

Stage Whispers - Single Asian Female Review



By Michelle Law. Director: Claire Christian. La Boite Theatre, Musk Avenue, Kelvin Grove. February 11 - March 4, 2017

Newby Queensland playwright Michelle Law has given us a comedy crackling with authentic Asian flavours as part of the BrisAsia Festival.

Single Asian Female follows restaurant-owner Pearl and her two daughters Mei and Zoe as they approach a crossroad in their lives.

The play is only five minutes old when Pauline Hanson's name is volleyed off the dark walls of La Boite's Roundhouse Theatre, but Law's play focuses less on politicking and more on social attitudes around race and gender equality.

The sisters wrestle with each other both physically and emotionally as they react to age-old prejudices. Mei is all for shedding her Asian ancestry to win social acceptance at school. Zoe is more thick-skinned, returning serve on the xenophobic opinions thrown at her left and right by so-called suitors.

Despite their separate dramas, both girls are orbiting the "strong woman" of the family, Pearl: immigrant, mother, permanent resident, restaurant-owner and fiercely proud Asian. Look at her daughters the wrong way and she's likely to find a more forensic application for her fine sewing skills.



But Pearl is struggling as a single mother and owner of the family's Golden Phoenix Restaurant on the Sunshine Coast and a crisis is building.

All three women are played with tremendous grit and determination by actors Hsiao-Ling Tang (Pearl), Courtney Stewart (Mei), and Alex Lee (Zoe).

Tang sings her way through the fourth wall to open the play and pull the audience in to her world. The effect is lasting and whether she's wearing a visor and faux fur slippers or shouting down her daughters in traditional dress, we are with her, laughing, crying and cringing.

Stewart loads her character with a ton of spunk yet manages to pull back to expose the vulnerable teen struggling to find her identity.

Lee could have played the angry older sister, pissed off with the world because of how she is treated as an Asian woman. There is anger, but also strength and reserve. By the end of the play, she's even channelling Tina Arena.

The supporting roles are superbly cast. It's hard to take your eyes off Emily Burton as Mei's firm friend Katie. Her physical presence as well as comic timing in the delivery of Law's razor-sharp dialogue: "She's not slut-shaming anyone" hooks you in. I'd love to see her in a one-woman show.



Patrick Jhanur has some of the most awkwardly natural moments in the play and he and Lee have found a great chemistry in their scenes together.

Emily Vascotto as high school "It" girl, Lana, mixes comedy and venom in almost equal doses to create a character we all love to hate.

Set and costume designer Moe Assaad's modular arrangement with a split level set putting bedrooms above the restaurant with little room for privacy or secrets, captures the close quarters of this comedy-drama, where the audience gets to join the family in bed, on the toilet, and a select group of 12 actually sit on set in the downstairs restaurant for the duration of the play.

The detail on set is fascinating and worth a closer look at interval. Pay particular attention to the family photos on the stairwell which are from the actors' own albums.

This is a new work of significant cultural value, it is a credit to director Claire Christian and La Boite Theatre and an inspiration to emerging playwrights around the country.

Debra Bela

Photographer: Dylan Evans

Source: <http://www.stagewhispers.com.au/reviews/single-asian-female>