

The End of History

Old world meets new, and loses

Producing a new play has to land high on a theater's risk list. The UO theater department's Second Stage production makes that leap with *Lotus Lessons*, a piece that combines the tale of an adopted girl with the history of Chinese women in the U.S. — and more.

The play comes from a projected future. Arcata playwright Wendy Williams, who adopted a daughter from China, explained at a talkback session on May 23 that she wondered what a Chinese girl adopted by a white mom might experience as a teenager. The resulting script, which took years of research into the history of China — from literary symbolism to foot-binding to opera — incorporates the weight of that past into the mixed world of the adopted girl.

The part of the girl, Emma, was originally given to Shizuka Moon. Health issues caused her to leave the show a mere week before opening, and Katy Pelissier, who had been cast in the show as a dancer, stepped in. The director wrote me to say that "[Katy] memorized the lines in four days and now has completely made the role her own."

That's challenging because Pelissier doesn't appear Asian or Asian American. When Emma looks at herself in the mirror and wonders about the shape of her eyelids or her skin color, there's some awkwardness,

Fogarty camps it up marvelously as an eeeeeevil drag queen.

also present in Emma's too-constant, tedious whining. But Williams' play mixes "reality" with the supernatural to reveal deeper truths. Young, angry, Doc Marten-booted Emma interacts with the ghost of Afong Moy (Dian Du), the first recorded Chinese woman to live in the U.S.

In the play, Moy — whom, in real life, P.T. Barnum exhibited in the mid-1830s in his American Museum — owes a debt to the White Ghost (Martin Fogarty). The



Afong Moy (Dian Du) and a dancer (Yokko)

plot revolves around Moy's attempts to turn Emma into a good Chinese girl so that the Ghost can take her for his own nefarious (and nebulous) purposes. Fogarty, clad in a spectacular costume designed by UO theater prof and Chinese opera expert Sandy Bonds, camps it up marvelously as an eeeeeevil drag queen in the mode of the most stylized divas. The Ghost's power, though hidden beneath the robes of a woman, comes from a world of patriarchal control: He deals harshly with women who need his help, seducing them with promises and then taking, taking and taking more. Like Moy and two dancer/servants (Megan Joy and Yokko), the women remain his slaves.

But Emma, who so longs to see her birth mother that she trades Happy Meals to hungry ghost Moy for instruction, doesn't live in the China that forced its noblewomen to bind their feet. She doesn't live in the U.S. that would put on display a real woman like Moy (played with surprising skill by first-time actor Du, also resplendent in a design by Bonds). Emma exists in the world of Powerpuff Girls and Buffy, of the Rock 'n' Roll Camp for Girls — though the way she got here might be through the sacrifices of many other women.

A script that reads well doesn't always mean a smooth production, which is definitely the case here, but it's good that the UO takes risks like *Lotus Lessons*. This final show in Arena Theater lends itself to a striking scene design by undergrad Nilcea Marques. And, like the Lord Leebrick's winter production *Memory House*, this play provides a glimpse into the world of international adoption — what trade-offs it brings to the (mostly) girls who are forced to exchange their countries and their heritage for the troubles of life in the U.S. **EW**

Lotus Lessons continues May 29-31 at the UO's Arena Theatre. Tix at 346-4363 & the door. Speaking of taking risks, the UO will open a new theater and a revamped Robinson Theatre next season. Check out blogs.eugeneweekly.com for a glimpse into the new building!

Opening Nights

The Memory of Water

Opens at the Very Little Theater Friday, May 30.

Funerals do bring out the best in siblings, don't they? English playwright Shelagh Stephenson explores the tragicomedy inherent in the forced reunion of three sisters during the two days leading up to their mother's funeral. Won a big Brit award for Best New Comedy in 1996, so apparently there's a lot of laughter and Important Realizations about Life. Good to see a play in town that features women — and what the heck, throw in some forgiveness and life affirmation, and you have a potential blockbuster on your hands. Show dates are May 30 & 31, June 1, 6-8, 12-15 & 19-21. Tix at 344-7751.



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