Language (SgSL) with clarity, appropriate pacing and precise intention, so that Claire may receive accurate clues to inform her acting choices and energy.

"Actors who are D/deaf or visually impaired are also prone to using shortcuts in acting," Peter Sau explains. He refers to the tendency of actors to pretend to listen or see instead of really seeing, listening and reacting moment to moment, regardless of whether they are disabled or non-disabled. Indeed, for Claire, Grace and Ammar, they must push themselves to experience even more on stage so that each actor can feed off as many authentic reactions and moments as possible. In the end, the brilliance of theatre is created by the synergy between the actors, and it is the authentic exchange that enables the audience to believe in the story of the show and to root for the characters on stage.

Ultimately, each rehearsal is meant to be a transformative experience for the actors of “CHACHAMBO! Taking Flight”. Under the watchful eye of Peter Sau, the actors learn to break free from the superficial understandings of what acting should be, and in turn they embrace the vulnerability and openness inherent in genuine human interactions. In a world plagued largely with insincerity and half-heartedness, their pursuit of truth becomes a model of what human characters should be. Through the risks taken in the rehearsal room, “CHACHAMBO! Taking Flight” seeks to challenge social norms and expectations, and to finally represent actors with disabilities on stage with the respect that they deserve as professionals.

Tickets for “CHACHAMBO! Taking Flight” are now on sale. It runs from the 4th to 6th of August at the Victoria Theatre.