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SKIN



TerryandtheCuz. OzAsia Festival. The Maj Gallery. September 28 – October 1, 2016

SKIN is an inter-active promenade production from Malaysia that effectively takes one into the nightmare world of human trafficking. As is stated by the creators in the program, Malaysia currently hosts approximately 90,000 refugees, whom exist in a state of transit having no international legal standing. What this production successfully achieves is an 'experience' that is informative as much as it is alienating. It is a journey that one takes sometimes with the other attendees/participants and at other times as an individual. Subsequently, each person has their own individual journey in this 'experience', which is informed by one's own personal experience of dealing with respective 'immigration' procedures in different

countries, and in particular those in South East Asia.

It is a de-humanizing process that begins with you filling out an official form with questions about age, education, religion, and income, and one rather intriguing question - 'What would your family and friends pay if you were kidnapped?' – and then agreeing to give up all your possessions (mobile phones, bags, wallets, watches, etc). You are then given a number and proceed to the next part of the 'experience'.

There are about six different parts to this progressive journey that are all in different locations. In most you are an active participant in a particular process that is not too dissimilar from those you may experience at an 'Immigration' desk when entering a particular country. The difference here, however, is that questions you are asked by the 'officials' are based on what you had written on your form at the start. This information and how you responded and treated the 'officials' determined your fate.

Either individually or in a group you are constantly told 'No Talking!' However, this being said to a rather diverse group of Australians produced a variety of responses that was as revealing as it was disturbing and ironic. Being well experienced in such 'Immigration' procedures I knew it best to just follow instructions, as well as simply allow this simulated process and theatrical 'experience' to take place. Some people, however, couldn't help themselves and chatted on regardless of the repeated instruction of 'No Talking!' – for which some would pay a price by being further isolated from the main group.

The final two parts of my journey through this 'experience' involved sitting with all the attendees/participants in a container to watch a contemporary dance piece. To be blunt whilst this may have been the most 'theatrical' aspect of the whole 'experience' it was also the most conventional and for me less interesting. As contemporary dance goes it was well performed but simply did not have the same impact as the other parts. After this 'performance piece' half the group was led to another container, and then taken away – to where one never found out. The rest of us were then invited to join a 'welcoming' reception as we were the ones chosen and allowed into this unspecified country – a new home. Why us and not others was never really explained except that we were the 'movers and shakers' and subsequently deserved a new start. That was it, we were then told, the performance was over and we could go back to the beginning and collect our belongings.



Australia Day
WRITTEN BY JONATHAN BIGGINS

ALEX RATHGEBER

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In each part of this journey no reason is given for the respective actions, choices and decisions by those leading you through the entire process. This is deliberate and very effective in simulating this 'immigration' process of identification and worth. I was struck by the egoism of some who were deliberately provocative, drawing attention to themselves and treating the production as – well, just a theatrical production and not allowing themselves to 'experience' what many refugees are currently suffering. Maybe the rebellious Australian nature was a way of dealing with this de-humanizing 'experience'? I was reminded of the SBS program 'Go Back To Where You Came From', that also aimed and making one appreciate the suffering that far too many refugees.

To me this was the most interesting aspect of the 'experience', how some people responded with a kind of rebellious mocking attitude whilst others allowed themselves to be simply guided like subservient sheep. I was in the later, but fully conscious of the seriousness behind this production. Chatting to one of the creators afterwards, and asking about audience responses I was told that most people were appreciative of the 'experience' of what it is like to be a refugee in a country like Malaysia and wished to know more. Others, those from the performing arts 'industry', were keener to discuss the actual production. In either case, however, the creators were happy to talk, yet as I found out their primary concern was to draw attention to the current state of affairs in regard to human trafficking – the actual content rather than aesthetic of the production. Their aim is for one to 'step inside the "skin" of a refugee, in order to truly empathize with the suffering, indignity and powerlessness of their journey. It challenges us to do more to help'. In this respect this production is extremely successful and is certainly worth the price of admission – just leave your ego at the door.

Tony Knight

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