

The Poison of Polygamy, La Boite Theatre Company and Sydney Theatre Company

Presented by La Boite Theatre Company (Brisbane) and Sydney Theatre Company, 'The Poison Of Polygamy' is an adaptation of the first Chinese language novel in Australia. Adapted by **Anchuli Felicia King**, and translated by **Ely Finch**, the work details the beginning of the Chinese diaspora in Australia and explores the evolving idea of what it means to be Chinese in Australia. Finch's translation uses modern, conversational language and lots of humour, paired with **Courtney Stewart's** meticulous direction which ensures this timeless tale is easily understood and well received by contemporary audiences.

The text follows the story of struggling Chinese families in the 19th century that see their men migrate to Australia in the hopes of earning big money in the Victorian gold rush. Highlighting the racial discrimination and violence they experienced at the hands of the Australian authorities, 'The Poison Of Polygamy' presents the experience of Asian immigrants and explores what it's like to be Chinese in Australia. In the second act, the meaning of the title becomes more apparent as one of the men takes on a concubine and learns the power of greed, morality, and identity.

Facilitating this extremely evocative and powerful story, the work sees the sound, lighting, sets and direction seamlessly woven together. The opening scenes use flashes of red lights and strobe lighting that are jarring to the audience, reinforcing the characters' state such as talking from beyond the grave, to being in a nightmare. Six tall red pillars on a square base on wheels were the main set pieces which were rolled on and off stage throughout. They were used in a versatile way that informed the audience of different settings such as the opium den, family home and on the ship to Australia. A particularly clever use of the pillars was when two characters each sat on the base of a pillar and rolled in perfect unison from side to side, evoking the feeling of being violently rocked on a boat.

The production is performed in the round and makes excellent use of the space with characters entering from all sides as well as using the stairs and corridors. James Lew's costumes are simple and versatile and skilfully inform the audience of class, status, and location. Matt Hsu's sound composition utilises a multitude of traditional and non-traditional instruments which tie in the themes and scenes of the work.

Shan-Ree Tan is bold and provocative in the roles he performs. Particularly in the opening scene when he breaks the fourth wall and addresses the audience, he brilliantly challenges the audience to think about our own behaviour and moral standings. **Ray Chong Nee** and **Gareth Yuen** both give very readable and heartfelt performances smoothly alternating throughout their many roles. **Silvan Rus** and **Merlynn Tong** are heart-wrenchingly moving, both portraying more morally sound characters than their counterparts. The role of courtesan and concubine is performed by **Tsiu Hei** who portrays this shallow, fiery pocket rocket with real pizzazz.

This work expertly juxtaposes the Chinese diaspora of then, told by the Chinese diaspora of today and demonstrates the lengths migrants go to, to find community to survive in their new country.

Standing at almost three hours in length (including the interval), there could have been significant trimming of the text without losing the integrity of the work. 'The Poison Of Polygamy' offers incredible insight into the Chinese Australian diaspora while examining the racial challenges Asian Australians still experience today.

★★★★☆

[Review: The Poison Of Polygamy @ Sydney Theatre Company \(scenestr.com.au\)](http://scenestr.com.au)