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SINGAPORE ARTS FESTIVAL

Honest sex talk gives sense of empowerment

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ONE of the more risqué events in the Singapore Arts Festival featured older women talking about their sex lives. Whether one went to watch *The Best Sex I Ever Had* with trepidation or anticipation - or an equal mix of both - it's a good bet that most left feeling relieved that the whole event was a lot more affirming than expected. After all, *The Best Sex* wasn't just about Singaporeans talking about sex, but Singaporean women above 50 - ordinary

mothers, grandmothers, widows, divorcees sharing stories about physical passion in their lives.

The Best Sex, a "social art" performance directed by Canadian group Mammalian Diving Reflex, turned out to be a cross between *Sex and the City* and *The Jerry Springer Show* - but not as much over-the-top drama.

There were some awkward moments during last Friday's performance which sought to get some audience interaction, but by and large, *Best Sex* had a receptive all-female audience who was quite captivated with the stories that came from the panel of 10 women.

The women - aged 57 to 66 years - sat as a row behind tables, as if in a panel, with a DJ-like "moderator" on the side. A linear timeline was kept to, with the 1940s as the starting decade. That's when the panelists introduced themselves, in random order, in simple Twitter-length sentences. Some shared that they were born in the year of the dragon, and in KK Hospital; as others gave one-liners that she was expected to be a boy, or that the year she was born was when her father stopped smoking opium, another shared that she was given away because her family was too poor.

As the moderator went through the decades, prefacing each year with the music of the era, a picture emerged of the women as they took turns to share their life stories in not much more than 10-15 word sentences. That was the core strength of the show as the pared down sentences and often-stark statements were well-scripted to carry a wealth of significance or pack a punch.

Some themes that emerged were: how some of their parents had preferred boys, that they had started exploring or becoming aware of their sexuality in their early teens. We were privy to the time they had their first menses, and then how they met their first loves, and eventually who they married and why.

Funniest moments were when the women shared about their first time at sex - in the proverbial back seat of a car, with men who didn't know how to do it, and even with mothers-in-law at close quarters. As the night wore on, we began to have an idea of the women's personalities as they revealed their sexual relationships. We were also given a hint of the traumas that they went through - suspicions of their husbands' infidelity, miscarriage, separation, reunion, divorce and death.

The panel had some questions for the audience - some very intimate ones - which on Friday night, were gamely picked up by a few who did share their experience.

The process built up to a point where the women shared their idea of "The Happy Valley" - a district where women could have younger men at their disposal. At this point, a video was shown where they interviewed men on the street about it - and we had a good laugh at the various men's reactions; made all the more hilarious because they wouldn't know what we laughed at.

The ending was a nice touch where the women came down to the floor, and the audience members were invited to approach them at their various "stations" where they shared photographs and other paraphernalia about themselves. Some went on to ask more questions, but it was an intimate and brave way to end a session, especially one that saw the women bare so much of their souls in public.

Unfortunately, with this panel of all-Chinese women, one can't help but wonder how much more interesting and layered if it had included women from other races besides Chinese. Or if the audience had also included men?

Perhaps it was the all-women environment though, that gave a sense of empowerment. Whether or not that's the intention, *The Best Sex* - which the Singapore cast had renamed *All the Sex I've Ever Had* - was a testimony to the fact that good art is honest art, and that it's real stories that make up theatre.

Before being allowed into the Esplanade Theatre Studio, the audience was given a contract to sign which made us promise not to "obsessively gossip" about what we heard in the performance. At the end, it turns out that when sex is talked about openly, and presented respectfully, one doesn't feel the compulsion to "gossip" about it at all. Discuss perhaps, but in a civilised, natural way. Which in a way is what sex is all about anyway.