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3 FAT VIRGINS UNASSEMBLED: Home Yet Far From Safety

AUTHOR

[Pospoken](https://popspoken.com/author/popspoken)

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Written by Cheryl Tan

The theatre scene this year has been rampant with plays and conversations centred on feminism, equality, sexual assault, and issues of patriarchal violence. These range from Drama Box’s FLOWERS, Eng Kai Er’s Blunt Knife, to Pandemonium’s This Is What Happens to Pretty Girls, and Grace Kalaiselvi’s Goddesses of Words. Director Grace Kalaiselvi now brings us a remake of Ovidia Yu’s highly-acclaimed play, 3 Fat Virgins Unassembled (3FVU), presented as part of the Theatreworks Writers’ Lab: Not Ordinary Work (N.O.W.) project. A three-week public project led by artistic director Noorlinah Mohamed, N.O.W. celebrates female creatives — thinkers, writers, and change-makers — from a diversity of backgrounds and experiences.

In our current socio-political climate in which gender equality is fought for, sexual assault fought against, and gender norms widely discussed and defended, 3FVU lends its voice to the current conversation again, as it once did when it was written in 1991. Understandably, some things have changed since then and so in this production, Kalaiselvi modified Yu’s original script, to better reflect the issues we face today.



A narrative told by four women, 3FVU deconstructs the identities of the typical Singaporean woman, shedding light in particular on the individual roles of a woman in domestic settings (as a mother and/or wife), and in the workplace (as an employee). While each of the four actors, each playing multiple roles, transition relatively seamlessly between several characters, they have one main character each throughout most of the play.

Munah Bagharib plays VIRGIN A, a female employee who gets continually sexually harassed by her boss, and who struggles with whether she should speak out about the issue despite risking her job. Zelda Tatiana Ng plays VIRGIN B, a teacher trying to pursue her passion in theatre production but who gets utterly talked-down to by a supposed established theatre director who makes her question her worth as a competent human being. Chanel Chan plays VIRGIN C, a woman who not only has to grapple with her roles of mother and wife, but also her husband’s infidelity.

Rebekah Sangeetha Dorai plays WOMAN, most recognisably the most volatile character who, for most of the play, assumes the role of the different men in these women’s lives. Dorai’s presence, at once both compelling and domineering, was seen almost immediately upon the commencement of the play. The opening scene before the house announcements were made had her walk around the performance space looking at the other three women as she went, who each performed a set of individual gestures in repetition.

This play’s main challenge seemed to be balancing both indulgent satire yet shedding light on topics such as sexual assault, infidelity, motherhood and, ultimately, what it means for a woman to navigate her place in modern Singapore.

Humour then, is used as a means to juggle with what most would consider ‘heavy’ topics. Male characters are exaggerated to caricatures with domineering power over the women, and several characters were played to stereotypes for comedic effect, and eliciting bouts of laughter from the audience, the most notable stereotyped character being Ng’s portrayal of a lover of VIRGIN C’s

husband, who spoke English in a very heightened Mandarin accent. While each of these characters' stories unfolded only one character, Chan's VIRGIN C, seemed to effectively portray the duality identity that she struggles with — being both a mother and a wife, and feeling like a failure on both fronts.



We learn that the 'virginity' in 3FVU does not refer to sexual virginity but personal insecurities. While virginity in its more literal sense is often considered the very measure of a woman's worth, these insecurities — body image, marital status, career, sexuality — are by extension what these women and their societies ground their worth in. One memorable scene towards the ending was, coupled with an enchanting acapella delivered by Dorai, a projection slowly revealing the names of several noteworthy women was played. These were women whose lives' works have contributed to the betterment of their societies in both past and present. This manoeuvre in audience attention felt rather sudden, but I certainly appreciated the thought put into this segment. It was, perhaps, the homage paid to the many women whose works we may have failed to adequately celebrate.

Although the most notable act of empowerment was a scene in which VIRGIN B quits being part of the theatre production she had been working on, the play ended with a scene that implied the suicide of VIRGIN C. Regardless of the effective satire achieved, audiences felt this piece end on a rather sobering note. In all honesty, my most immediate reaction was that of annoyance. Why was this play yet another grim story about disempowered women? Was it not time for stories in which heroines showed us that change can happen? But perhaps this is what the play conveyed after all — that we are simply not doing enough, that while change may be happening, it is happening at too glacial a pace.

While all plays should, on their own, be able to clearly convey a director's stance on social topics such as these, post-show dialogues are of course always more than welcome. Almost all audience members stayed for the matinee's post-show sharing. This for me was the most enriching part of this production's experience, the aftermath of which will be shared in my thoughts below.



THINGS FALL APART

While the play itself portrayed women who were seemingly rather disempowered in fending for themselves — their dignity, respect, and rights — it is interesting to have heard such honest personal experiences from several audience members. Which then begs the unnerving question — with all the conversations that are happening and awareness being spread, why is it that a play highlighting women's issues written in 1991 can still speak to the audience of this day and age?

The stage has become a platform on which women's issues can be seen and heard. But beyond carrying the voices of these people, what action are we taking? Conversation without action is nothing. Words slip away. The ones who lead these necessary conversations are members of communities that are the most vulnerable — namely women and sexual minorities. These are the people who have themselves experienced sexual harassment or abuse. These are friends of survivors of assault and trauma. These are people who genuinely care about the issue. The ones in this room and in these spaces are people who are looking out for themselves, their loved ones, and keeping themselves in check in efforts not to harm others. Why then, does change seem to take so long to come?

Perhaps it is because the very people who perpetuate harmful behaviour and attitudes are, more often than not, not part of our current conversations. This is something I learnt while attending FLOWERS earlier this year, and I believe it applies to us now more than ever. In these post-show dialogues and sharing sessions, in these spaces in which we finally open up to speak about and push the need for change and awareness, where are the people who need to hear them? Who are we overlooking and leaving out of our conversations? Could the people we leave unwittingly leave out of these conversations be the very ones whom the conversations are about in the first place, and the very ones who most need to hear what we have to say?

We have so many conversations about these issues, so many discussions and opinions voiced during post-show dialogues and post-show suppers around the table, so what are we doing about it? While it is necessary for us to keep these conversations going, keep awareness spreading, and keep calling each other out on harmful behaviour, it is imperative that we do not stop here. Yes, advocacy takes time. Yes, change will come in time. But perhaps this timeframe has been stretched too wide for much too long. And perhaps it is time for us to think about who we might have overlooked, and bring them into the conversation. After all, if we all fail to own these issues collectively as a society, things do fall apart.