

# 3 #Millennials Read “Fight Club”. You Won’t Believe What Happens Next!



**By Akanksha Raja**

*(1200 words, 20-minute read)*

There are so many performance modes packed into the approximately 70 minutes of *FIGHT! PALAST #membersonly* – confessional monologue, workshops, live fighting, interactive sketches – that it is difficult to classify. Performance makers have been using this form of super-hybridity for a while now, but it still takes some getting used to, sitting in the stalls.

The work played with fiction and autobiography, heady irony and grounded honesty, character and caricature, the rehearsed and the improvised. The dichotomous lines between these is entirely obscured. Overwhelming as the experience felt at points, it is commendable how

deftly Swiss theatre company PENG! Palast's Nina Kohler, Christoph Keller and Dennis Schwabenland juggle various modes of performance.

The M1 Fringe Festival 2017 is the first time *FIGHT! PALAST #membersonly* is being performed in Asia, and in English. I had little idea what to expect walking into the Esplanade Theatre Studio; based on promotional material I had seen before the show, I had deduced that the subject matter would be some critique of the social-media-obsessed zeitgeist of the digital era (as indicated by the satirical overuse of hashtags and Internet-speak in the show's synopsis), and that this commentary would somehow be enacted through live boxing matches by the three performers.



Esplanade, Singapore 2017 Fight Palast 6.1.2017. Photo by: Jamie Chan for M1 Fringe Festival

Both these elements did unfold in the show, but they were enmeshed in a web of several other issues and theatrical elements, that – as enjoyable and entertaining as the show was to watch – felt too fast and too much to digest all at once. Perhaps this could be intentional, to represent a “parallel to our busy digital lives” as another review at [FiveLines.Asia](https://www.fivelines.com/asia/) suggests. If so, it

succeeded in that respect.

Essentially, *FIGHT!* is a version of Chuck Palahniuk's 1996 cult novel *Fight Club* updated to reflect modern Web 2.0 concerns. So Tyler Durden's statement that "The things you own, end up owning you," referring to consumerist culture, becomes, in a networked society, our possessive "ownership" of our online social media identities, which in turn, controls us. This idea is brought out in one particular scene where the three performers deliver a joint soliloquy on how our curated social media selves make us out to be pretend-celebrities. In other words, a performed version of ourselves, a second skin to hide our lonely ordinariness that is less "like"able, less remarkable.

Scenes like that transpose *Fight Club*'s main argument to today's context elegantly. Using that novel as point of departure to lead into contemporary issues works well. But a large part of the first half of the show was frequently punctuated by a repeated staccato retelling of the novel's plot – perhaps it served to bookmark different scenes, or segment the show somewhat, but it didn't really require multiple iterations to understand the intended allusion, and the discussion about our relationship with social media felt less developed. All the hashtags in the title and promotional material had me believing it would be *the* prevailing topic of discourse.



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In one of many instances of audience interaction, they each requested audience members to take pictures of the actors posing near-nude, and post them to PENG! Palast's social media accounts. On one level the interaction is a playful theatrical element, but it's also a blatant method of brand promotion that speaks of the prevalence of online self-marketing to establish an identity in a connected world. The line between commentary about self-promotion and actual self-promotion was erased, to the benefit of the company.

Their state of undress is also in reference to sexualised workplace environments, following Keller's personal recount (re-enacted by the other two) of working at a call centre, where he observes how crass sexual and sexist terms are used to describe engaging callers and making sales. Somehow by the end of the scene everyone is in nothing more than codpieces and a breastplate and we are in a strip club for a while. A line in *Fight Club* comparing furniture catalogues to pornography is recalled as someone mimics masturbation to an Ikea booklet. A vignette of porn ensues where the boys practice some particularly erotic squats and

lifts when someone's "wife" Kohler enters back home "from shopping, because after all, I'm the woman." She has bought an Ikea shelf that Schwabenland offers to fix up "because I'm the man."

Suddenly two audience members are roped in to install it instead, after which, 15 minutes later they are handed a mallet and asked to destroy a decent bookshelf. Recalling all the destruction of big brand names in *Fight Club*, this scene speaks about the meaninglessness of material possessions. But the point of this, Schwabenland emphasises, is that teamwork is more important than the end result of any endeavour. So all of this throws up a quick-fire barrage of ideas: of consumerism mirroring sexual impulse, the disposability of products, gender dynamics, the purpose of work.

A boxing match ensues, with Kohler emerging the winner. She recounts, in between the two rounds, how she would break down in tears "while rehearsing these scenes" under the pressure of fighting as a woman, feeling the need to beat the men in order to validate her ability.

For just a moment – at the word "rehearsing" – the audience is confused as to whether we are hearing Nina, or a performed version of Nina. Is her insecurity that of the actor in rehearsal, or the character in training or that of women within the patriarchy? I liked this bit best – Nina talking as human not performer, about performance – this specific performance, but also about inhabiting a woman's body, a woman's skin.



Esplanade, Singapore 2017 Fight Palast 6.1.2017. Photo by: Jamie Chan for M1 Fringe Festival

This is the most immediate link to the Fringe’s theme of “Art and Skin” I could find in this production – the actors continually remove and put on many different skins, whether in the form of physical clothing or performativity. But it’s Nina’s brief emotional strip-down in this scene that brought it home for me.

Michael Ng reviewing the show for [bakchormeeboy](#) suggested that at the heart of the show was a defiance against the conventions of performance – like convention is a skin that actors are expected to wear by critics and academics. But sticking to these expectations “blinds” us from “appreciating the perspectives and processes of an artist.”

*FIGHT!* punches back stridently at these assumptions. Maybe that’s why it felt difficult to digest. The Polish theatre critic and academic Roman Pawłowski, in a 2016 [essay](#) on the increasing trend of contemporary non-fiction theatre, articulates this theatrical experience quite accurately: “what counted instead was the awareness that we are sharing a space with real people. Their strength and spontaneity *dismantled the theatrical process*

*from within*, blurring the lines between theatre and reality ... [allowing] actors to exit their life roles and to see the self from a certain sort of sideline.”

If I felt the show was distracted, fragmentary, less than cohesive, maybe it's because the show reflects on contemporary living as such. If I felt my preconceived notions of performance disrupted, maybe it's because the show provokes us to examine the idea of performance itself – beyond the theatre. Of skin, and of confronting the many contradictions within our skin and within those around us.

## **Selected Reviews**

“M1 Fringe Festival 2017: *Fight! Palast #MembersOnly* by Peng! Palast” by Michael Ng ([bakchormeeboy](#))

“FIGHT! PALAST #membersonly” by Myle Yan Tay ([Centre 42](#))

“Fighting to Feel Alive” by Akshita Nanda ([The Straits Times](#))

FIGHT! Palast #membersonly – Review by [FiveLines](#)

*FIGHT! PALAST #membersonly* by PENG! Palast was staged on 6 and 7 January as part of the [M1 Singapore Fringe Festival](#) 2017 which ran from 4 to 15 January 2017.