

Interview: Jonathan Lim on Chestnuts Does Christmas: Like a Hard Candy Virgin

by Amy Tan

The brainchild of Jonathan Lim, Chestnuts is Singapore's longest-running comedy sketch show. After 12 years of no-holds-barred comedy, Chestnuts returns to its birthplace - Jubilee Hall - for a special Xmas edition. This year, we talk to Lim about the humble beginnings of this show and the upcoming installment, Chestnuts Does Christmas: Like a Hard Candy Virgin.

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1. When did you start to think about Chestnuts and what were some of the motivations behind creating it?

The idea came to me and my buddy Sean Yeo in 1996. We realised that there was NO sketch comedy to be had in Singapore, and we were madly in love with 2-man sketch comedy a la Smith & Jones, Fry & Laurie, French & Saunders etc. It was our attempt to create a new platform for a madcap, kooky kind of comedy where anything went!

2. When you first staged Chestnuts, did you expect it to become the household name for parody that it is now?

Not in our wildest dreams! Our first show was attended almost entirely by friends and relations! They enjoyed it and their warm response spurred us on, but we thought it was just a little niche. Years later, we realized that we touched a particular spot that Singaporeans really wanted touched - so we expanded our range of spoof targets, marketed wider, enlarged the show. 12 shows later, its really paid off in fulfilling but unexpected ways!

3. Chestnuts has been running for more than a decade. How do you continually come up with new material?

It's a constant struggle! Each year as Chestnuts planning time approaches, I panic & tell myself there'll be nothing to write about. But a few brainstorms later, me and my trusty team always throw up a lot of ideas, and in the end, i end up struggling to choose which targets NOT to hit!

In recent years, though, several characters have emerged that have developed a life of their own, and i look forward to writing them new adventures year to year. Such as the flamboyant queens who host Pondan News Asia (who've also done news bulletins, travel shows and are now doing current affairs talk shows!) and the 2 non-english speaking Mainland Chinese salesgirls. Both of these pairs appear in this Xmas special too!

4. In your opinion, what makes a good parody?

Equal parts ludicrousness and respect for the truth.

5. With parody, it's always a gamble of your audience being clueless about the subject matter. How do you overcome this?

Machine gun style. We spread our fire over a wide enough area - everything's bound to hit someone. Not all the audience will catch our references, from Shakespeare to hip hop, Chinese theatre to Jap horror, local TV to touring musicals - nor do we expect the audience to catch it all. The references fly pretty fast and furious, and even catching half will give you a belly-aching night of laughter.

As far as I'm concerned, I see it as our duty to celebrate ALL that is out there, in its infinite variety, not just feeding the mainstream.

For example, Theatre In Ten, our rapidfire round-up of the year's theatre, from the "biggest to the most bo liao" is made up of a lot of theatre references. But we've also learnt to craft it so that even non-theatre-goers laugh at the way its delivered and the sheer comic energy of it!

Also, we've developed a knack for double-targets - sketches that spoof one target through another. For example, you may not know Mckellen's Lear, but you'll probably know his Magneto. This year, you may not know your Nativity, but you'll know your Madonna, hopefully. You may not know your Dickens "A Christmas Carol", but we'll get you via Blue Mansion, Paranormal Activity, Victor/Victoria, chinese new year and other things!

6. Singapore has a reputation for heavy censorship. Is there anything that you exclude from making fun of?

We don't exclude things because of censorship, but because some things just aren't funny to laugh at. Disasters, life-damaging scandals, religious beliefs - these are areas we find no joy in intruding into. Even this year's nativity play told through Madonna songs is written with a tremendous sensitivity and understanding of Mary and the true meaning of the Nativity. Drawing upon my Catholic childhood and my later Protestant church involvement, I wrote a Mary & Joseph that a Christian would appreciate as a warmer, more human depiction of things we might otherwise take for granted, such as the bizarre and traumatic domestic dilemma Mary & Joseph must've found themselves in after the Annunciation. And what we rediscover in a new light is the faith that sees them through.

7. What can we expect from Chestnuts Does Christmas: Like a Hard Candy Virgin?

A taste of how Chestnuts has changed over the years! Some sketches hark back to the 90s, with our Dickens spoof dating as far back as 1996. Others are very much in the vein of recent years. Fans will love seeing the 2-man dynamic revived (when Tan Shou Chen plays Scrooge and I play everything else in the story), but also relish the newer, larger cast, situation-based comedy sketches.

But is our Xmas special, so every sketch springs from Christmas traditions, from carolling to Xmas family lunch, to gift-gigiving to Sunday School Nativity Plays. And there's a delightful warm and fuzzy feeling that comes with all the sketches, alongside the hilarity. Its a show you'll love for its comedy as we;; as its Christmas feel!

8. What advice do you have for aspiring scriptwriters and playwrights?

Read a LOT MORE! Be hungry to taste how other's write, and be humble to learn from them.

Watch a LOT of theatre/film! Know the medium you are writing for - and its complexities and technicalities. A script is a blueprint for such a complex artistic endeavor involving so many other arts and skills, that the writer MUST know the potential and limitations of each.

Please don't try to be a First. There is always a legacy that we should honour and research. Few things are more frustrating than a scriptwriter who reinvents the wheel naively because he/she has no idea how overdone such & such a topic is, and goes on to give it

a superficial treatment thinking it is a pioneering attempt, unaware of the depths already plumbed by others, both locally and internationally.

Chestnuts Does Christmas: Like a Hard Candy Virgin runs on 28, 29, 30 December, 8pm nightly at the Jubilee Hall, Raffles Hotel. Tickets are available through SISTIC at www.sistic.com.sg.