

Blue Curtains Review: Single Asian Female

Superlative social politics

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A show with limited flaws is always difficult to review without resort to a thesaurus list of superlatives as alternative to just saying 'it's so good'. With "Single Asian Female", however, there is almost an immediate recognition not only of its greatness but of the reason for it. This debut play from Michelle Law is absolutely absorbing in its authenticity, making for a fresh, fantastic work, to which audiences should be flocking.



The story follows a family of Asian women as they navigate the intricacies of race associated with life in everytown Nambour. It begins with Pearl (Hsiao-Liang Tang), owner/manager of the The Golden Phoenix Chinese Restaurant, rejoicing in the finalisation of her divorce with delivery of a table-top karaoke 'I Will Survive' (who needs disco strobes when you can have flashing Chinese lantern lights?) Pearl is clearly a strong woman, as are her daughters Zoe (Alex Lee) and Mei (Courtney Stewart).



Classical musician Zoe, the eldest, resents having to move back to the Sunshine Coast after the loss of her Brisbane apartment, but is buoyed by a hook-up with Paul (Patrick Jhanur), a local immigration lawyer.



Mei, meanwhile, as an about-to-graduate secondary student is anxious to get away, especially from the mean girl pressure of her peers (embodied in Emily Vascotto's Lana). Sick of being seen regarded as a stereotype, she

struggles to reconcile her Chinese heritage and Australian upbringing, with empathetic support from her best friend Katie (Emily Burton).



It is a bold and punchy script that sees witty humour easily transition into poignancy as there is alluded-to revelation of the reasoning behind what has led Pearl to overhaul the restaurant, revel in charitable crusades and stop going to 'the university'. It is these layers that combine to create such an emotionally compelling and gripping production.



Although there is much intimacy as audiences glimpse into the women's lives, this is also a play about bigger concepts of culture, family and regard for others. As such, it is packed with political references and nuanced social commentary that contribute to, but never contrive the narrative. Indeed, although it centres around many difficult-to-dissect issues, it also conveys a real sense of fun within the social politics.



Although not 'in the round', the staging is wonderful in its creation of a rich aesthetic. The multi-level space of the back-of-restaurant's living area is functional but also detailed in its decoration, while the restaurant area is adorned with red and gold, lanterns and tables at which audience members can sit.



The most memorable aspect of the work, however, is the performances of the stellar cast. Hsiao-Liang Tang is perfect as Pearl, inhabiting the role with equal parts feisty sass, fierce strength and tragic torment.



And Alex Lee and Courtney Stewart are both attuned to their every relationship dynamic detail as siblings, as evidenced by their committed verbal taunting and seize of every opportunity for exasperated eye-roll.



The authenticity of their interactions is a joy to watch and contributes significantly to Act One's engagement. And by Act Two, it is clear exactly how much alike the Wong family women are in their assertiveness and resilience.



In support, Patrick Jhanur is a solid potential partner for the overly-anxious Zoe and Emily Vascotto, in her mainstage debut, shows great promise as the passively-aggressive Ms Popular, Lana. However, it is Emily Burton who steals every scene. There are few actresses who can play a teen as well (as "A Tribute of Sorts" showed), and as Mei's best friend, she is simply superb, not just in comic timing but in perfect emphasis and nuanced looks that can make even a Lazy Susan turn thing of hilarity.



Initially, the episodic narrative flies by, however, Act Two, drags a little with the inclusions of some superfluous and overly-length scenes. The opening night audience at its world premiere still responded with immediate standing ovation, so this can perhaps be forgiven.



While “Single Asian Female” is sure to have a long life in this country, audiences should see it as soon as possible before the specifics of its narrative are revealed, because there is nothing more rewarding than the anticipatory interval discussion and shared experience of realisation that really engaging theatre can bring. It is a brilliant new, challenging and exciting work that not only serves as an entertaining expose of the seemingly simple lives of others, but also a reminder that we really have no idea of what might be going on behind others’ closed doors. Like the smell of oil that lingers in the skin of those in the family living above The Golden Phoenix, it is a work that will stay with you in memory of its essential messages about family and resilience, as much for its laughter.



Photos c/o – Dylan Evans

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