

Prodigal Daughter Reviews

The Age

November 2005

Author of *Monologues* and *A Walk Through the Life of Shakespeare and Cervantes* - both of which had successful seasons this year - Asa Palomera has become something of a powerhouse on Melbourne's independent theatre scene.

In her latest play, *Prodigal Daughter*, **Palomera exhibits the qualities that make her a playwright to watch - a deft evocation of character, a formidable command of dramatic structure, and a willingness to broach disturbing subject matter.**

Set in South Korea, the play begins with Mina (Mandi Sebasio-Ong) returning to visit her family after a lifetime in America. Amid mordant exchanges with her mother (Felicity Steel) and younger sister (Kaori Hamamoto) over their cultural differences, Mina is uncomfortably re-introduced to Korean tradition.

But when the family crosses the path of an ageing general (David Dawkins), they must confront the terrible secret that led to Mina being sent abroad as a girl

The performances vary. As the mother, **Felicity Steel is a revelation.** Bent double by decades of guilt and suffering, you can feel the arthritis in her soul. Sebasio-Ong as Mina starts shakily, but rallies to master the dramatic challenges of the part.

And as the snaky sister, Kaori Hamamoto ensures much-needed comic respite.

At its best, the production provides some striking theatrical moments. **The uneasy rapport between the three women who make up this dysfunctional family is brilliantly captured;** the violent past that stalks them breaks onto the stage in a denouement of furious intensity.

It's also visually exciting. Daryl Cordell's set design is a model of versatility and elegance - with a few tweaks it evokes everything from a funeral bier to a Korean public bath. It is complemented by atmospheric lighting and wonderful traditional Korean costumes.

This production is a jewel.

The Times

Robert Dawson Scott

*** (three stars)

It may sound a fool's errand to seek anything in common between the 2000 shows on the now bloated Fringe. And yet, every year, common themes emerge. Last year it was the war with Iraq; this year, theatre makers seem more concerned with displacement, migration and home.

Asa Gim Palomera's play *Prodigal Daughter* was first seen in Australia last year. It concerns a young woman sent away from her home in South Korea to the U.S. At the age of 8.

When she tried to return home, on the death of her father, she is rejected by her mother and treated with suspicion by her sister and by family friends.

Palomera, who also directs for her Asian women company, is a Korean-American herself. In addition, as the wife of a Spanish diplomat, she has to put up with the rootlessness of changing postings every three years.

Her play has an uneasy mixture of styles. It is at its most effective when it is at its most Korean. When the family visits the father's grave and the returning sister does not know how to behave, we who know nothing of Korea feel similarly disorientated by the unfamiliar ritual, even by the headgear.

However, in hinting at the reasons why the young girl was sent away, a plot involving a paedophile US general and a mother who was not Korean but one of the hated (in Korea) Japanese, Palomera perhaps overloads her play. The usual inimical Fringe surroundings do not help, but a strong central performance by Amanda Sebasio-Ong as the titular daughter does a long way towards redeeming matters.

South Korea is in Edinburgh in force with any number of martial arts and gymnastic shows posing as theatre, all clearly heavily supported by its Government.

Palomera's Play would not win the Korean Government's approval, but it is here too, a fair reflection of the Fringe's potential.

Three Weeks

**** (four stars)

As *Prodigal Daughter* moves from light hearted humour to political commentary, **it becomes clear that its characters are simply glossing over gaping fissures in a jovial facade.**

Set against the backdrop of the Korean War, the eventual implosion of the toothpaste-advert smiles and the fake rituals of grief point to not only the unstitching of a carefully managed status quo, but also to the comfort found within tradition. The sinister reality is thus unveiled.

Although slightly gratuitous, nudity is a concise metaphor of truth. It is the protagonist, Mina, who must be the unfortunate found of flesh in what is **a mesmerising tale of long harboured secrets** that aimed, and failed, to preserve the greater good.

one4review

**** (four stars)

After thirty years of living in the USA Mina, Mandi Sebasio-Ong , returns to the land of her birth, Korea, but why are things so strained in the family home. Her mother, Felicity Steel, and younger sister Teresa Koari Hananoto, are not very welcoming and it seems nose neighbour Mrs Kang, Elizabeth Semmel was unaware of her existence.

On a outing the mother and daughters have a chance encounter with an American General, David Dawkins, and his aide, Brook Sykes, and the encounter of mother and General indicate that there is a history between them. But what?

A visit to Mina's father's grave together with other family members shed little light, but **as the play progresses the terrible secrets of time long gone are gradually revealed** and some of the situations are made clearer.

This is a compelling play, with good acting, sound direction and a versatile set, a performance that was over all too soon for me and would enhance one's early afternoon viewing.

Broadway Baby

Pete Shaw

**** (four stars)

Writer and director Asa Gim Palomera creates fascinating theatre in her play, The Prodigal Daughter, which runs at C until the end of the Festival on Monday. A story crossing both the Korean War and WWII probes into some uncomfortable areas of paedophilia, cultural stigmatism and abuse of power.

The show opens as Mina (Mandi Sebasio-Ong), a Korean who has lived in the US for more than 30 years returns to the country of her birth for her father's funeral. She is alienated by her family, which at first we assume to have something to do with her Americanised values, but through a series of revelations and flashbacks, we discover a more sinister reason for her treatment. In an attempt to see her family through the Korean War, Mina's mother (Felicity Steel), allows her six-year old child to be abused by an American General (David Dawkins). Nina's mother, having lived with the guilt for decades, appears to blame her own daughter, and the interfering traditionalist Mrs Klang (Elizabeth Semmel) is a constant reminder of her shortcomings. **It's about honour, it's about shame, and it has some powerful things to say about the United States as a "liberator"**.

But what makes this piece really special is the stylised way Asa Gim Palomera paints the story. There's a precisely choreographed fluid motion, even in blackout as the set changes. It's a discipline I've not seen before, and beautiful to watch. Abandoning the constraints of naturalistic delivery, we occasionally get flashes of movement and chanting that break the conventions of modern theatre. It is also almost cinematic in quality, with sharply delineated scenes. It's also worth noting the strikingly atmospheric lighting design, which complements the simple, but effective, set perfectly.

If I had any criticism, then it is only that perhaps some of the unnecessary story arcs could be trimmed to help the audience concentrate on the central themes. For instance, we probably don't need to know the Lieutenant (Brook Sykes) has a liking for young boys or his attempts to blackmail the General. These are red herrings, which muddy an otherwise strong narrative.