

## THE DOCTOR IS OUT (OF HIS MIND)

**What the Butler Saw is a madhouse farce**

Monday • February 9, 2009

We firmly advise that you refrain from reading the programme notes of *What the Butler Saw* because as far as this madcap play is concerned, the less you know beforehand, the better.

Suffice it to say, Joe Orton's classic play (re-jigged for local audiences by *Zebra Crossing* director Loretta Chen) is a ticking timebomb of absurdist proportions, full of twists and turns.

Set in a psychiatric clinic – where “unusual behaviour is the order of the day”, as one of the characters remark – the two-act part crime mystery, part sex comedy piece involves a lot of cross-dressing, even more undressing, mistaken identities, naughty puns, and the bizarre search for Sir Stamford Raffles', erm, missing body part.

The last time I was in stitches watching idiocy unfold was at the movies, after watching the Coen Brothers' farce *Burn After Reading*.

At Saturday's gala night, it took a greater part of the first act to get the ball rolling. But once it did, the audience was pummelled by punchlines and gags again and again.

Comedic timing was essential and the cast proved to be more-than-able comedians, in particular TV vet Vadi PVSS (recently of *Calefare*) and radio DJ Vernetta Lopez's acting turns as a delusional government official and boozing, flirtatious wife, respectively. (Yes, Vernetta, you should do more theatre).

And whatever reservations some may have of Timothy Nga as a serious actor, he proved to be a gem of a joker in this one, playing the excellent wildcard of a police sergeant with the most ridiculous accent we've ever heard.

The cast gamely turns up the slapstick-o-meter, but don't forget to keep your ears open for the

script's finely wrought Brit wit (for those who care to listen closely to Orton's verbose lines even when it's in danger of being drowned out on a couple of occasions by the physical comedy).

What the Butler Saw is one elaborate telling of a joke. If you're able to follow the fast-paced, convoluted thread of its narrative, it's a laugh-out-loud keeper.

What The Butler Saw runs until Feb 22, 8pm, at Drama Centre Theatre. With 3pm weekend matinees. Tickets at \$34 to \$65 from Sistic. Advisory: Mature themes (16 years and above).

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PART C

# Life!

THE STRAITS TIMES  
TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 10 2009



## Insider Tips

Colourful and chaotic Ahmedabad

C6

## Tread alert

Music stars play it safe at Grammys

C8&9



## Say what?

Singlish in British satire

C10

## A mad, mad, mad world

review theatre

### WHAT THE BUTLER SAW

Zebra Crossing Productions  
Drama Centre Theatre  
Last Sunday

adeline chia

English playwright Joe Orton's most famous play was given an enjoyable staging by director Loretta Chen.

She transplanted the play from late 1960s Britain to 1960s Singapore, where sexual repression and racial tension ran high. The transition was not as uncom-



Ingenious local touches by (from left) Elizabeth Tan, Shane Mardjuki, Vadi Shanmuga Sundaram, Gerald Chew and Vernetta Lopez.

book it

### WHAT THE BUTLER SAW

**Where:** Drama Centre Theatre  
**When:** Till Feb 22, 3pm  
**Admission:** \$34 to \$60 from Sistic  
([www.sistic.com.sg](http://www.sistic.com.sg) or call 6348-5555)

fortable as it sounds, though some elements proved a tough fit. But a few ingenious touches saved the uneasy marriage.

This production stayed true to Orton's vision of a world gone awry, of ubiquitous madness and slippery sexualities. The script, with its defrocked women, men in dresses and careless view of rape, still amused and disturbed the audience.

In the play, Geraldine Boo, played by a permanently distressed Elizabeth Tan, applies for a job as secretary to psychiatrist Prentice Ang, played wanly by Gerald Chew.

After a failed attempt to seduce her, he embarks on a frantic cover-up that unleashes mayhem: cross-dressing, shootings and straitjackets.

Some fundamental aspects of the British play strained to fit the Singapore context. One wondered if there was even a substantial psychiatric culture in Singapore at that time to create a consulting room farce with any meaningful bite.

Also, the tasteful if floral looking set, with its patterned wallpaper and shelves of encyclopaedia, looked like a blast from the past – but not Singapore's.

