

Review: 'Fortunate Daughter' by Thao Nguyen a funny, insightful coming out story

By Pat Craig
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"Fortunate Daughter" is a coming out story, a solo show by a young woman struggling to reveal her lesbianism to her traditional mom.

That's not exactly groundbreaking fodder for a piece of theater in the Bay Area, yet Thao P. Nguyen finds a way to make the topic fresh and entertaining with a natural humor that runs easily from gentle to slapstick and with a gimlet-eyed view of her surroundings, which run halfway around the world and back.

Thao lives with her mom and soon-to-be-married sister and works in a social service center for LGBT minority youth in San Francisco. Her boss, who must be a close friend because of the wildly funny portrait she draws of her on stage, suggests she take a year off to get in touch with her Vietnamese roots. So Thao leaves for Vietnam with her mom, who is frantic, less about the trip than with her daughter making a perfect impression on Thao's grandmother. It's a typical family vacation.

For a variety of reasons -- both cultural and circumstantial -- it is next to impossible for Thao to simply "come out" to her parents, much as her friends want her to. The push and pull continues, with Thao creating hugely funny impressions of her mom, friends and co-workers and family members, particularly her sister, who is going through the getting-married crazies.

Essentially, Thao's tale is of one woman trying to make the most important announcement of her life, but life won't stop careening crazily in one direction or another so she can get a word in edgewise.



Photo by Cheshire Isaacs of Impact Theatre.
Thao P. Nguyen's solo show "Fortunate Daughter" tells the story of a gay woman torn between her traditional Vietnamese family and her gay and lesbian friends.

It's natural to recall earth-shattering moments in your life as big impressive events, but as Thao accurately observes, that's not the way it usually happens. Life is often more subtle than that.

And she's able to tell her tale in a delightful disarming way that adds much to the humor of the piece. It has some profound observations of the notion of coming out, as well as the other things going on in Thao's life, as she searches for a way to reveal her truth. But most impressive is the fact that these observations are revealed during the course of rather ordinary conversation, brilliantly spoken.

Thao developed the show with director Martha Rynberg and performer W. Kamau Bell (currently in the FX series, "Totally Biased"). Together, they were able to shape a play that looks and feels utterly casual yet packages an enormous amount of information and emotion throughout.

More simply, it manages to make you feel like you're sitting in Thao's living room, listening to her tell a story. That's something every solo performer aims for.

The show is played on a set that consists of a single chair and old wooden box that Thao drags around the stage to represent different locations from Vietnam to San Francisco's Dolores Park.

'FORTUNATE DAUGHTER'

Written and performed by Thao P. Nguyen

Presented by Impact Theatre

Through: Aug. 3

Where: La Val's Subterranean, 1874 Euclid Ave., Berkeley

Running time: 1 hour, 15 minutes

Tickets: \$12-\$20, www.impacttheatre.com

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