

Arts review: Robert Zhao's Albizia is a wondrous multi-species forest drama

1 of 2 Robert Zhao transports a whole secondary forest into the Esplanade Theatre Studio for his immersive performance installation, Albizia. PHOTO: CRISPIAN CHAN

Shawn Hoo

UPDATED 4 HOURS AGO



Albizia

Robert Zhao Renhui

Esplanade Theatre Studio

Thursday, 7.30pm

In Albizia, man and forest let down their guard, and a whole world opens up.

Multidisciplinary artist Robert Zhao has coaxed the forest to lay bare the drama of its multi-species inhabitants and invited his audience to rove the set of his imported forest – which is, miraculously, made of real trees in lively arrangements.

Camera-trap footage of kingfishers nabbing their meals, or a lizard climbing into a bin, make up some of the fauna you can patiently follow if you peer into the old television sets nested amongst the foliage.

There are two large screens at the front of the theatre, which often scale up sweeping scenes of excavators logging the forest or offer a loose narrative of an enigmatic human pair working through the tough terrain.

In this swirl of photography, video, installation, soundscape, set design and performance, Zhao and his team pool together their varied practices to create a total sensorium that gives the visitor a view of the forest approximating omniscience.

The result is that the forest is given dramatic expression as a complex protagonist, which lighting designer Elizabeth Mak's sharp shifts in lighting bring out. In one striking moment, the forest is drenched in red and given an apocalyptic treatment.

While there is no discernible narrative structure in playwright Joel Tan's dramaturgy, the shape of the show is marked by thoughtful contrasts.

Tranquil moments which invite contemplation often crescendo into climactic episodes, as in one memorable sequence where a cacophony of bird squawks and roaring vehicles builds up into a terrifying and wondrous chorus.

But Albizia is no simple manifesto for the beauty of nature, as Zhao builds on his longstanding interest in the porous boundary between culture and nature, where he plays the roles of artist and scientist, documentarian and fabulist.

A cabinet of curiosities holding field guides, mason jars and old cameras is integrated into the verdant landscape, foregrounding the artifice of curation.

In other words, while Albizia is dubbed an “immersive performance installation”, the word “immersion” does not mean illusion – such as the kind found in, for example, the ongoing [Sensory Odyssey at ArtScience Museum](#), which boasts hyper-realistic 8K resolution video of animals in their ecosystems.

In Zhao’s secondary forest – defined as a forest which regenerates after its original vegetation has been cleared – the view is less of an idealised and pure nature, but a hybrid possibility of new life existing between nature and culture.

There is no real path through Zhao’s Albizia. Many visitors choose to sit in front of the big screens and take in the big picture, while this reviewer preferred roving the set and, to invert the adage, miss the forest for the trees.

After all, Albizia is an exercise in finding out what holds your attention. The more you linger, the more you see.

Its success is proved in the fact that one exits the theatre feeling like the concrete corridor pales in comparison with the vibrations and sensations Zhao has fabricated.

Zhao is set to continue exploring the status of the secondary forest from the vantage point of Singapore – a country where less than 0.2 per cent of its land is covered by primary forest – as he represents the nation at [the Venice Biennale in 2024](#).

In choreographing the secondary forest in its sensory totality, Albizia disputes the inferior ecological status of these new forests in a feat of documentary research transmuted into a mesmerising drama.

Book It/Albizia

Where: Esplanade Theatre Studio, 1 Esplanade Drive

When: Sept 1, 7.30pm; Sept 2 and 3; 1pm, 3pm, 5pm, 7.30pm and 9.30pm

Admission: \$38 or \$30 (concession)

Info: str.sg/i5ub