

C'est du Chinois

review by Rachel Merrill Moss

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A scene from *C'est du Chinois*

Rare is the successful theatrical production that asks a great deal of its audience members. Rarer still is the production that requires the audience to learn a new language in order to grasp the presented narrative. And an arguably handy language at that. Mandarin is exclusively spoken, taught, and acted-out in the delightful language-course-cum-family-drama, *C'Est Du Chinois*, playing now through January 16th as part of the Under The Radar Festival.

The five-member Yao and Lu family, joined by marriage, have come to New York from China. They like coffee and cola, rice and feng shui, and really think Shanghai is a swell place, New York, just the big O.K. As so many immigrant families do, they have acclimated themselves culturally to their new surroundings, particularly warming to Hershey's chocolate and Budweiser beer. But they have held off learning English, choosing instead to teach Mandarin to those they encounter. In fact, all the aforementioned information is conveyed strictly in Mandarin, through the Yao/Lu language crash course, also available on a DVD simply titled "Ni Hao" (Mandarin for "How are you?").

Vocabulary is taught through the 80 minute performance, beginning first with simple nouns, and moving swiftly through to more nuanced terms, such as “love,” “fear,” and “happiness.” Each section of the course becomes more personal than the one before, eventually exhibiting the rift between husband and wife and their two families, stemming from their inability to accept the other’s position on consumerism and money. Articulated simply and completely in Mandarin, *C’Est Du Chinois* impressively adds enough depth to less than 50 vocab words (used alone and strung together) that an entire complex narrative springs forth. Only, of course, to the dedicated language learner.

Indeed, it’s the simplicity of the piece and trust in the audience that makes it so impressive. Emerging from one side entrance at the beginning, the cast brings with them bags and boxes that eventually reveal themselves to be clear markers and makers of identity, as happens with each new piece of vocabulary. Already given the challenge of teaching every new audience enough Mandarin to make sense of the proceedings, the cast dutifully bears the brunt of every new layer of characterization placed upon them. And delightfully, the audience is given no option but to keep up. No safety nets are in place should the course move too quickly (though the cast checks in now and again to make sure everyone is following), and that level of trust makes the material, pared down though it may be, that much more satisfying.

All in all, at less than 90 minutes, *C’Est Du Chinois*, is highly enjoyable and offers a rather exceptional Mandarin takeaway.