

Solo Times Four

July 26, 2013

by Sam Hurwitt

Featured, Theater

The Bay Area is blessed with more than its share of terrific solo theater artists, and new ones are coming out of the woodwork all the time. I hadn't had a chance to check out Thao P. Nguyen's work before now, but I feel awfully fortunate to have managed to catch her one-woman show *Fortunate Daughter* at Impact Theatre last weekend. A story about trying to figure out how to come out as a lesbian to her supportive but still fairly traditional Vietnamese family, *FD* debuted at the New York Fringe Festival last year, directed by W. Kamau Bell, and then enjoyed a sold-out run at StageWerx helmed by Martha Rynberg, who also directs it here.

Nguyen is an appealing and just plain likeable presence who gets you on her side from the beginning—if there were really any sides involved, which there aren't exactly. She talks about the nervousness of traveling to Vietnam to meet her grandmother for the first time at the age of 25. "I'm literally going over the river and through the woods to get to my grandmother's house," she marvels while describing the boat ride, then feels the need to check in with us: "You know Vietnam's not a war, right? Right?" We see her giddily flirting in text messages with a girl she likes, and somehow convincing herself to take her mom to the Dyke March with her, despite the fact that she is very much not out to her mother and not planning to come out to her either, at least not yet.



Thao P. Nguyen in *Fortunate Daughter*.
Photo by Cheshire Isaacs.

The portraits she paints of her family and friends are unforgettable and often terribly endearing, especially her parents—her soft-spoken, heavily accented mother who's surprisingly interested and cool with everything at the Dyke March, whether she's connecting the dots or not. Her dad is warm and upbeat, and alternately hilarious and heartrending in a scene when Thao imagines his possible reactions to her coming out to him. Her sister's self-centered take on the whole thing is priceless. Emmy, her boss at the Queer Youth Center, is very serious, very precise, and brimming with gravitas.

As engaging as Nguyen's personal story is, she deals with a lot more than that in the monologue. She brings us back to the emotional roller-coaster ride of the 2008 election, with the Obama victory and the passage of Proposition 8, with the renewed pressure to come out because so many of the people who voted to ban same-sex marriage know and love gay people—they just may not know it, because their attitudes haven't exactly encourages those loved ones to come out to them.

She also bitingly satirizes touchy-feely Bay Area liberal culture simply by chronicling it becoming a parody of itself. In one striking scene, she recalls a marriage equality rally in which the all-white, new agey speakers started singing old African-American spirituals of liberation and being gobsmacked by the thoughtless cultural appropriation.

Fortunate Daughter is a terrific piece of theater, solidly constructed and terrifically performed. The crowd was on the sparse side at the performance we attended, so I hope more people will trek down to Impact's North Berkeley pizza-parlor basement space to see it. It's well worth the trip.

[Fortunate Daughter](#)

Through August 3

[Impact Theatre](#)

La Val's Subterranean

1834 Euclid Ave., Berkeley, CA

About Author: Sam Hurwitt is the editor-in-chief of Theatre Bay Area magazine and theatre critic for the Marin Independent Journal. He's also written for American Theatre, San Francisco Chronicle, San Francisco Examiner, Kitchen Sink, Variety, East Bay Express, Austin Chronicle, Pacific Sun, Budapest Sun and other publications. His fiction has been published in Fourteen Hills, The Misfit Library, Defunkt and the Doubleday anthology *Voices of the Xiled*.

Link to article: <http://theidiolect.com/theater/solo-times-four>