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Interact's 'You for Me for You': Grim, witty immigrant's story

by Julia M. Klein, For The Inquirer

Two sisters, sitting beneath portraits of North Korean leaders, fight over a tiny portion of rice -- each insisting that the other eat it. It's an uncomfortable quarrel, an introduction to an off-kilter world marked by physical and emotional privation. The older sister, Minhee, has lost her husband and her son -- we're not sure exactly how. Fearful and ill, she may be starving herself to death. Junhee is younger, stronger, and readier for escape. Not much else is certain in *You for Me for You*, Mia Chung's grim, witty, fantastical meditation on family, freedom, psychic trauma, and the costs of leaving home. Poetic in its language, sharp in its social insights, and sometimes vexing in its hallucinatory flights of fancy, the play is receiving a strong production under the direction of Rick Shiomi at the InterAct Theatre Company.

As Minhee, Bi Jean Ngo, winner of the 2016 Otto Haas Emerging Artist Award, is the play's emotional pivot. She gets fine support from Mina Kawahara as Junhee, Dwayne Thomas as Junhee's American love interest, and especially Justin Jain and Hillary Parker, each playing a variety of roles. (Parker's ever-more-comprehensible garbled speech, meant to signal Junhee's dawning grasp of English, is a tour de force for both playwright and actor.)

The boundary between the real and the imagined is deliberately blurry in *You for Me for You*. Afraid for their lives, the sisters hire a smuggler to spirit them across the national border. But Minhee stumbles and falls into a dry well -- and into a North Korean version of *Alice in Wonderland*. Her adventures range from the ridiculous (a man in a bear suit hands her forbidden South Korean DVDs) to the terrifying (her husband returns and describes in pitiless detail the many possible manners of his death).

In one key scene, Minhee tries to barter with a bureaucrat for a permit to visit her son, confined to a re-education school. But the totalitarian state's rules and regulations, absurd to begin with, keep shifting, and only manipulation, cunning, and a touch of magic can overcome them. Meanwhile, Junhee is experiencing an American fantasia in New York City -- becoming a nurse, finding romance, and participating in the American fascination with yoga, frozen yogurt, gluten allergies, gift registries, and rooting against the Yankees. Chung's play is both fierce in its denunciation of North Korea's Big Brother state and clever in its skewering of our penchant for self-indulgent fads, dreamy romantic narratives, and cultural limits on free speech.

Melpomene Katakalos's gray, mostly abstract set is vivified by Peter Whinnery's lighting -- blood red at the play's most wrenching moments. Susan Smythe's costumes, Shannon Zura's sound design, and Jungwoong Kim's choreography all contribute to the show's power. What actually happens at the end of *You for Me for You* was a matter of debate between me and my theater companion. But the play's themes -- that nothing is gained without sacrifice, the past is impossible to shake, and freedom is never unalloyed -- resonated clearly nonetheless.