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An eco-parable with *The Man Who Planted Trees*

By ANN MARIE CHANDY

**A moral tale told through humorous puppets.**

It is no wonder that The Edinburgh Puppet State Theatre Company's *The Man Who Planted Trees* has met with critical acclaim. Currently playing at The Actors Studio in Bangsar, Kuala Lumpur, the show is a "must-see" for everyone.

Based on a tale by Frenchman Jean Giono (written in 1953), this is a poignant story which will tug at your heartstrings, get you giggling like a five-year-old (if you're not one) and leave you with a lot to think about.

The tale is easy enough to understand, and told effectively by Richard Medrington and Rick Conte, his colleague (or "collie-ggg", you'll note if you watch the play) who's an able sidekick who takes care of most of the props and puppets, breathing life into them all.



*The Man Who Planted Trees* features the excellent talents of Rick Conte (left) and Richard Medrington, and the star of the show, the 'dog'.

It's truly something to watch; Conte is able to lend so much expression to these puppets - so much so you forget he is even present. And this despite a reminder that he is always there. A good five minutes is devoted to one puppet - the dog, who, incidentally, gets "star" billing on the show - and its reference to the man who is constantly behind it (Conte the puppeteer) and the almost psychic connection between them. I thought that was a hilarious touch. And

very surprisingly, many of the children found it funny too!

The fictional story is about a farmer who moves with his dog to a remote part of France and plants trees in the simplest way possible: 100 in the morning and 100 in the afternoon. What appears to be a barren wasteland, where only wild lavender grows, is soon transformed into a great forest, which rejuvenates the local ecosystem. The audience at The Actors Studio Bangsar on Sunday afternoon was a mix of little children and their parents, as well as a few teenagers and young adults. Everyone seemed to have a good time, and I even overheard one little girl (who couldn't have been more than six) tell her mum on the way out of the theatre: "I wish I could see that show again."

Medrington, who delivers most of the tale, is very comfortable in his role as storyteller. He doesn't "talk down" to the children in the audience, and his frank, simple delivery makes the show very watchable for all generations. Conte's more dramatic performance for the puppets, complements Medrington's pragmatic style perfectly. While Conte's "dog" is jovial, funny and loud, his "farmer" is quiet and unassuming. Yet, the puppeteer manages to infuse so much expression and life into both puppets. You have to see it to really appreciate just how much thought and choreography goes into every movement, every gesture.



Conte gives the farmer life in

The Man Who Planted Trees .

There's more.

Medrington and Conte have included in their puppet show a few sensorial "gimmicks" that work wonders. They waft the smells of the woodlands and of lavender into the audience using giant leafy-fans; they sprinkle "mist" on everyone present (yes, they get everyone!) and they wave birds strapped onto a large stick over the heads of the audience. The little ones in the audience lap it all up and jump up to grab at the birds, and I had to restrain myself from joining them... (it looks a little awkward when you're 40).

All said, this was one of those shows which I really enjoyed. It is storytelling at its best. And when you're in the audience and you've got a tear in your eye, you know that the men on stage have done something right. If you've got some time on your hands, take your children for the show or just go for yourself. The message - everyone can make a change - is one that speaks to people everywhere and of all ages.

*Catch the Edinburgh Puppet State Theatre's **The Man Who Planted Trees** presented by Gardner & Wife Theatre at The Actors Studio, Bangsar Shopping Complex, Kuala Lumpur, until this Sunday. Tickets are priced at RM42, RM53 and RM64. For bookings, call the box office (03-20940400/1400).*

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