

Trust: The Journey to CHACHAMBO! Taking Flight

Every actor learns to trust the process of rehearsal. For most people, this means that with practice and by connecting their entire being to the role, the actor would build the confidence needed to deliver a spellbinding performance at the end of this arduous journey. However, for the three visually impaired performers of “CHACHAMBO! Taking Flight”, trusting the process means trusting that they are allowed to move and occupy space without fear. That is a psychological obstacle which Ivni Yakuub, Wan Wai Yee and Claire Teo Li Ling must overcome, all while grappling with the herculean task of preparing for a live performance.

In the spacious foyer of ART:DIS Bukit Merah, Claire Teo Li Ling effortlessly reaches for a flawless high note, and it resonates with power and brightness. Although she seemingly grasps at empty space, her hands and expressions tell the story of a young seductress who knows exactly how to draw the attention of lustful men to her body. Director Peter Sau watches on, his eyes trained on Claire’s gestures.

Spotting an opportunity to build on her performance, he interjects in Mandarin, “I want this action to be more sudden. Try using the image of lightning. After lightning there is always thunder, isn’t it? Give me the action, with lightning.” Claire thrusts her hand out into the air and immediately pulls an imaginary man to her, sharp and sudden, then gentle and soft - like lightning striking and dissipating from the night sky. With that change, Claire’s singing voice too takes on a similar quality, a sudden strike that fizzles out into an alluring siren song.

Peter hums in approval, and Claire continues to impress every onlooker in the room with her crystal clear soprano singing. Armed with a Diploma in Performance from LASALLE College of the Arts and a further two years of training under BEYOND DIS:PLAY, Claire is a force to be reckoned with. Even before viewing her extensive professional resume, the sheer amount of thought, details, and purpose put into her every acting choice speaks for itself. Still, the 24-year-old visually impaired actor keeps her playful energy intact, ready to take any direction thrown her way with grace and the occasional shot of witty humor.

In “CHACHAMBO! Taking Flight”, Claire plays Ming Zhu (Bright Pearl in Chinese), the headstrong but talented daughter of Bao Yu (Precious Jade). Forced to become the new Lao Ban Niang (Female Boss) of her mother’s entertainment club after the untimely death of Bao Yu, Ming Zhu has to grapple with a leadership role that she is hardly prepared to inherit and pressure from her tribe of disabled employees to find a solution for the financially insolvent entertainment club. Secretly, she struggles with her own identity as the disabled daughter of Bao Yu, and continues to feel that she is unloved and unwanted, the result of her mother’s strict and harsh parenting. The story of this mother-daughter pair is a quintessentially Singaporean one, and anyone who has experienced the trauma of broken parent-child relationships can relate to Ming Zhu, who ultimately yearns for acceptance and validation from her mother.

Back in the rehearsal room, Claire continues to perform her song in Mandarin, her voice clear as a bell.

However, even the most talented actor must meet their match, and Claire found hers in a pair of shimmering silver stiletto heels. As most who have the experience of wearing stilettos would attest, it is hard enough to balance and walk in them, so imagine having to turn in them without being able to see where the ground is, all while maintaining control of a vocally demanding show tune. “Try pivoting on the ball of your feet, and keep your core tight so that you don’t fall over,” Peter instructs, and Claire tentatively turns, and falters, but tries again. She quickly familiarizes herself with the new choreography, and completes the turn in one smooth movement.

As Peter explains later, “Visually impaired people do not have the security of knowing that the floor is under them, because they cannot see it. So how could we expect Claire to trust in a pair of stiletto heels?” It may only be a pair of heels, but it symbolizes the common struggle of all three visually impaired performers: They must confront the unknown of moving through empty space, and challenge their understanding of what it means to move with confidence even without the safety of their white canes. Dance and movement is a state of being that Ivni, Wai Yee and Claire rarely come into contact with in their everyday lives, but theatre is the perfect platform for the exploration of this unfamiliar territory. In time, they shall learn to trust that all the preparation and rehearsals they have done so far is indeed enough.

After all, there are high expectations for this performance - it has the ambitious goal of making history as the first theatre production in Singapore to prove that artists with disabilities too deserve to stand on the same stages as their non-disabled counterparts.

Developing artists with disabilities, from scratch

Even with the recent progress in embracing diversity and inclusivity, the disability arts scene in Singapore has yet to see a local production where a majority of the main cast are disabled, and this production seeks to break that barrier. The staging of “CHACHAMBO! Taking Flight” - a pan-disability music theatre production where 10 out of 12 main performers are disabled - is therefore a much awaited step towards ending the narrative of pity and charity. All ten disabled performers are professionally trained and aware of the stakes that come with a production of this scale, with 80 guest performers to fill the stage, as well as two-time Golden Horse Award winner Yeo Yann Yann making a powerhouse guest screen appearance as Ming Zhu’s mother, Bao Yu.

