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Shit Asian Moms Say: The Touching, Hilarious Musical *Legacy of the Tiger Mother*

Posted By Neha Talreja on Thu, Sep 13, 2012 at 12:05 PM



Two-woman musical *Legacy of the Tiger Mother* doesn't deal with the most original themes (motherhood, Asian-American stereotypes, a little bit of Mao thrown in a back story) in its delightful one-piano, two-voice production, but I'll be damned if I wasn't choking down a few smiling tears with the best of em' by the end --maybe its my own biological clock kicking in, maybe I'm a sucker for sentiment, maybe I just really miss my mom.

Angela Chan and Michael Manley's plot centers around the classical piano, considered by many Chinese as an avenue through which to teach a sense of discipline and competitive success from a young age.

It's a culture known to strive for perfection in every arena, and both grandmother and mother expect no less. Lily, a first generation Chinese immigrant waltzes into his daughter Mei's home with unavoidable authority, as mothers usually do, to help Mei's daughter Kim prepare for her piano recital. After the two cause a scene at Kim's recital over different parenting styles, we're taken back to Mei's childhood at the hands of Lily's parenting and we see a sort of predictable back story play out: Lily escaped a childhood of labor and injustice in Communist China to come to America to run a dry cleaning shop and make sure her daughter takes advantage of every opportunity she has successfully. Well-meaning immigrant parenting clashes with growing up in an '80s America of Ferris Buellers and Molly Ringwalds, and we see where Lily's strict expectations of perfection and Mei's isolating experiences shape Mei's own legacy as Kim's mother.

And it all works because the execution feels near-perfect (and especially put together for the **Fringe environment**). The dialogue and lyrics are quick and tight; they move right along with precise comedic timing and bow out on time to make room for more touching dramatic numbers. Satomi Hofmann gives a great performance as the grandmother, Lily. Her Chinese accent stays comically consistent, even through the musical numbers. As far as an appropriate play on stereotypes, moments of dialogue are tainted by a little bit of excess (The addition of "Confucius say" as a source of comic relief, for example), but these moments are few and far between. The stand-out number "Lazy White Children" (below) works far better -- even if the on-point lyrics fail to get you giggling, the hilarious choreography will. The show's requisite "fish out of water" anthem "Miss 1986," in which Mei, played by Lynn Craig, laments her traditional upbringing in a world of Barbie dolls and dream houses, is a little bit more lyrically scatter-brained but beautifully performed and sweet all the same. Writer Angela Chan on piano deserves a note -- the play never calls for complicated music, but the obvious theatricality in the piano parts (for the actual musical numbers, as scene-appropriate sound, and sometimes badly played as appropriate to the scene), characterized the piano and the player, breaking a kind of fourth wall and adding more dimension. Ultimately, the piece finds success in simply focusing on the legacy of motherhood itself, that simultaneous frustration and appreciation when you realize you're being just like your mother, for better or for worse. For instance, my mother will violently rummage through her purse as all the contents fly out in public, and the other day I realized I'd been cursed with the same habit that used to make me scream "Mooomm!!" Mei nags Kim as Lily nagged Mei. But it's just that all-too-familiar insistence that mother knows best that gave the play poignancy, and prevented it from becoming "Shit Asian Moms Say." *Legacy of the Tiger Mother* plays again on September 15th at 7:30 p.m. at **Exit Theater**, 156 Eddy (at Taylor). Admission is \$15.