

THE AUSTRALIAN

Michelle Law's play Single Asian Female has a universal appeal



Hsiao-Ling Tang as the hard-working Pearl in Single Asian Female. Picture: Dylan Evans

CAMERON PEGG THE AUSTRALIAN 12:00AM February 17, 2017

It doesn't take long for playwright Michelle Law to land a punch on Pauline Hanson in this world premiere about an Asian-Australian family that runs a Chinese restaurant in Nambour.

The joke lands effortlessly when delivered by Pearl (Hsiao-Ling Tang), the single mother who works seven days a week to ensure her kids will have a better life than her own.

Many audience members will recognise the patterned lino and red paper lanterns of the Golden Phoenix Restaurant. Law has taken this familiar space to test what a fair go means in modern Australia; to shake down the lifter and leaner debate into something meaningful and human. (Set designer Moe Assaad effectively displays the porous boundaries between work and home, complemented by Keith Clark's astute, understated projection work.)

The set-up seems straightforward. Australian-born Mei (Courtney Stewart) is endlessly embarrassed by her mother as her high school formal draws near. When older sister and aspiring musician Zoe (Alex Lee) returns to the family home unexpectedly, the stories of all three women begin to unravel.

Director Claire Christian deftly blocks the action from every angle, ensuring the dramatic focus is always where it needs to be. The scenes between Zoe and Paul (Patrick Jhanur) are masterclasses in how to stage awkward first dates and sexual experiences.

The production is exceptionally cast, with the three leads finding winning, real characters who explore personal yet intersecting paths. Emily Burton steals scene after scene as Mei's kooky and loyal friend Katie, a foil for the nastiness of schoolyard queen bee Lana (Emily Vascotto). Burton and Vascotto moonlight with cameos in the second act, playing these with abandon.

Seven months ago, *Single Asian Female* was staged as a 60-minute reading of an untested playwright. With support from La Boite and its partners, Law has been given room to grow the story, and she has done so generously.

Some transitions are rushed, and the second act meanders as the writer tests storylines and stylistic approaches, but the truth and tenacity of her characters quickly win us over.

Sound design by Wil Hughes supports it all with a flourish.

Single Asian Female may suggest it is a certain kind of play for a certain kind of audience, but its story embraces us all. It is a work that any Australian theatre company would be proud to produce.

Single Asian Female. La Boite. Roundhouse Theatre, Brisbane, February 15. Tickets: \$30-\$60. Bookings: 136 246 or online. Duration: 140min including interval. Until March 4.



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