

Book in for army laughs

By boon chan



Marching to the funny beat are (from far left) Koey Foo, Hang Qian Chou, Ghazali Muzakir, Dwayne Lau, Terence Tay and Rodney Oliveiro. -- PHOTO: WILD RICE

reviewcomedy

OWN TIME OWN TARGET

W!ld Rice

Drama Centre Theatre

Last Friday

The double-bill of Julian Wong's Botak Boys and Laremy Lee's Full Tan provided theatregoers with much to cheer about.

The former in particular was the most fun to be had at the theatre since the anything-goes manic ball of energy that was Chestnuts, which was also directed by Jonathan Lim.

Let's just say that audiences will never think of the term 'army camp' in the same way again.

The musical looks at the BMT (basic military training) experience, 'the curse of being male in Singapore', as seen through the eyes of Justin (Terence Tay), who has just returned from England, and his motley bunch of section mates.

Besides coping with national service, Justin also has to deal with relationship problems. And he has a secret.

If his section mates seem surprisingly supportive when the cat is out of the bag, well, we are in the realm of the musical genre. Here, characters break into song and dance faster than a sergeant can yell, 'Knock it down!', and idealism triumphs over realism.

Playwright Wong also wrote the hummable melodies and clever lyrics. Sample dialogue: 'Will we be punished for wet dreams?' Snappy reply: 'As long as you keep it dry.'

Watching it, you get the same frisson of electricity you felt when you caught Beauty World for the first time and thought that was a musical that we could truly and proudly call our own.

Full Tank was more laboured and felt more scattered.

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Sergeant Leroy (Rodney Oliveiro) has commandeered a tank and gone missing with his men. In a parallel plot, a terrorist has escaped, sending the authorities into a tizzy.

How the two plots meet, against the backdrop of an imaginative set which used jerry cans and ammunition containers as building blocks, is not particularly unexpected.

But Lee had something more in mind than milking yuks from inefficient bureaucracy.

There was a pointed comment about the collusion between politics and media when the Minister for Internal Security (Brendon Fernandez) threatened a TV reporter (Tay) for making him look bad. But it struck a jarring note because of the generally light-hearted tone of the piece.

The cast, which took on roles in both plays, was excellent. Oliveiro brought heart to the obscenity-spewing, tightly wound Leroy and in *Boys* as Justin's sergeant, he uttered colourful Hokkien exclamations with relish.

Nelson Chia's roles in the course of the evening included a golf-loving, responsibility-shirking general, an elderly petrol pump attendant and a soft-spoken instructor who turned into Mr Nasty. He made each character stick in the audience's mind.

Hang Qian Chou stole scenes in *Boys* as an excitable recruit who has a habit of flailing his arms about when he spoke.

Tay had one of the more difficult tasks as Justin could be rather whiny and emotional. It was good that he has a lovely singing voice which helped the audience to sympathise with the character.

It has been more than 20 years since Michael Chiang's landmark play, *Army Daze*, was first staged in 1987 and it is high time other playwrights tackle this crucial period in many men's lives.

Botak Boys and *Full Tank* present different facets of that experience and it is especially heartening that Wong and Lee are first-time playwrights.

There is promise of greater things to come from them and that is the cheeriest thought of all.