

THINGS TO DO • News

"The Chinese Lady" is witty and wincing as it puts questions of humanity on display

It's the pointedly imaginative story of America's first female Chinese immigrant



In Lloyd Suh's smart, nimble "The Chinese Lady," about a 14-year-old immigrant put on display in the 1800s. Credit: Adams VisCom, provided by the Denver Center

Audience members have grown used to the clever ways that theaters make requests to silence all devices, unwrap candies and otherwise zip it in a show's prologue. But the Denver Center Theatre Company and "The Chinese Lady" director Seema Sueko take their pre-curtain appeal a step further.

Right before Lloyd Suh's astute, sharply amusing and rending drama about Afong Moy, the first known female Chinese immigrant in the U.S., stars Narea Kang and Sky Smith take the stage. They introduce themselves and then make the usual request into a playful, even silly, bit.

At ease, the two are personable. That they can be seen as very nearly themselves in this pre-performance routine is a feeling worth carrying through to the play's end.

After all, Kang's Afong Moy is the centerpiece in a pointedly imaginative work about the career of an Asian teenager put on display in 1834, first by the two traders who bartered with her father in Guangzhou Province for a two-year loan, and then (in the play's loose version of history) by showman and huckster P.T. Barnum many years later. And what is theater, especially the sort that addresses audiences in first-person if not a commentary on (and disruption of) its own relationship to "display"?



Sky Smith (foreground) plays Afong Moy's long-time attendant in "The Chinese Lady" at Denver Center. Credit: Adams VisCom, provided by the Denver Center

Afong Moy was one part of the stage name given to the teenager by brothers Nathaniel and Frederick Carne. The other moniker was the exploitative, come-hither The Chinese Lady. The erasure of her personal history and exhibition shares ugly similarities with that of Saartjie Baartman, also known as The Venus Hottentot, the South African woman exhibited in France in the early 1800s. Moy talks about her life through her 60s. (Baartman died in her 20s.)

Moy is clear from the start that the story she tells is yet another work of imagination. But Suh's telling is a generous one, a restorative one. First, Moy cannot speak English. Second, she wasn't allowed to speak even when she could.

In a deft piece of dialogue, Moy recounts in rapid-fire succession the questions her presence — her body — pose to those who come to gawk at her. "Do you think she ... I wonder if she ... And my goodness look at her feet." Moy's feet and the tradition of binding them is a source of wonder, dismay and, when she meets President Andrew Jackson, an even more disquieting fascination. But everything about Moy (except her actual humanity) is met with curiosity.

Smith portrays Moy's older attendant and selective translator, Atung. He, too, has a story, though we only get slivers of it. (Something about Pittsburgh, one of the many stops on the tour, causes him to quaver.) His young ward dismisses him as "irrelevant," just another prop in the very baroque designed "room." He is also a master of the nearly imperceptible but meaningful smirk.

Their artificially concocted relationship develops into something more engaged and meaningful over the years. Her repeated, yet time-stamped, introduction to another year of exhibition underscores how her display extended long past the two years she was originally leased for. Along the way, she makes wry and stinging observations. What if a 14-year-old white girl had been sent to China for the same purposes of "education and entertainment," she wonders.

As Moy ages, Kang's performance deepens and gains poignancy. Gone is the chirpy, over-eager teen who makes the matinee audience laugh when she riffs on chopsticks or the same meal she must eat in "the room" created for its faux authenticity. A similar turn toward the ache and muted outrage of their situation gets expressed when Atung shares a dream he had about home, loss and Afong Moy.

A bravura scene comes late in the play when Afong Moy is no longer The Chinese Lady. She's aged out. But that doesn't stop her from walking the audience through her milestones — and ours — as she ambles across the stage in a simulation of a timeline. For the Denver Center production, Suh rightly added into Moy's account acts of anti-Asian violence in the city's 1880 anti-Chinese riot, which destroyed blocks of Chinatown businesses and left dozens beaten and 28-year-old laundry worker Look Young lynched.

Her ongoing oral history is made arduous for her — those bound feet — and deeply chastising for both the audience and that culpable nation that made her a spectacle.

IF YOU GO

"The Chinese Lady." Written by Lloyd Suh. Directed by Seema Sueko. Featuring Narea Kang and Sky Smith. At the Singleton Theatre in the Helen Bonfils Theatre Complex through Oct. 15, For tickets and info, go to denvercenter.org or call 303-893-4100.