

A Crash Course in Mandarin, With No Books or Interpreters

Ready to learn a little Mandarin? Head down to the Public Theater for the next week or so, where "C'est du Chinois," a language lesson in the lively form of an interactive theater piece, is being presented as part of the Under the Radar festival.

**CHARLES
ISHERWOOD**

**THEATER
REVIEW**

Created by the Hungarian-born Edit Kaldor, "C'est du Chinois" is really a no-frills, no-drama production: an amiable 80 minutes of energetic language instruction for audience members, performed by a (fictional) family from Shanghai that has recently immigrated to America. (The title is the French expression meaning "It's Chinese," equivalent to our own "It's Greek to me." Which I'm told, in Turkish, becomes "It's French." Go figure.)

Learning aids, like textbooks or supertitles to help keep us focused, are absent: only Mandarin spoken here. Of props, however, there are many, lugged onstage by the five performers as the piece opens. The father of the family, played by Siping Yao, starts the proceedings by handing a few sheets of paper to a volunteer in the front row, who then reads the introductory remarks:

"Thank you for your interest to learn Mandarin," the remarks begin. This will be "an important step for your future," they continue, an amusing acknowledgment of how large China looms in world consciousness as it flexes its increasing financial muscle.

And we're off! Usually standing on gray carpet rolled out on center stage, the performers take turns teaching us new words and simple phrases. Hanging from their necks are small, round whistles they use to cue us to repeat the sounds we have just heard.

C'est du Chinois

Conceived and directed by Edit Kaldor; language consultant, Xi Zeng; lighting by Ingeborg Slaats; props and costumes by Janneke Raaphorst; dramaturgical advice by Zhana Ivanova and Nicola Unger; produced by Stichting Kata and Productiehuis Rotterdam. Presented by the Public Theater as part of the Under the Radar festival, Oskar Eustis, artistic director; Patrick Willingham, executive director; Mark Russell, festival director. At the Public Theater, 425 Lafayette Street, at Astor Place, East Village; (212) 967-7555, publictheater.org. Through Wednesday. Running time: 1 hour 20 minutes.

WITH: Nucheng Lu, Siping Yao, Aaron Chun Fai Wan, Lei Wang and Qifeng Shang.

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As a theatrical performance, "C'est du Chinois" is spare and unadorned, and the performers (some are nonprofessional actors) are engaging and unself-conscious. Mr. Siping is an actor with some 40 years of experience: "entitled as national class B actor," his program biography informs ominously, suggesting the weird rigidities of even the arts in China.

At one point he brings out a scrapbook of photos and proudly flips through it, showing us pictures of him-

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interactive theater piece.*

self in various roles. He also plays a mouth organ and performs a passage from what I presume to be a traditional Chinese theater piece, wearing a paint-