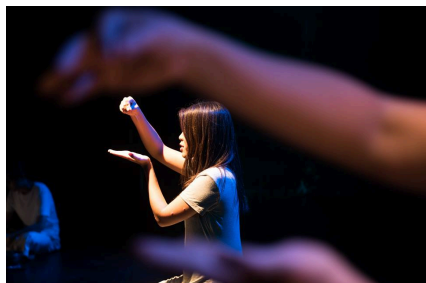


BWW Review: SMOKING WIT GRANDMA

ADELAIDE FRINGE 2018 at Bakehouse Theatre

Reviewed by Petra Schulenburg, Tuesday 27th February 2018.



"We think that caged birds sing, when indeed they cry." **Smoking with Grandma** mesmerises and transports its audience to another place and time through the use of storytelling, through physical performance and dance, projected images, and a powerful soundscape, composed and designed by Coelacanth.

The play explores the plight of the refugee through the relationship of a young woman and her grandmother, played with moving yet simple honesty by Katherine Leung and Angel SY Chan.

The script is powerful in its minimalism and silences and yet conveys volumes. Performed on a bare set of 2 chairs and one hanging light globe, the audience travels with the performers across the landscape of the story as it unfolds, creating intimate space when it is required, as well as cities, harbours, and ballet dance studios.

As the title suggests, the motif throughout is smoke and smoking as an act of placing oneself in the world, while at the same time contemplating how temporary and insubstantial it is, a chimaera. As the Grandmother says, "When you smoke you are no longer alone.... I watch and wonder where the smoke goes.....suddenly I am a part of the world around me."

The ongoing Syrian refugee crisis inspired writer and director, Cathy SK Lam, to consider the plight of refugees in general, not in terms of a political situation but, rather, in the light of the individual's life. Smoking with Grandma reminds us that a refugee's story is a human story, that every man, woman, and child had their own before their lives were torn apart by war, and that each one holds precious their dreams for a new life, and a better future for themselves and their families.

The refugees in Smoking with Grandma were people left behind by the Nationalist Party, also known as the Kuomintang. Many of them were government officials, military commanders, and intellectuals, who were forced to flee to Hong Kong for shelter, waiting for their government to bring them to Taiwan but, for most of them, the wait was a life time. They ended up spending the rest of their lives in a refugee camp in an area called Tiu Keng Leng.

Smoking with Grandma is presented for the 2018 Adelaide Fringe at the Bakehouse Theatre by Hong Kong company, ThreeWoods Playwright, whose mission statement is to "keep uncovering and reflecting issues in society through their plays". To quote director, Cathy SK Lam, "Art is still the most essential way to touch people's heart... you get to know the life that you are not familiar with through research and you learn the most beautiful thing in humanity. It makes you a better person and opens your mind to things that you are not used to."

The resonance from this play for me is the resilience of the human spirit, the intrinsic hope and optimism that underlies the life of each character. Yes, there is longing for a life left behind as well as regret but there is also great love and joy, and hope for the future.