

# At The Heart Of Chinatown

Chinatown Crossings is a site-specific theatre performance that takes the audience to its temples, stalls and back alleys

Helmi Yusof

CHINATOWN WASN'T ALWAYS CHINATOWN. Prior to the 1980s, its denizens referred to the area by its specific precincts and street names such as Kreta Ayer, Keong Saik Road and Sago Lane. It was only when the government wanted to demarcate the area as a historic district that the name 'Chinatown' gained currency. That said, the area has never been exclusively Chinese - there have always been pockets of Indian traders living in the district since the 1800s. They helped set up Sri Mariamman Temple and Masjid Jamae, two of Singapore's oldest religious institutions.

A new theatre performance-cum-walking tour titled Chinatown Crossings offers these and other nuggets of information throughout its lengthy but rich 2.5-hour duration. Produced by Mandarin theatre company Drama Box, the English-language show literally takes the audience across the colourful precinct, from Pagoda Street to Smith Street to Duxton Plain Park, all the while telling the story of various characters living there.

They include Ting Ting (played by Sabrina Sng), a girl determined to make her way in the world despite her social disadvantages; Kunalan (played by Pavan J Singh), an orphan who learns to speak the language of his neighbours; and Fong Cheh (played by Jodi Chan), a ma jie (domestic servant) from Guangdong who helps raise both Ting Ting and Kunalan.

The actors and audience have to snake through the packed streets of Chinatown to get into shophouses, temples, back alleys and food centres. Performances take place in the middle of milling crowds, with the actors speaking into discreet mikes that feed into the audience's individual earphones. The tour even makes a stop at a famous Chinese dessert stall, where audience members are treated to desserts and a spontaneous performance by its owners.

Against these evocative and authentic sights of Chinatown, the audience also learns about the lives of the three main characters spanning several decades, from Ting Ting's and Kunalan's childhoods to Fong Cheh's eventual demise. Drama Box has cast child actors (Lu Jiayi and Toh Yun Woon as Ting Ting, and Aadi and Muhammad Izwan as Kunalan) to play the younger versions of the characters.

Chinatown Crossings is helmed by artistic director Koh Hui Ling and playwright Jean Tay. Despite its somewhat sentimental narrative, there is a lot of heart in the material. Even as characters talk about the indelicate toilet habits of the district's denizens or the rituals of brothel operators, their stories are laced with humour and affection.

The creators are often determined to remind audiences of the multiracial richness in the district. The telling of the folkloric romance of the cowherd and weaver girl that gave birth to the Qixi Festival is entwined with references to Indian mythology. The significance of the crow in traditional Indian stories is compared to that of the magpie in Chinese culture.

All in all, Chinatown Crossings is a rewarding if mushy experience. Indeed, even if you've lived all your life in Singapore, it's quite likely that this site-specific show will open your eyes a little wider to the hidden but captivating facts of life past and present in the district.

***Chinatown Crossings runs in the second half of every week from now till Aug 18. All shows start at 7.30pm.***

***Tickets at S\$68 available from chinatowncrossings.peatix.com***