

Broad Street Review

For us by Mark Cofta

March 31, 2017

A factual description of North Korean society would be disturbing enough, but Mia Chung's harrowing drama *You for Me for You*, given a powerful production by InterAct Theatre Company, takes us much further.

*You for Me for You* takes its audience on a labyrinthine, abstract adventure about sisters Minhee (Bi Jean Ngo) and Junhee (Mina Kawahara), who attempt escape from North Korea, the world's most restricted and reclusive country. They're starving, and Minhee is sick.

When the sisters visit a doctor, played by Justin Jain, we see a series of quick visits that would be farcical were conditions not so terribly real. All speak in a forced code of national praise. The doctor credits "the privilege granted to me by our Great Leader," promising "the best care available on Earth," but barely examines Minhee. Despite Junhee's bribes, he provides only useless pills.

Soon they're paying to cross the border, but their guide -- also Jain, who plays many roles -- warns that the crossing "has a large appetite" and "there's always a sacrifice." Minhee falls into a well -- beautifully suggested by scenic designer Melpomene Katakalos, whose walls with oval openings also suggest North Korea's elaborate government buildings and supernatural eyes -- while Junhee reaches asylum in the West, no less a fable-like place to land than a well. She encounters Westerners, all played by Hillary Parker, who at first speak in a humorous patois illustrating Junhee's difficulties understanding English.

As much as America is an overwhelming fantasia of wealth and freedom for Junhee, the well is a frightening rabbit hole for Minhee. In flashbacks, Jain plays all the North Koreans Minhee encounters while finding work, seeking her husband, and visiting her son. North Korean society's protocols entail following orders and (when accused) giving names. Rules change constantly, leaving Minhee always reacting, guessing, and uncertain.

These worlds intersect; the sisters' connection remains strong. Ngo and Kawahara are brilliant together and separately, creating unique characters forged by North Korea's hardships. Both Jain and Parker reveal larger ideas about their societies through their many briefly seen, clearly drawn characters: Jain's roles add up to an almost fairytale mystery of power and control, while Parker's Westerners reveal a culture shaped by blithe acceptance of wealth. Dwayne Thomas's likeable character, who befriends Junhee in New York, provides a more personal perspective; as a black Southerner in Manhattan, he's another stranger, suggesting our society's persistent contradictions.

Jungwoong Kim's choreography accents both realities with expressive movements that help reveal emotional truths without hindering the storytelling. Rick Shiomi, who directed InterAct's spectacular *Caught* three years ago, helms a similarly provocative play in Chung's *You for Me for You*, a whirlwind experience that lingers long after. InterAct features post-show discussions, coffee conversations, and speaker events to encourage exploration and relate the play's themes to the Philadelphia community.