

Sweet and sour comedy/drama is a little revolution

SINGLE ASIAN FEMALE

Belvoir St, February 17, until March 25

★★★★

We've all dined somewhere like the Golden Phoenix: the suburban Chinese restaurant that doesn't look promising, yet serves surprisingly good food.

What we're not used to seeing is the Golden Phoenix depicted on our stages, which have been the domains of European – mostly Anglo – culture almost exclusively. Michelle Law's debut play sets about changing that.

In this regard it is part of a small, bloodless revolution, because role models beget followers, so a well-crafted play about three Chinese-Australian women will spawn more (female) Asian-Australian actors, playwrights and audiences, while spreading a little insight, understanding, empathy and laughter among non-Asian theatregoers.

The Golden Phoenix embodies the willpower, pride and relentless hard work of its owner, Pearl, a woman of 50 who, while running it, has raised two daughters and fought off the emotional and financial sabotage of her now-divorced husband.

Clinging to customs and values that her younger daughter, Mei, finds embarrassing, Pearl could so easily have been a caricature of the migrant in the new land. Law, however, has been too clever for her play to fall into the trap of examining "issues", keeping it about the interplay of the personal.

Even when Australian immigration laws enter the fray she sidesteps what must have been a massive temptation to indulge in overt politicisation.

In Pearl she has created a winning character. We can laugh at her spoonerisms and penchant for karaoke, sympathise as she deals with the trials hurled at her by life and her daughters, forgive her narrowness and marvel at her generosity of spirit.

But for the play to really work Pearl had to be played by someone who could make her both feisty and warm, and Hasiao-Ling Tang pulls this off superbly. She is one of those actors whose presence commands a stage, and the play waxes and wanes to some degree according to whether Tang is on or off.

Pearl's elder daughter, Zoe, is trying to carve a career as a classical violinist while working as a barista, and is also trying to carve a love life out of the male rabble that haunts dating sites in Brisbane and the Sunshine Coast. Alex Lee strikes a fine balance between imbuing Zoe with the worldly assuredness of the big sister, and retaining a flower-like fragility.

The younger sister, Mei, still in high school, would like to remove her Chinese ancestry as she might some dorky fashion from a hideous past. She is still brattish and could easily

become an irritant had Law not given her a keen sense of humour and Courtney Stewart not contributed 50 nuanced shades of frustration.

Shining out among the rest is Emily Burton as Katie, Mei's funny, super-bright friend (who can even turn her hand to rapping), while Lucy Heffernan can be a little too arch as the snobbish Lana, and Patrick Jhanur struggles to make much of the under-written Paul.

Directed by Claire Christian (originally for La Boite), with a flexible set by Moe Assad, the play is a sweet-and-sour blend of comedy and drama. Law sails disconcertingly close to the headwind of soap opera as she tries to raise the dramatic stakes, and only full steers clear when she raises those stakes still higher.

But her gift for comedy keeps us on board, and such flaws are unsurprising in a first play. More importantly she has extended the vocabulary of Australian drama in what is an entertaining and sometimes moving piece, and done it without resort to didacticism.

Sydney Morning Herald review by John Shand, 19 February 2018

John Shand has written about music and theatre since 1981 in more than 30 publications, including for *Fairfax Media* since 1993. He is also a playwright, author, poet, librettist, drummer and winner of the 2017 Walkley Arts Journalism Award.