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In 2005, full-frontal nudity in Quills was approved by the authorities, but references to the death penalty in Human Lefts were not. What gives?

BY ALL accounts, 2005 seems to have been a sexy year for the arts. Just look at the holy trinity of sexy productions this year: Quills, Rent and the Crazy Horse topless cabaret (if you buy the show's branding of itself as L'Art Du Nu, which is French for Art Of The Nude).

The bohemian characters of the musical Rent gyrated across the Kallang Theatre stage last month, singing of sexually transmitted diseases, alternative lifestyles and a general contempt for convention.

The Crazy Horse cabaret recently added its sex appeal to a nation that now allows bar top dancing, Cosmopolitan magazine and Sex And The City on HBO, albeit a censored version.

Quills included not only full-frontal nudity from Rehaan Engineer, who played the Marquis de Sade, but references to a staggering variety of sexual perversions.

The staging of this play may be evidence of greater openness towards sex in the arts these days.

In contrast, back in April 2000 the National Arts Council (NAC) withdrew its \$8,000 grant to Drama Box's play The VaginaLogue because it included a slide show which flashed a photo of a vagina, which the NAC considered 'inappropriate'. WHAT did provoke censorship this year was not sex, but rather the issues of race and civil liberties, which have long been sensitive topics in Singapore.

For instance, in 2000, Talaq, playwright Elangovan's play about an Indian-Muslim woman's abusive marriage, did not get a licence to perform in English and Malay after complaints from the Indian-Muslim community.

In May this year, Vadi PVSS, the artistic director of theatre group Miror Theatre found his play Shanmugam - The Keling Kia Trilogy arousing ire from some members of Singapore's Indian community. They took issue with the title's use of the phrase keling kia, which is Hokkien for Indian child. The term is often used to refer to Indians in a derogatory way.

The Media Development Authority asked the company to change the title, with spokesman Koh June May saying that 'it was felt that the use of the term in the title may offend or upset some members in the Indian community who say they have some bad memories relating to the use of the word'.

The play was eventually titled Shanmugam - The Kalinga Trilogy, in which Kalinga refers to an ancient South Indian kingdom.

More recently, The Fun Stage's original script Human Lefts, about a father and son and their relationship with a prisoner on death row for drug trafficking, was not allowed to be staged.

The play was part of Initiation International, a two-day mini arts festival organised by The Fun Stage, which included performances from the United States, the Philippines and Israel.

Creators Benny Lim and Brian Gothong Tan were told that the references to the death penalty were too sensitive, as the play would have been staged on Dec 3, a day after the execution of Australian drug trafficker Nguyen Tuong Van.

They were told on Nov 29, and had three days to come up with a new script, as not staging a local play would have put the NAC funding for the festival at risk.

The final *Human Lefts* that was staged retained the father-son relationship, but took on censorship as a theme - Tan took on the aura of a sinister authority figure by often prompting Lim's characters on what lines to say, and one scene saw Lim's mouth covered with masking tape even as he tried to talk.

IT HAS often been said that the most powerful sexual organ is not genitalia, but the brain. The sustainment of arousal takes place in the fragile realm of suggestion and flirtation rather than friction.

It would be easy to say that shows like *Rent* and *Crazy Horse* are token gestures, satisfying the appetite for physical titillation without risking challenges to the intellect.

But the big picture is more complex.

Quills, for example, was a fully loaded play, using sexual titillation as a springboard for other issues like power, morality and censorship.

However, the play was written by American playwright Doug Wright in 1995, and the script itself is set in 18th-century France. That, perhaps, made it comfortably distant from the here and now.

In that respect, plays like *Human Lefts* and *Kalinga*, which refer to the specific local sensitivities surrounding the death penalty and race relations, inevitably came under a higher level of scrutiny.

But stop for a moment and consider how lucky Singapore is that its artists respond to shifts in the socio-political environment so swiftly.

Despite obstacles, *Kalinga* was staged and talked about.

Human Lefts became a wholly different creature, but also resulted in conversations not only about the death penalty, but also the issue of censorship.

And there was a whole host of productions this year that delved into other sensitive issues: from the now-perennial pink plays riffing on homosexuality like the Toy Factory Theatre Ensemble's *Porcelain*, to war and terrorism (the M1 Singapore Fringe Festival), to race and religion (Agni Koothu's *Flush*).

In almost every case, these plays were unsettling, with ideas that challenged the audience's attitudes towards the thorny issues tackled.

As British playwright Harold Pinter, the 2005 Nobel Prize winner for literature, said in his recent acceptance speech: 'There never is any such thing as one truth to be found in dramatic art. There are many. These truths challenge each other, recoil from each other, reflect each other, ignore each other, tease each other, are blind to each other.'

Many plays this year have yearned for this sort of mercurial dramatic truth, the sort of process that will eventually result in a citizenry that is engaged with the problematic truths of its milieu. What is and is not allowed to be staged is a crucial issue, and how artists negotiate the shifting tide of censorship should be a process closely followed and commented on by Singaporeans.

But what is even more important is that Singaporeans decide to show up for stagings that matter. *Human Lefts*, for example, played to only about 60 people. What is the use of a thought-provoking play if no one is there to be provoked?

Censorship may dampen the fervour of artists out to challenge the status quo, but audience apathy will probably prove to be the more malignant factor in the long run.

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