Eight of the 10 main performers graduated from BEYOND DIS:PLAY, a comprehensive theatre training programme for actors with disabilities that aims to prepare its artists for a professional career across theatre, film and television projects. Led by Peter Sau, who has numerous accreditations and awards as both an actor and director, the programme was conceptualized as the first step towards nurturing a generation of artists with disabilities that would radically transform the theatre industry in Singapore. “CHACHAMBO! Taking Flight”, staged at the Victoria Theatre, is therefore a chance for the pioneer cohort of BEYOND DIS:PLAY to showcase the mastery of their craft after graduating from the programme in December 2022.

On the same day, I caught Ivni Yakuub for a short chat, where he was learning his dance moves with dance choreographer Ali. Ivni, who graduated from the first cohort of BEYOND DIS:PLAY and is currently playing Lucky Liu, responds humbly, “It’s still quite new to me, but

so far I'm managing the steps well." Lucky Liu is the lover-turned-husband of Bao Yu, and he breaks her heart by refusing to acknowledge her pregnancy, before betraying her by flirting with another employee. He was caught red-handed by Bao Yu, who threw him out of the house and swore that she would raise her unborn baby alone.

Ivni approaches the challenge of playing both the unfaithful Lucky Liu and the thoughtful Guitar Puteh with an open mind. A visually impaired performer with a strong music background, Ivni is a soft-spoken man who transforms radically when he is on stage, and this transformation is particularly exciting to witness.

Meanwhile, Wan Wai Yee is in the dance studio with her instructor, Xenres. She maintained a tight focus on her movements, waving her hands tentatively in tune with the music while committing each step to memory.

I caught up with her for a short chat later during a dance break.

With a smile, Wai Yee acknowledges that dancing is especially challenging for her. Unable to mirror steps from her instructor or to simultaneously follow another dancer when she forgets moves, she must therefore remember every step perfectly and lock it into muscle memory during her individual practice. She reflects, "Of the three: Acting, singing, and dancing, dance is the hardest. But I will continue to practice and improve."

And improve, she did. Three weeks after my first chat with her, Wai Yee has clearly taken great pains to internalize her dance routine, and her movements have grown in sharpness and clarity. In perfect time to the music, she executes her dance numbers with precision. However, her day has only just begun. Having completed her dance choreography rehearsals, her next challenge is to integrate movement into the acting skills she has learned over two years of BEYOND DIS:PLAY.

Anticipation hangs in the air as Wai Yee steps into the Black Box, where Director Peter Sau has been waiting. It is the last individual rehearsal before the entire main cast ensemble of "CHACHAMBO! Taking Flight" comes together for their first start-stop full run of the show. Wai Yee plays one of the three avatars of Bao Yu, Ming Zhu's mother. Bao Yu, the female boss of the entertainment club Jin Hua Yuan, employs disabled dancers, singers and musicians to help them earn a living with dignity. After Lucky Liu's betrayal, she resolves to raise her daughter on her own, and continues to be the most influential club performer and host in the scene. For this particular demanding scene, she plays a 36-year-old Bao Yu in 1983.

One could almost feel the magic happen as Peter carefully lays out the structure of Wai Yee's throughline in this scene, and ascribes intention and actions to each line of dialogue and each moment between. Peter's gift for breaking down the most difficult emotions and subtexts into plain common sense certainly helped his actors to quickly grasp and internalize the directions given. In a particularly intense and exciting scene, Wai Yee eventually managed to shed her fear of the unknown and, in an incredible moment of growth, pushed someone away from her in an onstage struggle. Any actor would understand just how much time and personal growth it takes to exert force on stage believably, so the significance of exactly how much Wai Yee overcame in that one moment was not lost on me.

Taking Flight

After six weeks of rehearsals, the cast of “CHACHAMBO! Taking Flight” came together to present their first stop-start full run of the entire play. It would be the first time where all the main cast performers would be present for the entire show from start to finish, so that they could see the script come to life in all its heartwarming glory. Claire brought a fresh wave of youthful energy to Ming Zhu, while delivering a masterful and tearjerking performance in some of the most heartrending moments from this show. The depths of emotion that Claire reached both in sung and spoken scenes was simply stunning to watch, not to mention the exhilarating experience of seeing this truly multitalented artist perform the leading role of a play that she wrote herself, for a pan-disability cast with all of its complex considerations.

Meanwhile, Wai Yee surprised everyone with her fearless acting which, in dance choreographer Ali’s words, would have made the father of modern theatre Konstantin Stanislavski proud. As an observer, it was incredible to realize that Wai Yee had left her previous fears at the door in a matter of two days, as she completed the scene without a hitch. This is also the first time any of us have witnessed Ivni perform his energetic dance solo, and I was awestruck by just how purposefully and confidently he moved. Both Wai Yee and Ivni gave thrilling performances of their respective scenes, and the story they managed to tell through words, movement and song was truly beautiful for me as an audience member.

Through this series of rehearsals that lasted well over a month, the fact that all three visually impaired performers learned to dance with such fluid coordination is remarkable, but underneath all the spectacle is the actor’s ability to trust in their fellow ensemble members, in their directors and choreographers, and in everyone who would come together to make this production work. Here is a play where diversity does not simply mean tokenism, and where real change could be made on the big stage. With an incredible main cast, a show-stopping lineup of song and dance, and a story that would resonate with audiences young and old, “CHACHAMBO! Taking Flight” is ready to take Singapore by storm when it opens in August.

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