

Single Asian Female (Belvoir)

Michelle Law's incisive debut play will have you in stitches then tears.

by *Justine Nguyen* on February 19, 2018

“Even if you are the dirt under a shoe and people call you ‘Ching Chong’ and do the slit-eye thing, they will still smile, eat your food, yummy yummy, get fat, hopefully have a heart attack sooner than later. They go to Bali for their holidays to buy cheap clothes and drink too much and have sex with young girls and boys. And then they come back with a Buddha statue, plop it on their lawn and vote for Pauline Hanson.” So says Pearl, fierce matriarch of the Wong family, wearing a *cheongsam* and perched atop a table in her restaurant, *The Golden Phoenix*. My friend and I clutched each other in frantic agreement, laughing and fired up all at once.

First seen at the Roundhouse Theatre in Brisbane early last year, Michelle Law's *Single Asian Female* comes to Belvoir preceded by huge expectations, and I'm happy to say that it more than satisfies them. Smartly directed by Claire Christian and with clever sets and costumes by Moe Assaad (shout out to Pearl's flesh-coloured socks!), this is a piece of theatre where seemingly all creative forces converge to carefully explore how Asian women love, anguish, fight, and simply get on in white Australia.

We begin with Pearl, and it is Pearl – played beautifully by Hsiao-Ling Tang – who takes us from laughter to tears in the space of a moment. In her 50s, she's a recently divorced Chinese migrant with two Australian-born daughters, Zoe and Mei. Pearl's attempts to understand their particular trials and tribulations, as well as her confusion and hurt when her expressions of love are so casually rebuffed, ring painfully true.

Law's script and Christian's direction ensure that when Pearl presents Mei with a *cheongsam* to wear at her formal, it hits all the right notes without feeling emotionally manipulative. When the *cheongsam* – given to Pearl by her mother and worn on her wedding day – is rejected out of hand by Mei, we feel, as Pearl does, the crushing weight of her dismissal. A short scene in which Pearl carefully runs her hands across it for loose threads is heartrending. In the dimly lit, cramped bedroom, Tang demonstrates the love and attention migrants often lavish on keepsakes from home.

We meet Mei, 17 years old and desperate to fit in at school, as she purges her room of any object that might give away her Asian-ness, a list that includes a blouse for Chinese school, jelly shoes, Hello Kitty pyjamas and a puffy vest. With Law's knack for incisive characterisation and Courtney Stewart's committed performance, the audience understands that while Mei's brattiness can be chalked up to teenage narcissism, it also has its roots in an anxiety about who she is and how she can escape social punishment for her racial and cultural difference. She gets to deliver some corkers, such as when she laments how her nose “can't even hold up my glasses properly!” – another moment where my friend and I grabbed at each other in gleeful recognition.

Mei's relationship with Katie, played with brilliant comic timing by Emily Burton, is richly realised. Though a supportive friend, Katie is unable to fully grasp Mei's anxieties about her place in the world. She also allows for an exploration of how even the most well-meaning

individual can commodify and appropriate other cultures in a way that is uncomfortable, if not downright harmful. When Mei, in an attempt to cosy up to mean girl Lana, accuses Katie of being a “wannabe Asian”, we understand that while it’s a convenient insult, it also speaks to a heretofore unexpressed frustration shared by many.

Mei’s relationship with older sister Zoe is equally rich – the peacemaker in the Wong home, she’s nevertheless riddled with her own anxieties. Alex Lee gives a deeply satisfying performance here, equally convincing as squabbling sibling, level-headed eldest child, and awkward single woman frustrated by what’s on offer. The spectacular scene in which she’s confronted with a series of lousy, offensive suitors (hysterically portrayed by Emily Burton and Lucy Heffernan) cuts to the bone in its accuracy.

Though Patrick Jhanur isn’t given too much to do as Zoe’s potential love interest Paul (this story is about the Wongs, after all), his sincerity and lightness of touch is winning. Lucy Heffernan’s Lana is overplayed at times – she could afford to tone it down a bit to gesture more effectively to the queen bee’s troubled home life – but her judgemental Claudia is spot on.

Single Asian Female soars highest when mother and children are in one room, however, their exchanges loaded with history and a shifting, hard-won intimacy. The febrile, destructive argument at the play’s climax is blocked by somebody who clearly knows what real arguments look like – jumping from topic to topic, tension is dissolved in an instant only to be reignited by an errant, unthinking comment. All three principals are superb here, but none more so than Tang, who is devastating in her pain and rage. While I have reservations about the amount of plotting that gets us to this point, and it may be simply too soapy for some, the raw, emotional honesty that emerges is ultimately worth it.

It’s been difficult to avoid simply reproducing Law’s script verbatim in this review, so chock-full of insight and great lines that it more than speaks for itself. This is a production crafted with intense care, wringing pathos and authenticity from the smallest of details – see how each woman takes off their shoes at the threshold of their home, a part of everyday life that we see enacted again and again. But it’s also a celebration of Asian identity and of female friendship, as well as the fraught, complex relationship between migrant mother and second generation daughter.

So, to my single Asian women – this play is for us. Beg, borrow or steal to catch it while you can. And then go hug your mum.
