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## A Marital Mindbender at Crowded Fire Theater

By Sam Hurwitt Sep 24, 2014

Local playwright Christopher Chen's last work with San Francisco's Crowded Fire Theater was *The Hundred Flowers Project* in 2012, a truly remarkable play about a theatrical troupe collaboratively creating a postmodern play about Chairman Mao that takes on a life of its own until the creators can no longer tell real life from the all-consuming play. Chen's latest at Crowded Fire, *The Late Wedding*, is similarly heady and meta-fictional. This one's inspired by the writings of Italian fabulist Italo Calvino, particularly his novel *Invisible Cities*, a collection of visions of fantastical cities that often act as allegories to explore philosophical themes. Chen substitutes marriages for cities, depicting an anthropologist exploring the marital customs of various fictional tribes.

A couple in one tribe (Michael Anthony Torres and Lawrence Radecker) spends all their time reminiscing, panicking a little whenever they have trouble reaching consensus on a minor detail of their shared memory. Another tribe believes in prolonging the anticipation of marriage to the point where long-distance relationships are the norm, as heartbreakingly depicted by Kathryn Zdan and Lauren Spencer. Yet another tribe believes that life is death and thus practices detachment in relationships, and Michele Leavy and Ogie Zulueta are hilarious in attempting to present a united front of serenity while squabbling over details as if no more enlightened than anybody else. The marriages are presented without regard to gender; more of them are same-sex than opposite-sex, but that aspect isn't commented upon, just allowed to speak for itself.

Calvino's novel *If on a Winter Night a Traveler* is also an explicit influence. Much of that novel was a second-person account of the reader's experience of reading the book, and the play begins in a similar way, with Zdan's pre-show turn-off-your-phones speech morphing into her telling us what we're thinking, including what we're thinking about her telling us what we're thinking.

Artistic director Marissa Wolf's deft staging fully embraces and accentuates the weirdness of Chen's assemblage of fragmenting vignettes. The terrific six-person cast continually morphs from one role to another, with some roles echoing others with similar interactions or snippets of repeated language. According to the press release, the play is designed for anywhere from three to 16 actors, so it could be that those resonances are in part due to an element of chance in which roles happen to be sharing one actor's face.

Melpomene Katalos' marvelous set comprises all-white towers of cubbies with various objects in them that are also painted white: apples, paper cups, books, umbrellas. As the play goes on, some normal objects are placed into these boxes, adding tiny splashes of color, though what these objects are doesn't seem to be thematically linked to the particular vignettes in which they appear.

Eventually the framework of anthropological studies is abandoned entirely as the play goes into all kinds of unexpected directions that still keep returning to the theme of marriage. The previously established structure dissolves into scenes and scenarios that trail off into each other, interspersed with delightfully random ephemera from the brain of the playwright — or rather the unnamed fictional representation of the playwright. As fascinating and often funny as these twists and turns are (in part due to Chen's readiness to poke fun at the meta-fictional complexity of his own work), the meandering of the narrative starts to feel aimless toward the end of the 80-minute play. Rather than building on what's gone before and gaining resonance, the show loses some steam as it slows toward the placid, lyrical denouement. That said, with your head spinning from all the narrative shifts, a rare quiet moment to process may be appreciated.