

# The Boston Globe

## Company One takes ‘You for Me for You’ beyond North Korea

By Jeffrey Gantz | Globe Correspondent  
January 21, 2013



Two sisters are starving in North Korea, and the older one, Minjee, is sick. They attempt to flee the country, but only Junhee makes it. She winds up working in a Manhattan hospital, enjoying a life she could only have dreamed of back home. Will she live out that dream, or will she return to North Korea and try to free her sibling? That’s the predictable-looking plot of Mia Chung’s new play, “You for Me for You,” which premiered in Washington, D.C., two months ago. The play, however, runs much deeper, and the production now up from Company One at the Boston Center for the Arts’ Plaza Theatre realizes its potential, right down to the sobering implications of the title.

Chung grew up in San Diego; her parents were born in South Korea. But “You for Me for You” is no propaganda piece. Even though the sisters have scarcely a bowl of rice between them, Minjee (Giselle Ty) doesn’t want to leave the North Korean nest. And the ditsy American (Anna Waldron) who keeps interrupting the North Korean narrative, dropping pens from her hair and speaking in a language we can hardly understand, is an ambivalent promo for the Land of the Free. After Junhee (Jordan Clark) scrapes up the money to pay a Smuggler (Michael Tow) to get them out, she and Minjee cross the border in a peal of thunder, but when the lights come back up, Minjee is still in North Korea and Junhee and the Smuggler are . . . somewhere else. The Smuggler

gives Junhee one day to raise the money to bring Minjee across; he goes back to argue with Minjee while Junhee goes on to New York.

Or perhaps she’s already there. It’s hard to tell in a play where “one day” stretches to two years, and then three. Junhee saves her hospital earnings. The women she meets — all played by Waldron, all named Tiffany — speak English as a North Korean would understand it, and they introduce her to a world of shoes and iPhones and eHarmony dating that’s almost as absurd as the one she left behind. And then Junhee meets Wade (Johnnie McQuarley), her Mr. Right. Can she leave him behind? Or is it all a dream?

The centerpiece of Jon Savage’s appropriately bare-bones set is a gently raked platform that looks to be covered with wide swaths of tree bark. (Bark, we learn, is extolled by North Korea’s leaders as a nutrient-rich food.) At the back, eavesdropping on every conversation, hang pictures of those leaders, Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il and Kim Jong Un.

The production gets off to a somewhat wooden start, with Ty and Clark arguing and shouting and coming off as stick figures. Perhaps that was director M. Bevin O’Gara’s intention; perhaps Chung’s initial dialogue simply lacks nuance. But Ty blooms in her exchanges with Tow’s tough, commanding Smuggler, giving life and even a semblance of reason to Minjee’s love of home. Each of Waldron’s Tiffanys is more scatterbrained, more irrepressible than the one before. McQuarley’s genteel, soft-spoken Wade is too good to be true, but maybe that’s Chung’s point. And Clark is a revelation once she reaches America; as Junhee’s English grows, so does her personality.

Clark and McQuarley reach dizzying heights in the effervescent sequence in which Junhee and Wade imagine what their life together will be like: She’ll meet Meryl Streep, he’ll be appointed ambassador to Greece. And Clark’s infectious ebullience just makes Junhee’s ultimate sacrifice that much more poignant. “You for Me for You” isn’t really about North Korea. It’s about you and me.