

EVERYBODY'S GOT ONE

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HANNAH AND THE DREAD GAZEBO



Photo by Jenny Graham

Fountain Theatre

New York med student Hannah lives in what many feel is a limpic space, somewhere between being American by birth and Korean by heredity, yet not quite feeling a part of either culture—especially since their parents' generation purposely did not speak their native language at home so their children could more handily assimilate in their adoptive country.

When Hannah's South Korean grandmother sends her a package from her confinement to the Sunrise Dewdrop Apartment City for Senior Living, located directly on the border of the Demilitarized Zone between South and North Korea, she's frustrated she can't read the enclosed handwritten note and even more alarmed when, instead of translating it for her, her local drycleaner will only tell her she better join her parents there as quickly as she can pack.

The struggle to navigate those contrasting cultures and the Twilight Zone that exists between alienation and acceptance, between peace and war, and soon even between living and dying, are some of the threads examined from the perspective of a kind of uncertain millennial haze in Jiehae Park's *Hannah and the Dread Gazebo*, currently being presented at the Fountain Theatre in conjunction with East West Players.

Despite a gossamer lyricism running throughout Park's dialogue, her rapidly flying metaphors begin to bog down the piece, leaving its audience struggling to grab onto or even find interest in any one of her themes. Still, under the smoothly-evolving staging of director Jennifer Chang, the impressively magical and beautifully mounted tale is something lovely to behold.

Chang's richly-appointed production features a wonderfully accomplished cast, as well as continuously clever and even elegant design elements to keep us suitably mesmerized as the action zips from location to location, often interrupted by monologues delivered directly to the audience from Hannah (Monica Hong) meant to help us keep up with what's going on.

Hong is quite naturally at ease as she slips into the skin of Hannah, warmly letting the audience in on her character's emotional journey at every juncture of the bumpy ride. Rising from the uniformly talented supporting cast—including Janet Song and Hahn Cho as her bewildered and bewildering parents and Wonjung Kim as a sprightly activist with an eye for Hannah's brother Dang (Gavin Lee)—Jully Lee is a real standout as the "Shapeshifter," playing everyone from Hannah's suicidal grandmother to the unnerved drycleaner to a rather unhelpful duty nurse to an old man Dang encounters while waiting at a train station who relates to him the ancient Dangun fable, something about a tiger and a bear and their encounter that mythologically explained the creation of Korea.

On Yee Eun Nam's austere minimal set, her continuous barrage of colorful and evocative video projections nicely set the mood but also underscore Park's message that living in limbo, both personally and culturally, takes its toll for modern-day Korean-Americans or, as Hannah tells us, "messes with my sense of identity or whatever."

Hopefully, the Fountain-East West collaboration on Park's poetic though perhaps too ambitious play will spark a new desire to explore issues that touch people whose stories are often overlooked in the quest to shout out about more universal topics overwhelming our society. In that effort, this sincere and well-groomed production should be heralded and congratulated for opening those doors.

It's funny, though. When my first play was mounted 25 years ago, I fought like crazy not to listen to my producers and director, refusing to make some judicious cuts to the script. It was as though everything I ever wanted to say had to be said in that one piece. A decade later when working on the screenplay version of the play, I excised pages of unnecessary dialogue without blinking an eye.

I wonder if the obviously promising and exceptionally talented Jiehae Park will come to that same conclusion one day and maybe the various themes overpowering *Hannah and the Dread Gazebo* could be explored once again, albeit maybe splintered off into several different plays.

THROUGH SEPT. 22: Fountain Theatre, 5060 Fountain Av., LA. 323.663.1525 or fountaintheatre.com