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'Caught' in an intriguing labyrinth

by Howard Shapiro

Is there such a thing as being close to the truth, or is that the definition of a lie? Well, it is not a matter of truth or fiction, but ... Yikes! Wait! I am talking here like one of the characters in Christopher Chen's nimble, intentionally baffling and altogether delicious new play "Caught."

You never know what the truth is in his theatrical *trompe l'oeil*, and you're even confused about who is who: At what point are you seeing the play, and when are you seeing the actors playing themselves? Or maybe playing actors.

Chen's play – the first world premiere from InterAct Theatre Company in an entire season of them – is a hands-down winner. Plus, in the production directed by Rick Shiomi, "Caught" is getting an interpretation and austere look (Bill Ng's visual design and Melpomene Katakalos' scenery) that heightens the mystery. It's a three-part treat that runs only about 90 minutes, set in a gallery that's also a lecture spot, then a New Yorker magazine office, a stage for a public interview session, and the green room just off a performance space.

In all these places, what is real and what is not becomes an issue – and I can't determine exactly what's meant to be true and what's not even now, after seeing it. But I can vouch for being sucked into the question, and having fun being fooled by Chen's script and the way Bi Jean Ngo (an academic theorizing about "arcane American truth battles" and well-known instances of fabrication), Christie Parker (her hapless interviewer), Justin Jain (a Chinese artist-dissident fraught with details of political prisonership), Jessica DalCanton (a New Yorker writer) and Ames Adamson (a snide editor) go about enacting it.

Part of "Caught" is about the way we appropriate stories, especially from other cultures. And some of it is about gullability and the risks we take by trusting people – and what we have to gain by taking those risks. "Caught" is also a funny ode to false and circular logic. It makes you feel as though you're lost in one of those barnyard mazes constructed of corn husks and hay bales.

The difference is that eventually, you come out of those mazes and back into the semblance of clarity you left when you'd entered. You can't come out of "Caught" – which in its last part, chews over the nature of perception – without clearing your head and chuckling at what you've just perceived.