

The Magic Behind the Magic

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The lights go down and I thrill with anticipation. Every single time.

In a lifetime of theatre-going and reviewing, that sensation of excitement has never dimmed. It is one of the magical things about the theatre. It is alive. It is "now" and "now" only. Even if a show has been running with the same script and the same cast for years, no two performances are quite the same.

And it is not just us, the audience in the auditorium, for whom the moment of the darkening house brings an adrenalin rush.

Behind the scenes, the theatre is absolutely surging with it. There is a swarm of invisible experts on whom everything depends - even the glamor of the star actor. As the lights fade, they all are braced for action - lights, sound, sets, props, communications, curtains...

The grand illusion of the theatre is, of course, that the audience is only vaguely aware that there are people backstage.

That's a very careful construct the business calls "the fourth wall". It's an invisible line between the audience and the performance.

We audience members, look through it to the lights and sounds of another world created on the stage. Another reality which we know is not real and yet it lives in the moment, vivid and transporting in its myriad forms. From gut-wrenching to hysterical. From tragedy to farce - with music and dance, fantasy and spectacle... For us, the pleasure is immersive. Theatre-going is about experience. We are receptive and reactive but essentially, in conventional theatre, we are passive and comfortably seated in the big black box.

Unlike all those theatre people creating that world of illusion for us.

I had to take a private backstage tour at the Festival Centre to realise the how much skill and drama lies behind skilful drama. There are death-defying performances executed back there - the mechs and techs dancing up the magic. They are star turns in their own right and they are the heart and soul of theatre - and not a bit glamorous, rarely recognised by the ticket-buyers and stage door Johnnies. But don't seem to care about such things. It is not a competition. It is serious art and serious business. They know who they are and they are a world unto themselves.

As a professional theatre-goer and one, with an actress mother and a critic father, who was pretty much raised around theatres, I have always been aware of the other world of mechs and techs. I've doffed my cap to them, but kept out of their realm as a matter of protocol.

But knowing what they do does not prepare one for seeing what they do. And how much territory they have to traverse. There are miles of stairs and labyrinthine

corridors and from earthy worlds right beneath the theatre to the eyries of the roof spaces.

The sound techs seem to use every inch of them. They scale the heights and crawl through the depths in the name of audibility and resonance. They are extremely fussy and absolutely fearless. And fit! As are the lighting techs. All of them are able to brave perilous heights - looking down on an almost toy stage below while at the same time performing expert high-tech feats of their own.

It's dangerous work. For big productions, those mechs and techs can spend weeks manoeuvring heavy cargo in loading docks, rigging things up, checking, ladder-climbing, streaking along perilous catwalks. They seem to love it and to take a special pleasure in the fact that theirs is a secret world. They adorn it with quips and in-jokes. In the Fezzy Theatre they have made an ad hoc gallery with their souvenirs from major shows. There's a sense of humour and mischief in the camaraderie - along with the disciplined professionalism.

It seems unjust that the wide realms of theatre-lovers don't get to see these other stars. The Backstage Tour certainly gives one an insight, but right now there is an easier way, a safer way to see what they're all about. Photos! Neville Cichon has a Backstage Pass Photographic Exhibition up in the Festival Theatre Foyer - right through until April 7.