

Arts

Challenging works abound at SIFA 2022

Singapore International Festival of Arts in its second week threw up complex works that forced audiences to confront their prejudices and expectations

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project SALOME

By Ong Keng Sen and T:>Works

[redacted]RESS Janice Koh gives a performance of a lifetime in *project SALOME*, a complex reworking of the 1st-century story of Salome from the perspective of the victim, Salome herself.

Conceived and directed by Ong Keng Sen, the play splits itself into three components: The first has Koh singlehandedly playing several roles in Oscar Wilde's classic 1891 play, which include Salome, her stepfather Herod, her mother Herodias and the Syrian captain.

The second component has Koh playing a professional tennis player who has an affair with a married politician in a contemporary tale that unfolded on Instagram (@thesalomecomplex) weeks before the stage production ran, and finding resolution only in the last moments of the performance.

The third component is a film screened on stage involving Ong's encounter with Michael(a) Daoud, a real-life queer performance artist who fled Syria and found political asylum in Germany.

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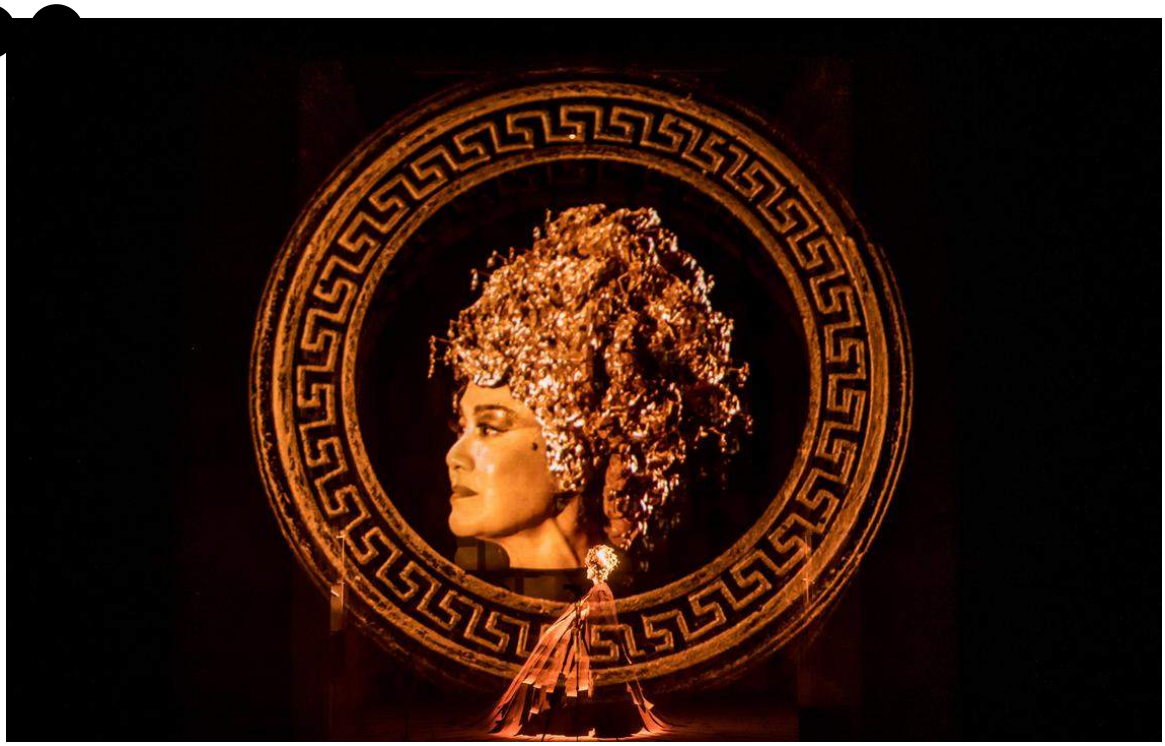
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Janice Koh performs with only her head in project SALOME. DEBBIE Y

Taken together, *project SALOME* is a fascinating and complex exploration of power and politics, of how women and minorities have to navigate a minefield of patriarchal demands and expectations, and how sex and sexuality can be used as weapons against the world and, unwittingly, on ourselves.

