

# Timberlake wertenbaker's play credible witness to singapore

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Following up the refugee crisis since 2015, the asylum debate is again brought into the spotlight not only in the political discussion but in the literature and art field as well. Recently, British director Andy Smith has brought Timberlake Wertenbaker's play *Credible witness* to Singapore. Tackling the subject of political asylum and far from being a tirade on the bitterly-disputed topics of ethics of refugee displacement, this chamber opera brings takes another insightful perspective and raises questions about memory, identity, nationhood and history in the transnational turbulence of exile and displacement.

*Credible witness* begins with a prologue set in northern Greece, where Alexander Karagy teaches the Macedonian children to uncover history through witnesses. Alexander's commitment to the former nation of Macedonia forced him to flee Greece with a forged passport. His mother Petra, after losing contact with her son for three years, arrives at Heathrow in search of him. While Alexander drifts from a community center school teacher to street sweeper, to leaflet distributor then to being homeless, Petra is detained in the detention center and have to go on hunger-strike to pressurise the authority into finding her son. Petra eventually meets her son but only to disown him in a confrontation full of irreconcilable attitudes: one insists on intransigent patriotic loyalty to Macedonia while the other has been assimilated due to disillusionment and pragmatism.

Up till this point, Wertenbaker's ideas and their dramatic delivery are equally compatible and fascinating. Through the stupendous performance of William White as Alexander, the audience witnesses how names, memories, and

histories comprising cultural identities seep and bleed across boundaries by a series of absurd transformation. Adam Moore, the child actor as Henry, a student of Alexander in the community center, also gives a rather impressive performance, subtly delivering the almost neurotic state of the character at the initial stage due to the family trauma he encountered. Link to larger thematic concern? Why is it important?

Along the main storyline a number of other characters also surfaced at the detention center and community center, whose stories reflect the ironic concern that asylum can only be gained through the fabrication of identity, history, and culture. These minor yet significant characters have added depth to the play. Whether it be the arbitrary naming of Ali or the physical scars Ameena had to demonstrate as evidence of trauma in order to gain asylum, their experiences pose more thought-provoking questions into audiences' minds: who can be the credible witness to the violence and trauma rooted in the depth of national history? Is it problematic that conditional hospitality rests on one's ability to express oneself in a language and manner that can be heard?

Moving on, the great mother-son confrontation packs the right emotional punch. Alice Stone delivers a good job as Petra, presenting her character truthfully as a superb embodiment of maternal and nationalistic pride. William's performance also accurately captures the utterly conflicting yet firm stance of Alexander as we bear witness to the transformation of this man who once regarded himself as a bearer of a proud Macedonian history

to a pedagogue of the future, one who is determined to prise open the possibilities of hospitality under inhospitable conditions.

However, only two scenes are assigned to falling action and dénouement while Wertebaker apparently attempts to wrap all her remaining ideas within such short time. The audience is presented with the reconciliation of the immigration official Simon Le Britten and the asylum seekers, as well as the return of Henry and Anna in the epilogue. While it is understandable that Wertebaker wishes to express a cosmopolitan view and call for a new understanding of history on universal humanity, such dramatic resolution is subjected to over-simplification. Even though the role of self-pitying Simon is skilfully played by David Johnson, the bureaucrat was excessively symbolic. It also defies belief that he almost miraculously appears at the detention center to help Petra out in New Year's Eve, leaving the impression that the play is too focused on getting the message across rather than telling a story.

Another apparent weakness of the production is the stage setting. A detention center is supposed to be a prison-like space where these metonymic figures of a deeply troubled world are held within. However, it seems that the director is afraid to waste any space on the stage—the detention center seems far too spacious, which not only weakens the tense mood so effortfully build up by the actors and actresses but also forces a sense of isolation among the characters.

Fortunately, the effective stage lighting and effects to some extent compensates the drawback in the stage setting. The almost dreamlike

lighting used for the detention center is rather innovative and resonates ideally with the representation of the detention center as a liminal space, a place of transition, waiting, and not knowing. The Kafkaesque quality of the lighting also portrays the detention as an absurdity of an ungovernable government institution. The dark and oppressive light used at the start of scene eleven is also metaphorically significant in reflecting the utter disappointment she felt from the rejection and detachment of her son. In the epilogue, light is shone gently on the characters, symbolically alluding to the hope for a multicultural future predicated on mutual tolerance and understanding, ending the whole play on a high note.

2017 is the 16th year after *Credible Witness* was first performed in London, but the play remains equally, if not more socially relevant despite the time passed. While it certainly could be made better if the ending and the stage setting were dealt with in a more plausible and sensible way, overall it is a respectable piece of theatre with notably stunning staging and has certainly made its mark in the growing canon of asylum dramas.