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Crimes of the Heart



We've seen Shakespeare's "Measure for Measure" performed with a high tech cast taking place in the future. We've seen Arthur Miller's "Death of a Salesman" staged by high school drama students situated in Medieval Europe. The setting of a play doesn't matter, and nor should the composition of its cast.

Leslie Ishii's recent production of Beth Henley's Pulitzer prize winning "Crimes of the Heart" is a testament that Asian Americans can play Southern ladies and gents, imitating not only their looks and expressions, but their attitudes and mentality to perfection.

Lenny Magrath (Elizabeth Liang) is a 30 year old virgin who has been spending her birthdays alone with a single candle for a while. Her only birthday gift this time around is a box of old crappy chocolates from her friend Chick Boyle (Hiwa Bourne). Boyle is worried that Meg Magrath (Kimiko Gelman) is coming back to visit Lenny and seeing their father, who has been comatose at the hospital. Boyle never had a good relationship with Meg, who, as the family's most promising child with a singing career, has had many lovers and opportunities. Meg comes home to see Babe Botrelle (Maya Erskine), who has just been released on bail after shooting her husband in the stomach because she claims she "doesn't like his looks." When the three best friends Meg, Babe, and Lenny get together, they reminisce about the past and hope best for the future, even though for Babe, the future could lead to jail time, and she may not be able to take it anymore.

The design of the play is simple, but the Southern accents are drilled to perfection. Doc Porter (Tim Chiou), the ex-lover of Meg who goes out with her when she returns but leaves her with a renewed desire to sing, is particularly strong in imitating the Southern tongue. Meg, in particular, has both a strong Southern female voice as well as an ability to show her personality in subtle ways. In one scene, Gelman chews on the poor chocolates that were supposed to be Lenny's birthday present. She takes a bite out of each of them in order to look for nuts, driving her sister crazy. Make no mistake about it, she is spoilt.

Erskine's role as Babe has some of the wackiest as well as most heart felt scenes in the play. In one exchange, she tells her friends how she stopped to make lemonade after shooting her husband because she didn't like his looks. In a matter-of-fact voice, Erskine narrates how she added ridiculous amounts of sugar to the lemonade to quickly quench her thirst. The description is complete with actions and make-belief that seem to jump right out of the stage as if it was happening right there. Idiosyncratically playing a saxophone for much of the play, Babe reflects quietly most of the time, and so we are not surprised when she goes to get a rope for doing the deed. Her performance made the conclusion seem inevitable.

Ishii's one-of-a-kind direction allows the play to build up to its frenzied climax before relaxing back to normalcy. The air is slow and monotonous at first, although we are quite entertained by Lenny blowing out her candles repeated, and also touched by her meaningless affairs and helpless life. However, when Meg enters the scene, her infectious personality draws us in, and we are even more enchanted by Babe as she tells her ridiculous story. Each character in the play is liberated in some way, and Ishii's slow build-up of the story makes the final result all the more satisfying.

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An Asian American production of a Southern play was long overdue. Now, Ishii's staging of Henley's best work shows us that both location and cast composition don't matter. Only thing that really matters is in the heart.

"Crimes of the Heart" is performed by East West Players (<http://www.eastwestplayers.org>) in Los Angeles, California, until of 5th of December, 2010.