

# Solo Theater Still Alive in 'DIS-ORIENTED'



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"I'm a racist!" Colleen "Coke" Nakamoto realizes, somewhat cathartically, at the end of the opening sketch. Sinking to the floor, she comically screams: "No!" Yes, the doctor informs her, unfortunately even Asians, residents of Hayward and generally good people can be racists. Everyone can. Oh, the humanity.

Such is the end of the opening sketch in "DIS-ORIENTED," a show consisting of three solo performances by women of Asian-American background at the Off-Market Theater in San Francisco. Now, I could write about how solo performances are often weird and about how it takes a special kind of person to do a solo show. I could be a snob and say solo performances are not what most people consider 'traditional theater.' But that wouldn't do justice to "DIS-ORIENTED." Rather, solo performance is, at least in the context of "DIS-ORIENTED," something much more primal or straight-from-the-heart. Under the direction of W. Kamau Bell and Martha Rynberg of the Solo Performance Workshop, this show and performances like it are in a sense re-inventing an art form by bringing it back to that intimate emotional level.

The first piece is an excerpt from Thao P. Nguyen's "Fortunate Daughter," about a Vietnamese girl coming out as a lesbian to her sister, and subsequently musing upon what it would be like to come out to her tradition-bound parents. Portraying this process in a one-woman show is no small task, but Nguyen's versatility is remarkable, and not to mention very, very funny. At one moment she is the young lady nervously coming out (presumably herself, after all, the character is also named "Thao"), and at the next she is the spitting (quite literally) image of her strict Vietnamese father. And with a finely-crafted story arc, Nguyen's performance is as moving as it is hilarious.

To give you a sense of the subject matter of Japanese-American Coke Nakamoto's piece "Soft Tissue," well, let's just say it would not be out of place in "The Vagina Monologues." Portraying a woman battling with the sexual dysfunction Vaginismus, again, presumably herself, Coke's performance is infused with a spastic liveliness. Nakamoto's background as a dancer is apparent in the sheer physicality of her performance. But even as she reaches points of high comedic energy, she is able to bring her performance back down to a serious tenor, illustrating her ability to tell a story with ultimately solemn theme in astonishingly humorous but also affecting way.

Probably stemming from her background as a comedian, Iranian-American and former Cal student Zahra Noorbakhsh's piece, "All Atheists Are Muslim" (an excerpt from a longer show), is more along the lines of a stand-up comedy routine, and follows less of a story arc. When Zahra attempts to tell her parents that she wants to move in with her American boyfriend the atheist Duncan, they are absolutely opposed because the move is "non-Islamic." Her long-running gag is her cartoonish (though probably not inaccurate) impersonation of her father. Though this piece fits more squarely within the bounds of racial comedy than the other two, Noorbakhsh's performance is so emphatic and charming in the stand-up sort of way, that it's hard not to enjoy it.

There is a very real quality to the solo performances of "DIS-ORIENTED," along with the sneaking sensation that there is more truth in them than fiction. The pieces seem to have a double function as an emotional release as well as an art form for the performers. But the performers' closeness to their work is one of the show's greatest strengths, and they demonstrate the supreme ability to laugh at themselves without compromising the messages they want to convey, and the medium of solo performance goes a long way to make this possible. If "DIS-ORIENTED" is any precedent, then long live solo theater.

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