

“Sense and Sensibility”

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International espionage, a homosexual love affair, show-mance, a court trial, and all “based on a true story”: it seems to have all the elements that a play should have. Add to that the music of Njo Kong Kie, the direction of Johnny Tam as well as the acting and singing talents of Wong Pak Hou and Jordan Cheng, and it’s like a line-up tailored specifically for this text. However, as the first project in music theater from the Macau Experimental Theatre, *Mr. Shi and His Lover* tells almost all of the original “story” in its first scene, and the remaining six scenes present mostly the internal monologues of the two main characters, Peking opera singer, Shi Pei Pu (Jordan Cheng), and the French diplomat stationed in China, Bernard Boursicot (Wong Pak Hou). Although there are occasionally scenes of confrontation, most of the time is dedicated to self-analysis and dissection.

It must be mentioned that the playwright Wong Teng Chi uses a dense style of language, piling up layer upon layer of discussion on the matters of gender, nation and acting faced by two people, and the audience is sometimes unable to discern if the words come from the characters or from the author himself. Two people in a deep predicament they cannot get out of, emotional blackmail, and political tension that crosses national borders, if it were all interpreted in the form of ordinary theater perhaps people’s thoughts would be entangled in a maze of language. However, Njo Kong Kie’s powerfully emotional music breaks away from the Hong Kong-style pop that is typical in other local musicals. During every scene of emotional flow of the characters, and the Chinese and Western musical elements are interwoven organically, balancing out the strong speculative nature of the literary language, allowing the work to keep a suitable distance between the emotional and the intellectual.

This kind of distance also reveals the dramatic nature of the two main characters. The diplomat Boursicot should have stayed rational in his interpersonal and administrative affairs, yet can’t free himself from this androgynous emotional connection. Peking opera singer Shi Pei Pu isn’t a spontaneous and romantic artist, and meticulously crafts a story of his devotion to his country. Deception is everywhere, and his goal is clear. Between the rational and the irrational, as a character itself, once again the music provides the atmosphere, and the audience ponders the characters without being able to reach a final verdict.

In the nineties, David Henry Hwang took the same news event and adapted it into *M. Butterfly*, a big success on stage and in movie theaters. Many critics, besides mentioning the subject of gender in the play, also pointed out the deconstruction of the concept of “Oriental” created by Western intellectuals. Under Western patriarchal roles, even though Shi Pei Pu is revealed to be male in the end, he is never able to become a complete man. This same story, as told through Wong Teng Chi’s writing, questions and deconstructs the homosexual relationship between the two and their Chinese and French national identities, repeatedly attacking the definitions and labels of gender and nation. However, a play is still a play: two people must coexist in the same stage and face this kind of deconstruction, undergoing some type of epiphany (perhaps that is the “appropriateness” repeatedly emphasized at the end of the play). When the play ends, the actors either instantly die on stage or they go back to a more harsh reality.