Koh's turn is nothing short of mesmeric as she switches roles in split seconds, one moment playing the desirous Salome, the next moment the incestuous Herod, the next his proud wife Herodias. All the time, she is performing with only her head and the rest of her body hidden – a "decapitation" to mirror the beheading of Jokanaan (or John the Baptist) later in the play. A lesser actress would have been eclipsed by Daoud's heartbreaking true story of crossing borders illegally through Greece, Turkey and Serbia to get to Germany, taking on paid sex work along the way just to buy a fake passport – but not Koh.

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Production design is top-notch, with Heman Chong's gorgeous set design of stacked boxes towering over Koh and artfully lit by Elizabeth [illegible]. Creative producer Noorlinah Mohamed, composer Kaffe Matthews, head dress designer Ashley Lim, makeup designer Bobby Ng and others complete the dream team.



project SALOME boasts top-notch production values. DEBBIE Y

Ubin

By Drama Box

A few groans were heard when Drama Box announced that *Ubin* was to be a 4-hour site-specific theatre experience on Pulau Ubin. Audience patience was further tested when the show was cancelled at the last minute on the opening night (Wednesday, May 25) due to wet weather. But when it opened the following evening, almost no one regretted making the trip to the north-eastern island.

Co-directed by Kok Heng Leun and Koh Hui Ling, *Ubin* combines dance, walking theatre, an audio narrative and a participatory workshop to examine the past, present and future of the island. The audience is

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first taken on a 2-hour stroll through the island's town and the southern edges, while listening on portable audio devices to first-hand accounts by past and present villagers of their lives on Ubin.

They tell of love lost and found on the island, familial sacrifices made in search of better futures, and livelihoods created or destroyed by quarry mining. They immerse one in Ubin's rich history — these stories which are typically neglected in the stories we tell of the larger development of Singapore. The experience is augmented by four dance pieces that examine human relationship with the land and sea, and ends with a participatory workshop, in which everyone is asked to imagine the future of Ubin.



Ubin by Drama Box takes the audience to Pulau Ubin to uncover its past, present and future. DEBBIE Y

Is the experience transformative? Does it compel one to mourn the last vestiges of kampong life? Does it move one to try and save Ubin's beautiful natural environment from the scourge of development? If the voices heard in the workshop are anything to go by, Singaporeans have become so pragmatic and unsentimental that they'd rather see Ubin

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turn into an affordable retirement village, a staycation hub or a recreational attraction than waste a good piece of land that's only 10 minutes away from the main island.

Ubin is an undoubtedly sincere work of art. But it is ultimately too compassionate, conciliatory and even-handed to change minds or light fires in bellies.

Remotes x Quantum

By John Torres and Eleanor Wong

Filipino filmmaker John Torres lost his mother in the first few weeks of the Covid-19 lockdown. His new work *Remotes x Quantum*, created with Singapore playwright Eleanor Wong, carries a sense of bereavement, even as it tells stories of economic survival and existential angst in the two countries.

Shown at the Arts House, *Remotes x Quantum* begins as a film that splices the story of sisters mourning a recently-deceased loved one, and men who've chosen to become real-life avatars in a remote and deadly game.

Suddenly, an audience member (actress Melissa Gay Marcia) stands up and leads the rest of the audience to a different room in the Arts House, where Singapore dancer Ma Yanling, surrounded by beautiful home furnishings, begins to tear up the place in a fit of existential despair. In the final scene, performed in yet another room, we see the soul of a woman (also played by Ma) departing from her body via theatrical effects.

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Dancer Ma Yanling tears up a room in Remotes x Quantum at The Arts House. DEBBIE Y

While certainly ambitious, this hybrid film-theatre-dance piece doesn't cohere. Themes emerge — notions of mortality, mourning, virtual realities, power, capitalism, First World problems versus Developing World problems, and others, but most are too superficially explored to earn our full empathy and engagement. That said, *Remotes x Quantum* has moments of transcendental beauty when Torres reaches deep within himself to deal with his own personal loss.

The Singapore International Festival of Arts runs till 5 June. Visit sifa.sg for programmes.

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