Review

Young directors with new productions bring excitement to the scene

TWO PLAYS ROCK BANGKOK THEATRELAND

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Causing small but palpable tremors on the local theatre scene are two original productions by a new generation of directors. The small double earthquakes in May may have pulled the seats out from underneath some members of the audience, causing them to scratch their heads or furrow their brows. But even if everyone was puzzled by the logic (or lack thereof) of Nophand Boonyai's riot of a play, *Welcome to Nothing*, the piece definitely shouldn't have deepened the lines on anyone's forehead — stomachs might ache from frequent laughing, but no visible signs of ageing should have taken place.

Adapted from his own comics, *Welcome to Nothing*, is Nophand's second directorial and playwriting effort, following his debut in January, *Dokmai Nai Sangdad* (Sun Flower). The play's 15 mostly unrelated scenes mock, critique and satirise a plethora of society's ills with outlandish comedy. Yet in almost every scene, Nophand surprised us with a heart that matches up to his wit.

Reminiscent of one of the most imitated plays of the 20th century, Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, *Welcome to Nothing* reflects a less confusing existence and possesses more hope in mankind, but it still recognises the flaws that may lead to our downfall: The absurdity of the superficiality and materialism of today's society that blinds and numbs our imaginations. The place of "nothingness" in *Welcome to Nothing* may appear as barren, and feel as devastatingly lonesome as the country road in *Godot*, but Nophand treats the space/state of mind and today's search for meaning with more nonchalance.

The work he did for the Director's Lab in March exhibits Nophand's serious vision for his chosen craft and an honest desire to challenge his audience to feel and exercise more of their imagination. Although *Welcome to Nothing* pulses with relevance, it is less another "absurdist" play or existential rumination than one that is more concerned with itself as a work that is bold and experimental. It seeks to be meaningful rather than mirror our tendency to search for meaning, but it manages to be refreshing while being able to touch audiences of different ages.

'[The Orpheus Schemata]'. PHALATT SANGKHAKORN

'Welcome to Nothing'. Photo courtesy of NOPHAND BOONYAI

Welcome to Nothing also introduced some new acting talent. Featuring an all-male cast, including Kriangkrai Fukasem, Keerati Sivakuae and Nophand, the play had them in drag, donning campy wigs, playing sexually ambiguous or gay characters, and playing children and old women. You name it, these boys did it with a great sense for comedy and with touching sincerity.

Another production that brings something different to the local scene is Nuni's *[The Orpheus Schemata]*, devised and directed by Pattarasuda Anuman Rajadhon and meLê Yamomo, which had its première last weekend. Dealing with the equally puzzling topic of love, this multimedia show's non-narrative approach aims to give its audience a more visceral experience, and may be the perfect way to handle the inexplicable. As the show itself reveals in one of its scenes, no matter how hard we try, the human heart and memory will always find a way to defy logic.

[The Orpheus Schemata] probes into contemporary love stories, while trying to grasp the logic of love. Just like Orpheus, the characters go through hell to protect their relationships and cling to their love only to lose everything despite their best efforts: An Englishwoman waiting for her Kareni husband-to-be, the man who changed her world and is stuck in a refugee camp, a superstitious mother takes her disapproval of her daughter's relationship too far, a love affair torn apart by the tsunami, a long-distant relationship held together only by letters.

Full of evocative images and delightful arrangements of words, the production's greatest strength lies in the visual and aural experience created by the performers' bodies. A woman in a long white dress removes her bridal veil and chops onions and tries to fill the emptiness within her with the very thing she's ripping apart. Two performers, take wine into their mouths and spit on another performer wrapped in white paper towel. A mother, threatening and beautiful in black, fills the stage with cigarette smoke and her cold voice as she speaks of how to get rid of her daughter's boyfriend. The aria *Che faro senza Euridice*, from Gluck's *Orfeo ed Euridice*, performed by baritone Saran Seubsantiwongse, echoed throughout the tiny black box space and vibrated in your body as everything lay in ruin after the tsunami.

The creators seem to not yet have a firm and artful grip on some of the mediums employed in the production. Footage of Skytrain stations are generic and lack emotion. The presentation of classical paintings depicting hell and the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice appear stiff and awkward. Projected texts, confusing and sometimes distracting, disrupt the emotional flow of the scene.

[The Orpheus Schemata] is a brave undertaking by Nuni, a company that has yet to celebrate its first anniversary. Already showing clear and distinctive vision, the troupe has thus far proved to be a dynamic part of the Bangkok theatre scene, both with this production and its debut piece, *Mozart in Mischief*.

One can only hope for more work that dares to have a vision and tries to flip theatre on its head like Nophand's and Nuni's.

'[The Orpheus Schemata]' continues its run this Friday, Saturday and Sunday at 7:30pm (with 2pm matinées on Saturday and Sunday) at Makhampom Studio, Saphan Khwai. Tickets are 200 baht (150 baht for students). Call 08-9691-2247, 08-6900-0445, or email mkp-studio@hotmail.com or info@nuniproductions.com.