

Monologues Reviews

Vibewire Review

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05 May 05

***Monologues* is a series of theatrical vignettes presented through a mix of movement, dance, comedy and tragedy, which explores some of the various socio-economic roles played by Asian women. These include the roles of wife, mother, daughter and sex worker.**

Milking Madam Butterfly (Yet Again), performed by Shireen Morris, calls into question the role of opera heroines. Using a Brechtian style of theatre, the dramatisation of the role includes a mix n' match of Madame Butterfly, a talk show host and an actor-playing-Madame Butterfly-becoming-impassioned-narrator.

In *Virgin Sale*, Shireen Morris, Kaori Hamamoto and Janette Hoe inhabit the characters of three prostitutes. **The story is a potent exploration of young girls who are sold into prostitution by their parents. The scripting is compelling and gives shape to the heartbreaking lives of these prostitutes.**

I found the subject matter of *Woman on Top* fascinating, particularly when compared to the content of the other *Monologues* performances. Kathleen Baguio who plays the Prime Minister's wife, resplendent in an eye-catching emerald dress, gives a remarkable performance. Baguio embodies her character believably, and leaves her audience wondering just how many Prime Minister's wives sacrifice sex and love for power.

S.S.S. – Retired Prostitute, in contrast to *Woman on Top*, is a vignette about another type of woman in power. Janette Hoe plays a retired prostitute, who by the age of 17 had slept with 2,000 men. In theatrical white, symbolising age and wisdom, the retired prostitute offers insights into the characteristics men look for in Asian women – 'S.S.S.' or 'Small, Sexy, Subservient'. Hoe gives a graceful and sumptuous performance of this retired prostitute, now in control of her life.

Arrivederci Tokyo offers a hilarious tale of an Italian woman married to a Japanese man. Cultural differences are played out symbolically through food. The Italian wife bemoans the blandness of Japanese food – steamed not fried - and the over-proliferation of soy sauce. Diana Stathis, as the Italian wife, gives a raw and sensual performance and a comic highlight to the overall production.

Not unlike *Arrivederci Tokyo*, *Prisoner of Soy Sauce*, offers another take on cultural difference and food. This time, it is the 'wisdom of Asia in Japanese food'. Miki Oikawa masterfully commands the roles of both the Japanese housewife and the Australian husband. As the hysterical Japanese housewife, she leaves us in no doubt as to who the real master of the house is – she is no 'docile oriental woman'. As the prejudicial Australian husband, we are provided with an insight into the origins of his opinions - his grandfather during the war believed that all gooks were savages and uncivilised. **While the husband's ultimate change in character is somewhat unconvincing, the comic ending is priceless, as the Japanese housewife succeeds in turning her husband into a 'docile western man' – a prisoner of soy sauce.**

The Dowry is the tragic tale of an arranged marriage in India, performed by Mandy Sebasio-Ong, Shireen Morris and Daniela Lucchetti. The story is of an Indian woman bound by tradition to her parents, her husband and her husband's family. The story sketches the poignant and cruel fate of a woman at the mercy of her abusive husband. Though it is powerful, I felt that some parts of the dramatisation and characterisation of the roles were lacking in comparison to the other vignettes in *Monologues*.

Japanese Medea is the story of a Japanese woman and her husband, who are sent to San Francisco to work. The story is one of a highly educated woman who, in a loveless marriage, has borne two children from 'two impersonal humpings'. Her isolation from her husband and loneliness in San Francisco, results in 'madness', and imports tragic consequences. Miki Oikawa as the Japanese Medea gives a riveting performance filled with pathos, which is sustained throughout.

As a young Asian woman, I am constantly looking for representations that speak to me. In *Monologues*, I was drawn into the stories of these women. As writer/director, Asa Gim Palomera says in her introduction before the performance, the issues explored are not only Asian women's issues, they are universally relevant insights that translate across genders and cultures.

***The Good:* Brilliant scripting, powerful stories, beautiful costumes and some unforgettable performances.**

***The Bad:* Some of the performances and characterisations border on caricatures.**

***The Vibe:* An important piece of theatre that offers powerful stories drawn from research undertaken by the writer/director, in collaboration with UNESCO and UNICEF.**

The Age

Helen Thomson

May 2nd 2005.

This production by the Women of Asia Company has a long collaborative history. The eight female performers together represent a kaleidoscope of Asian female experience, their own racial origins as varied as the material they present.

There is an interesting contrast between the liberated performers themselves and the female predicaments they depict in their monologues. There are moments when it seems as though Asian women, stereotyped as "small, sexy and subservient", are hopelessly trapped in social practices that make pitiful victims of them.

But some of the characters on stage find they can exercise power in even the most subservient of roles. The prime minister's wife, for example, although privately ignored and long since sexually replaced, discovers that her public role as the exemplary support of the leader of an emerging country can actually reverse the power relationship with her husband.

No such luck for some of the other women, however. The two Japanese children sold into prostitution by their parents, in *Virgin Sale* justifiably claim "the stilts of our

parent's house are borne of our bones". The retired prostitute in a later monologue has an illusion of power that is soon tragically exploded.

Equally heart-rending is *The Dowry*, a story of an Indian arranged marriage suffered by the young wife at the hands of her mother-in-law. This monologue, and the two about prostitution, highlight one of the show's most significant themes. This is the part played by other women in the enslavement of girls, often to brutal male sexual fantasies.

It is not all grim, however. There is one funny episode of a multi-racial culinary clash: *Arrivederci Tokyo*. Told by the Italian wife of a Japanese man, it describes her frustration at facing what seems to her a starvation diet of fish and rice. The same kind of struggle goes on between a Japanese wife and her Australian husband in *Prisoner of Soy Sauce*, but here the feisty woman is clearly winning the battle.

The show ends with *Japanese Medea*, a tragic tale of the sacrifice of two children and the failure of a loveless arranged marriage.

This is altogether engaging, beautifully performed and thought-provoking work.