

MY THOUGHTS

Comedy is no joke

■ BY OW YEONG WAI KIT

A FEW weeks ago I was in a production by the NUS University Scholars Club of the playwright Noel Coward's *Hay Fever*. The classic play, set in 1920s Britain, was a viciously funny comedy of manners, filled with witty jokes and humorous banter.

In the play, I had the part of Simon, an impertinent and impetuous young man with a penchant for doodling portraits when not chasing after young ladies. Naturally, it was a challenge to portray him, given the vast differences between the character's attitudes and my own.

Nevertheless, I rolled up my sleeves and did my best. Scene after scene, the audience roared with laughter at the antics of the characters, and we actors drew upon their raucous energy to give them the delightful experience that light comedy provides. By the end of the play, the applause made our tireless efforts all worthwhile.

If there's one thing that I've realised after being in the show, it's that comedy has a certain magical quality to it.

Humour relies upon the relief of tension, usually involving the testing of social boundaries that is achieved by either lampooning authority or deriding the downtrodden. For an actor to be humorous, having a good sense of comic timing is essential: The thing about comedy is that the slightest change in gesture, facial expression, or inflection of the voice bears significance. If the actor lacks a critical aware-

ness of all these factors, the joke falls flat. Every comedian knows that it's not easy to be funny.

Comedy also has a serious point. The kind of humour that surfaces on stage or screen is usually dependent on the tensions and pressures of the society which produces it; in other words, what we laugh at frequently has a lot to do with what we feel uncomfortable about.

In Coward's *Hay Fever*, the madcap behaviour of the characters drew critics of the time to denounce the apparent lack of morals of the playwright. Their criticism reflected the insecurities over the rise of moral decrepitude of the Jazz Age.

In our time, the jokes of talk show hosts like Conan O'Brien or Jon Stewart poke fun at American politics, while closer to home, comedian Gurmit Singh depicts the anxieties of the average Singaporean as personified in the character of Phua Chu Kang. Other entertainers like Hossan Leong, Sebastian Tan, and the Dim Sum Dollies also push local boundaries of humour, skewering public figures and events with aplomb. Humour is a marker of the political maturity of a society, and in this regard, local comedians show that Singapore isn't doing too badly.

Indeed, in a world that is all too often beset by tragic events, perhaps there's nothing like a good comedy to offer a few precious hours of laughter and reflection.

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