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THE HIGHLIGHTER

Under the Radar: “C’est du Chinois”

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By Olivia George



“Thank you for your interest to learn Mandarin. It is a good investment of your time.” So we are informed at the start of “C’est du Chinois,” an educational and entertaining piece included in this year’s Under the Radar Festival, running through January 20 at the Public Theater.

The opening remarks are read by an audience member off a piece of paper provided by Siping Yao, the oldest of the cast members who plays the fictional family’s patriarch, and happens to be adorable in any language. The paper explains how the cast will first teach us some basic mandarin, through a “Simon Says” type situation involving call and responses and pitch pipes, before proceeding with their story. But with the exception of those few short lines, the show goes on to be performed entirely in Mandarin. The cast does not utter a word of English

throughout, although they do make liberal use of pantomime and props to help us understand.

The most striking aspect of this piece is not the story itself, although it does turn out to be quite poignant, but simply the fact that a primarily English-speaking audience is able to follow it at all. There is something very comforting about the way in which the actors are able to break down that ever-enduring fourth wall, as well as a language barrier, in order to impart to us their various struggles and heartaches. In a society so dominated by such technological interactions as e-mails and texts messages, such an effective use of human communication is extremely refreshing.

The question is also raised as to why the characters feel such a desperate need to relay their story at all. While it's true the themes that emerge from the family drama as it unfolds are universal, it goes deeper than that. The answer lies in the reactions of Kevin Shang, the youngest cast member, whose growing frustration with his family's dysfunctions needs no words to be palpably recognized. The characters must perform because they know that their story, though fictional, has a power to affect audiences in a real way.

As is the usual down at the Public Theater, this is not escapist theater, or a show you can expect to sit back and enjoy with half your brain, but a piece that will keep you thinking about it long after you leave.

"C'est du Chinois" will play one more performance at the Public Theater, this Wednesday, January 16, at 9:30 PM.

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