



Spike Wong's powerful 'White Sky, Falling Dragon' plays at Santa Cruz Actors' Theater

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Family drama and historical trauma combine to poignant effect in the latest offering at the tiny theater tucked away inside the Santa Cruz Arts Center. What a show! Actors' Theater and Soaring Dragon Endeavors have teamed up to present the people of Santa Cruz with a potent dramatic blend infused with emotion and cultural interest. Spike Wong acts alongside a talented cast in "White Sky, Falling Dragon" to bring his genealogical script to the stage. In this telling of his family descent, Wong portrays his grandparents and parents in a period of their lives and world history when things were uncertain and tragedy was falling from the sky.

In portraying a Chinese American experience of World War II, Wong gives us a glimpse into a part of California history that is poorly underrepresented. There's nothing preachy about this play, however. It is a formidable work of art about brothers, lovers, family secrets, and California dreams. The story is gripping, the relationships are compelling, and the discoveries we make as the play unfolds lead to a tremendous experience of catharsis. We start the play confronted with strangers and by the end they become like family, the way great art can convince us that, although the storyline may be fictional, we have come to know something true.

To evoke this artistic feeling, the play begins with a musical performance. One musician plays a cello, one plays a viola, and another one plays Taiko drums. This fusion of western instruments with Chinese rhythm creates a tone that is both orchestral and symbolic. The play is about the intermeshing of cultures, and the seriousness of the music matches the content of the narrative. It also mirrors the language of the play, which is spoken in both Californian English and Mandarin. This dialogic diversity is valuable in and of itself. The audience is invited as guests into a family's home rich with food, poetry and love.

There are many things to learn from this play, but possibly the most important is in the dialogue between Ma and her veteran son Ernie. Ernie has returned home from the war haunted by ghosts and grief over what he has done and what he couldn't do. He

feels changed by his experiences and struggles to adapt to civilian life. Among his few comforts are his mother's cooking and her words. She refuses to allow him to drift into despair and instead pulls him back into himself through gardening and storytelling. This portrait of maternal love is a gift that shows us how it is possible to heal from even the most horrific emotional pain.



Wong has created a reverent portrait of his relatives, and the cast delivers a stunning performance to do it justice. Spike Wong plays Pop, the fictional version of his grandfather, and his stoic reserve is played with great restraint. Winston Wang is charming and vulnerable as young Ernie, vacillating between a vigorous swagger and crippling self doubt. Cynthia Dear embodies maternal energy as Ma, and cuts to the quick in the climactic scenes with her son. Yin Yin Liow wows with romantic openness that draws the audience into her hopes and fears. Tristin Ahn plays a funny and lovable cousin Eddie that helps to ease the tension. Ian Dwyer has a memorable role in one of Ernie's flashbacks as an airfield crewman who sees the shattered bombardier at their rawest moment.

As a dramatic depiction of a Chinese American family, there are cultural differences and areas of overlap in this play that celebrate and critique California. We live in a place on the Pacific Rim that has a tremendous wealth of culture, and the basketball playing cousins Ernie and Eddie alongside the traditional values of Ma and Pop give us one portrait of a time that matters from distinct points of view. As the younger generation strives to find ways to adapt and to thrive in mainstream California culture, the older generation work to preserve their traditions and values. California and the US are a place of opportunity, but one that comes with painful sacrifices. Whether it is drinking coffee or Chinese tea, it is their strong familial bonds that hold together this California family in loving communion.

You can see the Santa Cruz County Actors' Theatre's "White Sky, Falling Dragon" at the Santa Cruz Art Center, 1001 Center St., Santa Cruz, through May 5. Go to santacruzactorstheatre.org for tickets and information.