

Review: Isaac Tan on *The Change* by Edward Eng (Gangguan!)

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By Isaac Tan

“Follow the science” has been touted as the solution to dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic, and it could also arguably be used by environmental activists as the signs of climate change have been highlighted by scientists for several decades.

But what if the solution is not about science?

In Gangguan’s maiden production, *The Change*, playwright and director Edward Eng teases out the complexities of effecting change in climate policy; the public relations campaign by companies related to energy production to “greenwash” their activities, or shift the blame to the individual consumers, and the overall inertia by politicians more interested in protecting personal interests.



Dennis Sofian in 'The Change'. Photo: Yong Junyi

This is conveyed by the premise of Alex (a bureaucrat who gets increasingly frustrated by his failures to effect change) collaborating with Danial (a friend from school who does socially-conscious theatre) to create a lecture-performance on climate change.

The bulk of the scenes consists of both characters discussing their work over Zoom, or one of the characters talking to another party, who is unseen or represented by an object, about the progress of creating the lecture-performance.

These scenes contain torrents of facts and insightful analyses about climate change and how countries and corporations are not doing enough, and how some of the supposed measures, such as offsetting carbon footprint or aiming for net zero, are not actually tackling the problem.

Through these scenes, the audience gets a second-hand performance-lecture. As Alex's or Danial's energy is often directed at a laptop or to the ether, coupled with the cramped conditions of the black box, it is difficult for the audience to engage with what is going on.

Additionally, as there does not seem to be any naturalistic focus on characterisation, it appears that Eng wants to avoid actually staging a performance-lecture (perhaps not to appear overly didactic), but still provide the audience with the relevant facts.

Therein lies the nub of the problem: the piece is a bit of everything. It wants to have some plot, yet add post-dramatic elements into it. This places quite a demand on Dennis Sofian, who plays both Alex and Danial.

With it being a one-man show, Sofian takes on the heavy script gamely and there is not a second when he appears to be bogged down by the science or the emotional demands of Alex, as he unravels as the show goes on.

However, he seems hemmed in by the slight unclarity in the direction.

There is not enough of a differentiation in the characterisation of Alex and Danial, as it sometimes seems that Alex is a more anxious and frenzied version of Danial. This leads me to sometimes wonder if Alex is the shadow self of Danial.

Are Alex and Danial meant to be actual characters or is Dennis Sofian, the actor, playing broad strokes of two characters who are foils to each other?

This question becomes more pertinent given that there are also metatheatrical “interscenes”—as it is called in the show—when Sofian breaks the fourth wall and is just an actor delivering a prepared text by Eng through a microphone about the process of creating this play.

Furthermore, with the microphone being such a strong feature in the interscenes, why did Eng make Danial speak into a microphone while ironing clothes to signal to us that he is on a phone call to Alex? When unexplained, it seems like quirkiness for quirkiness’ sake.

That said, there are other quirky elements that worked quite well.

We have Alex believing that he is speaking to Greta Thunberg, who is represented by a doll. In the exchanges, Eng manages to expound on certain things that the real Thunberg mentioned while offering nuanced critiques that go beyond the love-her-or-hate-her binary.

We also have Alex encountering a sambar deer (a rare species of deer in Singapore, but not threatened in terms of its global population). The exchange is a refreshing interrogation of the mantra about saving the environment for one’s children.

This is due to the resonating currency in the references to the sambar deer sightings by motorists, national service, and the problem of plastic bags, paired with the deer-caught-in-the-headlights gimmick (a stagehand shines a torch from the tech booth at Sofian physicalising the movements of the deer).

Sofian also shines in his physical work as the deer. He moves according to the conversation between the deer and Alex, which is delivered as a voiceover. He strikes a fine balance between moving his head and looking at the audience in a certain way so that it appears he (as the deer) is speaking, but not overdoing it like a crude caricature of a puppet show.



Dennis Sofian in 'The Change'. Photo: Yong Junyi

But where Sofian truly excels is in the final scene when Alex is giving a speech. He is in full control of the rhythms and the pauses that the speech requires which really inspires and provokes the audience to think about the themes of the play.

I am not under any illusion that the show would make an immediate dent in climate change policy. But the verve, creativity, and sensitivity to nuance displayed by Edward Eng make me excited as to what questions Gangguan! will throw up next, albeit with greater attention to creating a cohesive structure across the performance elements.

Writer's Statement

Each response published on Critics Circle Blog is paired with a statement from the writer where their politic, entry point, purpose, and intended audience is made clear.

Isaac Tan is a performer, writer, and educator who has been writing about the arts since 2011. He believes that every performance is an act of communication. His reviews are reflections of what he got as a receiver of this communication.

This review of 'The Change' was written at the invitation of Gangguan!, who provided our writers with complimentary tickets in order to write the review.

Further Responses

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The Change

Venue: Teater Kami Black Box, Cairnhill Arts Centre

Performed: 7- 11 December, 2022

Producing Company: Gangguan!

Playwright / Director / Producer: Edward Eng

Performer: Dennis Sofian

Lighting Designer: Ian Pereira

Production Stage Manager: Samzy Jo

Associate Producer: Benjamin Lye