

# Synchronized Chaos

an interdisciplinary art, literary, science, cultural, and travel writing webzine

## Performance Review: Joy Ding on Thao P. Nguyen's *Fortunate Daughter*

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Written by Joy Ding

Watching Thao P. Nguyen onstage during the second run of her autobiographical one-woman show *Fortunate Daughter*, it's hard to imagine the play, and its protagonist as anything other than fully realized. In fact, during an interview with Thao, I was actually surprised to hear her mention writing jokes. I tend to think of writing as a grind, a *process*. In contrast, the jokes in *Fortunate Daughter* are so on pitch, so effortlessly funny that they are instantly believable – it is very difficult to think of them as anything other than perfectly recalled hilarious moments. That is the magic that Thao creates.

One-woman and one-man shows tend to get a bad rap, for a good reason. They are very difficult to do well. A single person has to embody multiple characters, and not only speak for them, but also portray the interactions between characters. Bad one-person plays don't bother with the interactions, creating a ledger of monologues delivered with different affected mannerisms, rather than a show, populated with its own cast of characters.

Not so with *Fortunate Daughter*, directed by Martha Rynberg, and written and performed by Thao P. Nguyen. In *Fortunate Daughter*, Thao creates and inhabits a myriad of colorful characters, a full cast of fully realized people to take us through her struggle to reconcile for herself the pressures and expectations of two conflicting lives as a Vietnamese-American and a queer activist.



There's a delightful scene where Thao is driving back to San Francisco with her mother while furtively texting her crush Priya. We get to watch Thao drive, text, react excitedly to Priya's texts, and carry on a hilariously awkward one-sided conversation with her mother that goes something like this:

"Mom, how would you like to go to a dyke march?"

"What is a dyke? Well, a dyke is a woman. It's a woman march, basically."

"Oh lesbian! Okay, you know that word. Great!"

"Anyway there are going to be these women and they're going to be in a parade. You like parades, right?"

Thao's words, inflection, and expressive reactions create a place for a believable mother next to her in the car.

In another scene, Thao recreates all of the speakers on stage at an anti-Prop 8 rally, and the different reactions of rally attenders. Thao steps up on a chair, moves her body so it is loose and seductive, and becomes Foxy, a passionate, pouty drag queen; Thao steps down, her voice turns foggy and indistinct, she whirls her arms around as if to embrace the sky and she is Heather Feather, who sings an African American slave song "Freedom"; Thao condenses back to herself, angry that the song has been appropriated, taken out of context.

Each of her characters has real presence; they become real for the audience. Given that, it is even more astounding that Thao is able to reanimate them, to re-hook the audience each time she walks off stage for a break, which she does at least four or five times in a 90 minute piece. That's roughly once every 15 minutes. Rather than breaking the spell of the piece, these breaks do exactly the opposite. They only serve to further

Thao's charm; they make her main character even more believable, as her patter during the breaks shows the audience that hey, this is still Thao, even when she is supposedly not performing. It reiterates for the audience the common thread that ties the piece together, which is to say Thao's viewpoint on the world: marked by exuberance, some naïveté, and genuine good humor. It is humor, and the willingness find the funny in hard situations that makes the play sing, and each time Thao breaks the play, whether for a public service announcement ("this sweat break is brought to you by Thao's glands), or an unpretentious back and forth ("Hey, I'm working hard. Okay, you're working hard too. Pause. "But I'm working harder) to ostensibly take a break, the humor remains. It is still Thao; we are still in her story.

When I asked Thao about humor, and why she found herself drawn to it, she said: "I'm a big feeler. I let myself feel all of my emotions. Sometimes when I feel too much, I need a release. I need to find something funny about the situation; it's like I'm letting the air out of a balloon. Audiences need that too." For Thao, humor is both a way out, and a way to address difficult issues. There is a remarkable scene, during which Thao imagines coming out to her father, and acts out three different ways he could react. It is the one moment of real, reactive anger in the play. Thao's father becomes suddenly, immediately enraged. His words have a searing bite; the entire stage crackles with his anger. Then, Thao follows up with the hilarious reaction of an exuberant PFLAG wannabe father. This father runs around the room in his excitement and brags, "Mommy and I have a bet going about who you come out to first." And then her father's last reaction where he looks up, sighs, and looks back down; it is then that the audience realizes, with a sharp intake of breath, that the last reaction – quiet disappointment – is worst of all, which could neither have been understood nor properly processed, without the juxtaposition of the first two. The audience is tense, out of breath, speechless – then Thao takes a break, cracks some jokes. The audience laughs, takes a breath and loosens their shoulders in the aftermath of that devastating scene, and then, they are ready for more, difficult or not. Thao's masterful attention to this need for release allows *Fortunate Daughter* to address difficult issues, to be entertaining without being vacuous, thought provoking without being bleak.



Thao's conflict and the way she ends up resolving it toward the end of the show is heartwarming and truly satisfying. Rather than taking a pre-packaged deal (coming out to your family = happiness and progress), Thao makes a truthful ending for herself. There are so many more moments I would like to share with you – the solemn deliberateness with which Emmy, Thao's boss explains the complex reasoning behind their phone greeting ("Hello. This is Emmy. You've reached the QYC"); her father handing out business cards with Thao's picture at her sister's wedding, Thao's windmilling arms as she edges out of a conversation – but really, you should just go see it, and anything else Thao decides to do. Because whatever story she decides to tell, it's going to be a great one.

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