

Haresh Sharma, *Those Who Can't, Teach*. Singapore: Epigram Books, 2010. 112 pp. ISBN 978-981-08-5510-9.

This play by Haresh Sharma, resident playwright of The Necessary Stage (INS), Singapore, was first staged in 1990 to critical acclaim. Then in 2010 it was given an overhaul by its author – updated, revised, recrafted for a 21st century feel – and performed at the Singapore Arts Festival where again reviews were very favourable.

The play with its rather unsettling title (I am, after all, a teacher by profession!) centres around a typical neighbourhood school in Singapore and the issues confronted by its teachers and students. While some of the allusions and innuendo are particular to the city state, the scope of the play is certainly universal – teachers and their students.

In this relatively concise script of 4 Acts and 13 scenes (with a brief Prologue and Epilogue) Sharma deftly tackles a whole slew of teaching issues: Teacher versus administrator – is it fair for a teacher to be required to be an efficient administrator as well? Do teachers expend too much time and effort on weaker or delinquent students, neglecting the more gifted ones, to the latter's detriment? Does ranking among schools promote elitism and nothing else? Do colleges and teaching institutions actually prepare teachers for the real teaching world, or as one of the characters exclaims in alarm and frustration, "Everything [is] theory... pure unadulterated rubbish!" (18).

The play also gives us a glimpse into the complex reality of a teacher and shows her to be multi-faceted, something we choose to ignore. A teacher is expected to be a teacher, and that is it. We forget that she may be a daughter with heavy filial duties, a mother with children of her own, a lover, a woman with personal dreams. And yet daily, in fact at an hourly basis, she is required, expected, to be a role model, an inspiration, selfless, without a life of her own. In short, a teacher.

Needless to say, there are teachers, and there are "teachers" and Sharma gives a sampling of a few varieties. There is Zach, the young, brash male educator, a government scholar who is actually disdainful of the teaching profession and is always looking for ways to sneak out of his classroom. Then there is Farhana, a young woman, struggling against the constraints of her job – "There's no such thing as private life for a teacher" (15) – and its realities (for example, being able to get married only during school holidays!). Yet despite some indiscretions, she is a person of integrity and cares enough about the kids to be a good teacher. But it is the portrayal of Mrs Puah Su Lin, the central figure in the play, which engenders the most empathy.

She is the dedicated, committed teacher most of us have a fond memory of. "I've been teaching all my life.... Encouraging students to do their best,

reach for the stars, to fulfil their dreams. All my life I was surrounded by my students.... Their anger, their fears, their joy, their heartache..." (57-58). But as Sharma gently reveals, there is a costliness to this dedication. Years later, when she is in a nursing home, one of her ex-students Teck Liang asks her, "How did you do it Mrs Phua? How did you deal with it.... Year in, year out?" Her answer is simple and pure (and what we hope every teacher in every teaching institution would say), "I love teaching... I love my students" (58). But the pathos in this is that she is now alone, left in a nursing home by her own children. Interestingly enough, and tellingly, her children are never mentioned in the whole play. And we only realise she is a mother when she says, "Why would they take care of me? I spent more time with other people's children than my own" (58).

In the Prologue we are introduced to this idea, "I was happy once. But I was young. The older you get, the more you remember. The younger you are, the more you forget" (3) Through a series of voiceovers, memory flashbacks and scenes into the future, Sharma casts onto the activity and busyness of daily school life the poignancy of the passing of time and dreams unrealised. This wistfulness gives the play added depth and dimension. While aging is not ideal, the young students are not without their problems. Exams. Divorced parents. Feelings of neglect and embarrassment. School romances, seemingly trivial to the adults but possibly life-altering to the young ones involved. These are their concerns and the students look to their teachers for guidance and direction. Through the depiction of just four students – Teck Liang, Jali, Clare and Raymond – Sharma gives us a fair and rather wide-ranging representation of student life. A kid, other than his schoolbag, lugs to school the weight of personal and domestic worries. The vulnerability of students and their dependence on their teachers is best reflected in the relationship between Su Lin and her student Teck Liang. Her role in his life will extend beyond his years in school. As a grown man he will tell her, "I need you Mrs Phua to save me" (74).

The character of Sabtu also deserves mention. He is the comic school canteen operator and it is his dialogue with its colloquialism which I imagine draws the most laughs in the play. And yet despite his preoccupations with roti john and chicken, he does dish out a lot of wisdom and often comes across as the wiser in his exchanges with the teachers. Another interesting feature is the invisible principal. While the principal is spoken about s/he remains unseen. But Su Lin's remark, "We have a new principal now. A nice principal" (44) points to the fact that the principal's personality, his/ her niceness or lack of it affects the whole school and the individual lives of teachers and students.

The book would be of keen interest to teachers and students alike for it captures the day-to-day realities of school life – the mundane and the unexpected, the dreams and the disappointments, the sublime and the ridiculous hand-in-hand. In fact this could be a good classroom text. Epigram

has published this book as part of its From Stage to Print series. Towards the end of the book there is a section with structured questions targeted at secondary school students with the purpose of bringing the play “beyond the stage and into the classroom” (93). Students would learn to look at a play not only based on its storyline and themes, but to analyse its production issues as well. For example, in the 2010 production, the director had five characters playing 14 roles. Students can discuss the challenge of executing this smoothly and avoiding confusion in the audience; what is gained and what is lost in the audience experience had more actors been used. Robust discussions would give students a greater appreciation of this play, and hopefully a greater appreciation of their teachers.

Finally, what arises from the play is that on a daily basis, the lives, hopes and aspirations of young people lie in the hands of teachers and that those who can't teach, really should not because it is a vocation which calls for much sacrifice and selfless giving.

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