

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

The Power to Amaze

Sylvie · Wednesday, May 23rd, 2018

HALI: *How can something be 100% truthful and also a fantasy?*

JU: *This is how art works, by capturing the truth through*

imagination.

—*Soft Power*

*

The lines above come late in the world premiere of *Soft Power*, a collaborative work by playwright/lyricist David Henry Hwang (*M. Butterfly*) and composer/lyricist Jeanine Tesori (*Fun Home*), but they've never been truer. Hwang and Tesori choose to call *Soft Power* a “play/musical,” which is as good as anything, since it is currently demolishing all precedents at The Ahmanson Theatre and blowing up expectations like so much bubble gum. This joint effort rips through uncharted terrain with a contemporary satire that names only one name (not the one you think) and it speaks truth to power by skewering our current political scene with humor, grace and diligence.

It is a seemingly simple story. In an effort to outstrip American dominance in the field, Xue Xing (Conrad Ricamora), a Chinese film producer, visits Hollywood hoping to enlist a famous Chinese American screenwriter named DHH (played by a sly Francis Jue), to help him write a Chinese TV series that will compete with the successful American ones and provide this “soft power” to a China that desperately wants it.



Conrad Ricamora and Kendyl Ito in *Soft Power* at The Ahmanson Theatre

That's the beginning. The clash of cultures that ensues — including a vivid debunking of the colonially tinged perspective fostered by such beloved musicals as *The King and I* — is hilarious as well as smart. But when the visiting Xing is invited to attend a 2016 rally for that year's Democratic presidential candidate, he is unexpectedly drawn into her inner circle — and falls in love. Can you guess the rest?

This little event upends a whole lot of things, almost all of them grandly surprising, and they spark a shift in the balance of power, not just between the two people involved but, in due course,

between their two countries following the shocking outcome of the American election. The time frame for the show is both now and 50 years from now, though we glide back and forth between those periods with a laxity implicit in that huge convenience known as poetic license.



The cast of *Soft Power* at The Ahmanson Theatre.

Don't ask me how they put this thing together — smoke, mirrors, miracles, talent and a refreshing collection of self-deprecating inside and outside jokes. When was the last time a playwright injected himself as a central player into his own play (or musical) without a trace of self-consciousness (yes, DHH; do the disambiguation)? And when was the last time that a prominent and *real* political figure took center stage in a musical undisguised? She's a pizza-eating Hillary as you've never seen Hillary before, because the supremely talented Alyse Alan Louis, who plays her, will amaze you.



Conrad Ricamora and Alyse Alan Louis in *Soft Power*.

The surprises don't end there. Neither do the plot twists, the cleverness or the enjoyment because they're all as fresh and welcome as a long draught of water in the desert.

But this is a new show and it does have its hiccups. As wildly imaginative as is this joyful political fantasy, it can still use some tweaking. The show opens as a play with no music that slightly overstays its welcome, and when the music does come it delivers a terrific 11 o'clock number that happens at about 9 o'clock (no spoilers here). A switching of bodies in a hospital bed later on is a bit clumsy; switching beds altogether might have been easier. And while an aspirational final anthem raises the temperature in the hall by at least ten degrees, it probably could do with a little toning down.

In the scheme of things, these are minor and fixable issues, because what matters in this alluring and seductive affair is already there — and that is a smart, generous, rowdy and loving heart that beats strongly in a highly original musical or play/musical or musical with play or whatever else they end up choosing to call it. We talk entirely too much in this country about groundbreaking shows, but not since *The Lion King* have we had a musical that in so many subtle and intelligent ways really and truly tears up new ground.

Hwang and Tesori are the linchpins. Her music underscores by turns the crazy fun and foolishness, while their joint lyrics satirize the high points that deserve ridicule. Ricamora is a real charmer with a gorgeous voice as Xue Xing; Kendyl Ito will tickle your funny bone as his pre-teen daughter Jing (she also plays the older Jing) and, with his loyalty and his comic timing, the very American Austin Ku will delight you as Zing's devoted bodyguard.

The creators get a lot of good help from their friends, including director Leigh Silverman's brisk yet unhurried staging, David Zinn's imaginative and often glitzy scenic design, Anita Yavich's fanciful costumes, the make-up and hair and wig design from Angelina Avallone and Tom Watson and, above all, the resilient and endlessly exciting and inventive choreography of Sam Pinkleton.



The cast of *Soft Power* at The Ahmanson Theatre.

Soft Power's highest achievement lies in turning our racially dubious nationalism — our so-called

white privilege — on its head with neither bile nor anger, but simply by suggesting we laugh at ourselves as we look squarely in the mirror. The gesture is deceptively simple. A little humility *vis-à-vis* the rest of the world can be a powerful tonic.

Commissioned and produced by Center Theatre Group, in association with L.A.'s East West Players and San Francisco's Curran, *Soft Power* is, simply put, both a smart and gentle spoof and like nothing you have ever seen. Unique describes it. Seeing it will do even better. It may be an unintended prescription for peace in our time, but short of that, it is certainly an excellent recipe for a couple of hours of grown-up fun that also offers a return — no matter how brief — to a level of unadulterated sanity.

How welcome is *that*?

Top image: Alyse Alan Louis in front of the Golden Arches in the world premiere of Soft Power at The Ahmanson Theatre.

All photos by Craig Schwartz

WHAT: *Soft Power*

WHERE: Center Theatre Group/Ahmanson Theatre, The Music Center, 135 N. Grand Avenue, Los Angeles 90012.

WHEN: Tuesdays-Fridays, 8pm; Saturdays, 2 & 8 pm; Sundays, 1 and 6:30 p.m. Ends June 10.

Exceptions: Added 2 p.m. performance June 7. NO 6:30 p.m. performance on June 10.

HOW: Tickets: \$30–\$130 (subject to change), available online at CenterTheatreGroup.org, by phone at 213.972.4400 or in person at the Center Theatre Group Box Office, Ahmanson Theatre. Groups: (213) 972-7231. Deaf community: Info & charge at CenterTheatreGroup.org/ACCESS.

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