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C'est du Chinois

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A scene from 'C'est du Chinois' (Source: Raquel Belli)

Set in New York City, "**C'est du Chinois**" tells the story of the Yao and Lu families who have recently emigrated from Shanghai, China. They speak no English but still yearn to be understood. Their solution to this predicament is to teach all of New York City Mandarin.

A willing student has two options: you can either choose to come for an in-person lesson or you can purchase a self-produced language DVD. Although a bit unorthodox, the Yao and Lu families' plan taps into the international trend of China's growing influence and dominance; they are just here to help you adjust. As the play states, "Thank you for your interest to learn Mandarin. It is a good investment of your time."

The play begins with a crewmember walking on stage to signal for the lights to be dimmed. Said crewmember then walks to a backstage room and announces to the family that everything is ready. A family of five briskly move across the stage floor carrying large grocery bags filled with language lesson props.

Prior to beginning, the eldest son hands an audience member a microphone and a small script to read in English. This is the only information you will receive about what is to commence.

Lessons begin simply with the audience being taught the words for "kung-fu," "tofu," and "feng shui." As the language lesson continues you are taught the words for happiness, love, and tears; familiar concepts rendered unfamiliar by language. If you are able to, you acquire just enough language capacity to understand that all is not what it seems in the Yao and Lu household.

The underlying story of the Yao and Lu family is universal. It is one of dashed dreams, unwanted changes, discontent, anger, hope and joy. It is of a family that cannot communicate with their audience but most importantly cannot communicate amongst themselves. At times, they seem to have a better relationship with the viewer than they do with each other. Language is not often the sole barrier to understanding and in "C'est du Chinois" it is a barrier that is traversable.

Whether it is the story of a man once great because of his talent who now turns to gambling to fill a void, a young woman not eager to embrace the changes brought about by a pregnancy, or a man torn between the role of son and husband, these are all recognizable characters. We all know them, see them, love them, despise them, and reflect some aspect of them.

Maybe this is the larger point of "C'est du Chinois" -- that language only masks what is already familiar, what we already know as human beings; a shared universal language of emotion and experience.

Despite how confusing and difficult it may be to follow, "C'est du Chinois" creates tremendous intimacy between the performers and their audience. It is a direct relationship that develops with the play. From the selected audience member reading a few lines in English, the call and response method of teaching, the brief monologues given by each family member, to the opportunity to interact with them at the end of the show, it all underscores the capacity to connect without language. There are moments you feel compelled to get on stage with them or to shout out "wait, can you repeat that last word?"

In a brief conversation prior to the start of the show, Edit Kaldor (the creative mind behind "C'est du Chinois") revealed that this was her first time using an interactive element in one of her shows. As a first time user, she has done it gloriously.

What is "C'est du Chinois"? A French title for a play entirely in Mandarin, set in New York and made by a Netherlands based Hungarian born director, "C'est du Chinois" exists in a world all its own. Part scheme to sell a DVD that was described as garbage by "Papa," part family drama, part excessively long language lesson; what "C'est du Chinois" is depends entirely on the audience member.

For "C'est du Chinois," the main character that the story revolves around is you. More presentation than play, "C'est du Chinois" begins once the audience has settled. Its development depends entirely on how well audience members grasp the words being taught and it ends with the selling of a DVD to the audience members as they depart. The more of the language you are able to grasp and the more willing you are to participate, the greater your experience will be.

In some ways "C'est du Chinois" is a metaphor for life, neither is a spectator sport and no one has really figured it out.

Full Disclosure: The writer was selected to read the brief script in English and was given a DVD for her participation.

"C'est du Chinois" runs through Jan. 20 at The Public Theatre, 425 Lafayette Street. For info or tickets, call 212-539-8500 or visit www.undertheradarfestival.com.