

Review: Chinatown Crossings by Drama Box

[bakchormeeboy](#) 3 weeks ago



A melancholic trip down memory lane that effectively harnesses the history and geography of the place once known as Kreta Ayer.

If you had a chance to look at photos of Chinatown in the 70s and 80s, it would virtually be unrecognizable from the same bustling tourist district of today. There are so many aspects of Chinatown that have changed over the years, and with *Chinatown Crossings*, Drama Box hopes, through the experience of an immersive, theatrical tour around Chinatown, to unearth some of that past and bring it to curious ‘tourists’ who embark on this journey with them.



Chinatown Crossings is a massively ambitious undertaking. One and a half years in the making, Drama Box (themselves located in Chinatown) has spent that time forging strong bonds and relations with the other denizens of the area, truly getting to know the history of the place and the people behind it. Initially set in the present day, the group of 25 audience members are led on a tour of Chinatown, or Kreta Ayer, as tour guide and ex-resident Kunalan (Pavan J Singh) remembers it lovingly. Starting off in front of the Chinatown Heritage Centre, we're then led through various buildings, from Drama Box itself (an old shophouse) to back alleys where puppet storytellers used to do business, to even hawker stalls operated by pioneer generation siblings since the 1950s. As we meet these inhabitants and are given insight into the histories behind each structure, we're also introduced to Kunalan's other childhood companions – his best friend, fiesty "Princess of Chinatown" Ting Ting (Sabrina Sng), and 'ma jie' Fong Cheh (Jodi Chan), and together, weave an arresting tale of Chinatown in the past.



Jean Tay's script finely balances both the educational and entertainment aspects of the tour, finding unlikely parallels between Chinese and Indian cultures as presented by child actors Aadi and Toh Yun Woon (playing younger versions of Kunalan and Ting Ting). It's evident that plenty of research has gone into ensuring accuracy and comprehensiveness, from the similar fairytales the two cultures have, to the differences in the way they view customs such as respecting the dead, and we ourselves learnt a couple of new facts along the way. Many of these are told through the lives of our three characters as they reminisce upon their lives, each one finding comfort in the nostalgia, despite ultimately going their own separate ways. One cannot help but appreciate the poetry with which Jean Tay pens her script, introducing themes in the beginning that come full circle when they make surprise reappearances later on.

Being a 'tour', *Chinatown Crossings* requires actors to engage in audience interaction, while navigating the live, open theatre space of the real world and still remain completely in character. The quiet, stoic strength of Pavan J Singh makes him an effective guide as he takes on a measured tone to share his memories with us, a genuine smile slowly spreading across his face each time he speaks. This is played in contrast to Sabrina Sng's energetic, excitable Ting Ting, her brash loudness endearing as her enthusiasm spreads to the entire audience, an effective foil for the emotional secret she reveals later. Finally, it is Jodi Chan who ties the entire story together. Despite speaking only in Cantonese, she conveys her lines' meaning through her action and delivery alone, and makes full use of

her comparatively brief time spent with us to quickly portray the deep bonds shared with every other character, every scene she appears in a potentially tearful one as she grows from stranger to maternal figure to both Kunalan and Ting Ting. Much of the beauty in Jean's script lies in the unspoken – what she has done is craft three complex, believable characters, and the actors, in turn, have sincerely breathed life into them as we follow their stories across time and space, and allow ourselves to become active, willing participants every step of the way.



It is to the credit of artistic director Koh Hui Ling that the cast so seamlessly weaves between different time periods – Kunalan and Ting Ting, for example, exist at different periods in their lives, and the transitions from one tour guide to another are smooth and cleverly done with attention to tiny details. Coming down from Drama Box, Ting Ting's 'room' is newly marked with a poster of a Queen tour from 1986 to indicate the change in era, while Ctrl Fre@k's sound design intersperses segments with audio clips from podcasts and news from various eras to both indicate the year and provide additional information surrounding debate around conservation and change of the Chinatown landscape. Also, Ctrl Fre@k's soundscape we hear through the earphones provided enhances the mood in every scene, while still allowing room for the natural environment's ambient sounds to add to it. The entirety of *Chinatown Crossings* is nothing short of a logistics miracle, with each and every space carefully considered and set up to fully harness its potential as a performance space, from setting up lamps along back alleys, to utilising a

white sheet of laundry as a makeshift screen, to burning actual incense to create that additional sensory dimension.



Chinatown can often be seen as an artificially created tourist trap, but with the efforts of Drama Box, *Chinatown Crossings* effectively draws out the history of the place through moving, personal stories inspired by real people. With the juxtaposition of these stories set against the modern day landscape highlighting the contrasts between then and now, *Chinatown Crossings* becomes a melancholic trip into the past, bringing out a hidden fragility to this district that makes us mourn the people and stories now lost to progress. Tugging at the heartstrings while also imbuing us with new knowledge and appreciation for Chinatown, *Chinatown Crossings* has earned a firm place as one of our favourite shows of the year thus far.

Photo Credit: Drama Box

Performance attended 5/7/18

Chinatown Crossings takes place at Chinatown from 22nd June to 18th August and is **SOLD OUT**. However, it is slated for a restaging at an undisclosed period in the future. Follow them on Instagram and Facebook for the latest news, and pre-register for Season 2 [here](#) to book your tickets early to secure a place next time!

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