

Blackbird play review and analysis theatre essay



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

After being separated for 15 years, Una comes looking for Ray at his workplace after discovering his picture in a magazine. They once had an illicit relationship, and have been suffering the consequences ever since. What transpires next is a series of chilling twists and turns as details of their sordid past begin to unravel.

Blackbird is essentially a 75-minute duologue between two tormented souls, in an extremely filthy and under-maintained office pantry, which Ray calls a “pigsty”. This intense confrontation, being the focal point of the entire play, situates itself in a confined space. The claustrophobia is evident in the beginning of the play, when Ray keeps finding excuses to leave the pantry.

Director Tracie Pang’s artistic directions add a dimension of compelling realism, that would have been otherwise missing from the near-claustrophobic confrontation taking place onstage. The minimalist set design by Nicholas Li (with just a dim fluorescent tube light, a dispensing machine, a clogged litter bin, a few lockers, one table and four chairs) echoes Ray’s repressed life. The barbed wire lining the top of the set is a fitting reminder of the entrapment Una felt throughout her entire life. The subtle use of sound by Darren Ng (constant buzzing sound of a dully running office) also contributes to the mellow tone of the play.

The most sublime scene in the play fully transports the audience to relive that fateful moment of elopement 15 years ago. The interplay between actors, set, lights and sound is at its best. Darren Ng’s sound design (seagulls on a beach, a bell tolling midnight) balances perfectly with the

action onstage, teasing out the nuances during that scene. The projection of symbolic images on the pantry windows also creates a stunning effect.

It is no surprise that David Harrower's script has received the critical acclaim it has. The beauty of the script lies in its emotive capture of the juvenile mindset. The lines written for Una's flashback of her younger days (the yearning thoughts, the defence mechanism, the way a young girl would see the world) is spot-on and succinct. I am impressed by how Harrower slowly teases the audience by choosing to reveal morsels of new information about their past as the plot unfolds, thus ensuring that the audience is constantly engaged.

Every line of dialogue between Una and Ray is wrought with a dark emotion which blurs the boundaries between right and wrong. The audience plunges deep into the damaged and disturbed psyches of Harrower's two characters who seek for answers but arrive at none. Like most plays dealing with illicit affairs, *Blackbird* leaves the audience questioning: Who is the culprit? Who is the victim? Is there necessarily a clear-cut right and wrong in their relationship? It is Una who discovered Ray's whereabouts and sought him out, but to what purpose: Revenge, reconciliation or resolution?

Augusto Boal, the founder of Theatre of the Oppressed, sees theatre as "the passionate combat of two human beings on a platform" (Boal, 1995). Boal's approach attempts to substitute passivity with empowerment (monologue with dialogue). Monologue creates a relationship of oppressor versus oppressed, as the person talking forces his counterpart into listening. All relationships could tend to become a monologue, a man and a woman, one

of them tends to become the actor and the other one, the spectator. Human relationship should be a dialogue but one of them sometimes becomes active and the other passive. So oppression is this: All dialogues that become monologues (Boal, 1979).

In *Blackbird*, the roles of the oppressor and the oppressed are constantly reversed as Una and Ray attempt to assume power over each other. The confrontation between Una and Ray starts at a frenetic pace with Una being the oppressor, circling Ray like a vulture and forcing him into a corner with words like a scalpel. Ray keeps finding excuses to leave the pantry as he suspects Una of hiding a weapon.

However, the tables are turned (literally) when Ray starts to justify his wrongdoings with an assertive tone, leaning towards Una with clenched fists, while Una tries to avoid him by facing the wall. During Una's flashback monologue, she clutches her bag tightly as she recalls about her suffering, while Ray collapses into a chair, burying his head in his palms with repent. The tug-of-war continues as they dig up the past through passion-laden monologues and exchanges.

Blackbird is a dialogue of hurt and wayward passion, told with superb onstage chemistry. Credit goes to Daniel Jenkins and Emma Yong for digging deep to produce extraordinarily layered performances. Their excellent turns bring Harrower's deservedly-acclaimed script to life. I specifically wish to highlight Emma Yong's performance.

Yong's connection to her character Una is exceptionally amazing. She shows her remarkable versatility as a 27-year-old who has experienced deep

tragedy as a child. This illicit affair resurfaces after 15 years where Ray has moved on to a new life, while Una has been left to drown in shame. She remains stone-faced the entire time but her eyes express a myriad of emotions, from hatred to madness to confusion to yearning.

Yong's tears of conflicted pain during her flashback monologue is beautifully heart-wrenching. She ably navigates the complex psychological aspect of Una's character and conveys the emotional range required for a character who had sexual intimacy with a man at a tender age. However, one minor flaw would be her pace in line delivery, which sounds rushed at times.

Jenkins plays his character Ray with equal passion. His pace, in contrast to Yong, is more balanced. He discharges his performance with gusto, engaging the audience and leading them to sympathise with his plight as the drama unfolds. I was surprised that Jenkins was not initially cast as the male lead.

Blackbird was postponed from March 2010 to September due to the unusual circumstance of actor Patrick Teoh quitting the production. Teoh felt that he was unable to fulfil the demands of the role. After watching the play, one could probably see where he was coming from.

It is essentially just two people in the same space for 75 minutes, but truth be told, it did not feel that long at all. The 75-minute playing time is filled to the brim with palpable tension and raw emotions. When the cliffhanger climax ended with a truly unexpected twist, I found myself at the edge of my seat.

Quoting Una's opening line: " Shocked?"

Yes indeed.

Blackbird appears to be a simple situation begging for a simple judgment: “It was abuse, was it not?” But the complicated tangle of emotions leaves one with a feeling of disquiet and unease which is hard to shake off, even after the curtain falls.