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Fleeing Dear Leader, or trying to, in 'You for Me for You'



By Joel Brown | Globe Correspondent January 19, 2013

Playwright Mia Chung wondered about North Korea when she was growing up in sunny San Diego, the daughter of parents who met after immigrating to the United States from South Korea. She accepted the image of North Korea that she says she got from them and from the media, "that it's a corrupt regime that is going to fall apart any second."

But, despite famine and repression, it never did.

Chung, 40, began to think more and more about North Korea in the summer of 2009, when the nation made headlines because two Asian-American journalists were jailed there for several months. She began to read and watch documentaries about the country, baffled by the degree to which North Koreans expressed belief in the regime and their future.

The journalists were released in August, and that same month authorities in Northern California freed Jaycee Dugard, who had been held hostage since 1991, when she was kidnapped at age 11.

"I was obsessed with that story as well. The idea that she could be in captivity for 18 years was, I think, stunning to the whole world . . . and she probably could have escaped earlier," says Chung, who lives in Providence. "This introduced me to Stockholm syndrome, and that's when it became for me a fitting paradigm for looking at North Korea."

The idea of captives identifying with their captors helped Chung, whose plays include "Exquisite Corpse" and "Page Not Found," understand the characters in her new play "You for Me for You," which is running through Feb. 16 at Company One.

In the play, sisters Junhee and Minjee (Jordan Clark and Giselle Ty) face shortages of food and medicine, among other hardships. They plan to flee North Korea, but one finds it difficult to break away from the rule of their "Dear Leader" and brave the crossing to a new life. In the sisters' debates over their future, Chung explores why that could be.

"My sense is that, in the media, North Koreans are portrayed as certainly brainwashed, but also sort of unthinking and programmed by the state, all of which I might agree with on some level, but there's a dehumanizing effect when the weirdness of them is put forward with little context," Chung says. "It was important for me for it to come from a North Korean perspective, but also to make those North Korean characters as accessible as possible and as empathetic as possible."

"One of the questions is, how do these people believe this?" says the play's director, M. Bevin O'Gara. "And what you come up with is, how could they not? It's all they've known. They have no connection to the outside world."

The play is hardly isolated, though, as the location bounces quickly back and forth between the hardships of North Korea and the baffling abundance of the United States.

"It definitely is focused on North Korea, or at least the North Korean perspective," Chung says. "But what I really was interested in was the contrast between the closed society and an open society . . . and what that transition would be like, coming from a closed society to the US."

Looking at this country through a recent arrival's eyes, she says, "maybe we can even see how strange we are here as well."

That means American women are represented in the play by a single fast-talker named Tiffany (Anna Waldron), who shows up in a variety of societal roles — a civil servant, a fast-food worker, a teacher of English as a second language — and whose words sound like gibberish to newcomers.

The play, O'Gara says, is "so much about our relationship to language and particularly immigrants' relationship to language." Michael Tow plays the Smuggler, who leads the sisters to the border crossing. Johnnie McQuarley is the Man from the South, who changes one of the sisters' lives in America.

In the play's premiere last fall at the Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company in Washington, D.C., the rapid-fire changes of time and place, jumping from Korea to New York and back, were accomplished with the help of a mechanical turntable as part of the stage, Chung says.

"It was beautiful, but even as it was happening, I kept thinking that I didn't write this intending that it could only be done with a huge budget and a lot of special effects," Chung says. "I imagined that it could always be done with theatricality and great performances." Not to worry, because Company One doesn't have that huge budget. O'Gara says the production will do more with less, employing a set that is neutral and flexible enough to change instantaneously with lights and sound and a few props. The designers started, she says, by figuring out how to depict the border crossing itself, a passage that's as much metaphysical as geographical.

"The journey of this play is awakening Minjee and Junhee from this world, and the only way that can happen is through something magical," O'Gara says. "That is why this is the perfect story to be told in theater."