There were also some cheap references to more recent events. For example: Dr Ang was said to be writing letters to the press about topics such as actors smoking in theatrical performances and homosexuality.

But some clever local touches, especially delightful in the adaptations of the characters, saved the day.

The power-hungry and insane government official Rance from the original play was re-imagined as a devilish Indian psychiatrist. Vadi Shanmuga Sundaram played the character with clipped conso-

nants and wild eyes, prone to throwing theories into the air and careless abuse of power.

The most triumphant creation was Sergeant Ma (Timothy Nga), a gormless policeman dressed in the short pants of yore. His delicious concoction of Singlish, with its confusion of tenses and extra s's scattered like the wind ("What does he dids?") stole the show.

Ultimately, the original wit of the play won out. For example, as characters dashed in and out of the rooms to chase and avoid each other, often to great comic effect, Rance remarked that it was unusual for a room to have so many doors.

The ill-fitting parts never jarred for long, due to sound direction by Chen, who gave fair play to the witty lines but did not let them weigh the piece down.

The action moved along jauntily with the salty physical comedy until the madness eventually rolled towards the play's famous deus ex machina ending.



# THE BUSINESS TIMES

S\$1.00 online at <http://www.business-times.com.sg>



A SINGAPORE PRESS HOLDINGS PUBLICATION

CO REGN NO 198402868E

MICA (P) 197/08/2008

Friday, February 13, 2009

## Hilarious mix of sex and mayhem

By **AMANDA DE GUZMAN**

"ORTONESQUE", a term derived from Joe Orton, the British playwright responsible for *What the Butler Saw*, has become synonymous in theatre-speak with the outrageously macabre. While the Singapore version of the play was given a makeover by director Loretta Chen to tailor it to local socio-cultural sensibilities, it thankfully retains the delicious, dark absurdity that Orton became known for.

The play opens with the attempted seduction of the lovely, innocent Geraldine Boo (Elizabeth Tan) by the charismatic, morally lax Dr Prentice Ang (Gerald Chew). Boo is hoping to get a secretarial position with the renowned psychiatrist, and during the interview, he gets her to strip to her underthings on the pretence that he is to examine her.

The oldest trick in the book succeeds, and pandemonium ensues: what follows is a string of madcap incidents involving mistaken identity, madness, and cross-dressing that follow in deliriously quick succession.

What could have devolved into chaos is kept in check by a capable cast and Chen's sure direction. The heartiest laughs from the audience come from Chen's revisions, which took the form of several geographical and cultural in-jokes. These "Singaporeanisms" were adeptly and gleefully handled by the cast: they are clearly having a fabulous time performing the lewd and crude farce, and their exuberance is certainly infectious.

While enthusiastic, the production lacks polish. The comic timing between the cast is not seamless, with certain verbal exchanges lacking the



**Enjoyable:** *'What the Butler Saw'* provides not only a good time, but one that is both clever and risqué enough to send a frisson up your spine

crisp precision that is made necessary by Orton's take-no-prisoner script.

The first half of the play is heavily reliant on such dialogue, and it is where *What the Butler Saw* occasionally falters. However, during the latter half – where more physical comedy dominates and hyperbole rules – the cast really comes into its own, filling the stage with delightful chaos that is sometimes obscene but usually hilarious.

Particularly enjoyable is the performance of Vadi PVSS as mad Dr Rance. Vadi's rendition is the most authentic in the ensemble: there is not a hint of awareness in Dr Rance that would lead you to believe that he thinks he is part of a farce. Vadi's doctor is so naturally farcical both in his

delivery of dialogue and the way he directs his impressive physicality; it is as if he is completely in harmony with the absurd landscape of *What the Butler Saw*.

Even with Chen toning down the more salacious aspects of the production, *What the Butler Saw* has just enough nudity and dialogue dealing with various sexual perversions to satisfy even hardcore Orton fans. *What the Butler Saw* provides not only a good time, but one that is both clever and risqué enough to send a naughty frisson up your spine.

*'What the Butler Saw'* will be performed until Feb 22 at the Drama Centre Theatre in the National Library Building. Tickets are \$29-\$65 and can be purchased from Sistic at [www.sistic.com.sg](http://www.sistic.com.sg)