

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

tokyo fish story at South Coast Repertory — and more

Sylvie · Wednesday, March 18th, 2015

The prosaic title doesn't do it justice, but Kimber Lee's new play, *tokyo fish story* (the lower case is intentional), is a small gem. Now in a limited run on the Julianne Argyros Stage at South Coast Repertory, it is a sweet, surprisingly poetic 100-or-so-minutes about the value of having values, including, in Japan, the serious interweaving rituals of food, art and life. How they enrich and complement one another. But it's also more.

The aging Koji (a venerable Sab Shimono) is a *shokunin*, a Japanese term that translates as “master of his profession” as a Sushi chef. The restaurant he's owned for decades in a downscale section of Tokyo is beginning to suffer from the competition of younger and far less meticulous sushi chain restaurants.

Like most fine artists who take real pride in what they do, Koji refuses to compromise on the quality of the fish he offers his customers or its preparation. His son Takashi (a nicely balanced Ryun Yu), nearing 40 and second in command, has learned the sushi trade in his father's kitchen. He follows faithfully in Koji's footsteps, showing him all the respect and admiration he deserves and that the society demands. But the world is changing. Talented, calm and reserved, Takashi silently waits his turn. He worries about the future as he sees their business dwindle and watches his father's refusal to embrace not lower standards, but less intransigent ones.



l-r, Lawrence Kao, Sab Shimono and Ryun Yu in *tokyo fish story* at SCR

The only other regular employee in this kitchen is Nobu (the terrific Lawrence Kao), a happy-go-lucky dude in his late 20s, in love with American rap and hip-hop to the point of speaking almost exclusively in its hip, specialized jargon. Nobu is not a fool. He's an alert observer of the drama playing out around him and knows his skillful way around that sushi kitchen as well as anyone.

When a “help wanted” sign draws only incompetent applicants or, as it happens, a woman named Ama (an intriguing Jilly Lee), the contrast between the old world and the new looms sharper than ever. Tradition dictates that women are not allowed to work in a sushi kitchen. But change, this one included, is around the corner, and it comes like a breath of fresh air in some magnificent scenes, not only thanks to Lee's superior writing, but also to the delicate imagination and vibrant engineering of scenic designer Neil Patel and sound designer John Zalewski. Food preparation on stage is always tricky, and never as tricky as it is here, but it's pulled off as flawlessly as the rest of this production, down to the rubbery octopus getting a scrubbing by Nobu.

In a broader cosmic sense, this is a tale of the old vs. the new, tradition vs. novelty, perfection vs. something less than. But it also is about acceptance and acknowledgement and the transforming power of both. The play is so precisely and delicately written, and so faithfully staged by director Bart DeLorenzo, that all of Lee's subtleties and pauses and half-sentences and truncated words add up to a rich, enthralling fresh language for the stage.



l-r, Eddie Mui and Sab Shimono in *tokyo fish story* at SCR.

A scene between Koji, as he begins to acknowledge his advancing age, and his old friend the fishmonger, who has decided to retire (a versatile Eddie Mui), is all silences and monosyllables, with the single expression "Mm" repeatedly acting like some human punctuation that renders any number of meanings depending on tone, inflection, turn of the head and look. It is a masterful example of wordless communication between old friends.

It is that kind of piece. Small, subtle, wise and sweet. This is one fish story that mustn't get away.

WHAT: tokyo fish story

WHERE: Julianne Argyros Stage, South Coast Repertory, 655 Town Center Drive, Costa Mesa, CA 92628.

WHEN: Tuesday-Sunday, 7:45pm; Saturday & Sunday, 2pm; through March 29. NOTE: There is an ASL-interpreted performance at 2pm, March 28 and no evening performance on March 29.

HOW: Tickets \$22-\$74, available in person at the theatre box office, by phone at 714.708.5555 or online at www.scr.org

Top image: l-r, Ryun Yu, Sab Shimono and Jully Lee in tokyo fish story.

All photos by Debora Robinson.

...Meanwhile in SWITZERLAND at The Geffen Playhouse

This two-character mystery thriller has smart, even witty dialogue and enough suspense to hold your interest for a while, weaving in and out of the real life of its protagonist, the late American novelist and short story writer Patricia Highsmith.



Laura Linney and Seth Numrich in *Switzerland* at The Geffen Playhouse. Photo by Michael Lamont.

If you don't know of her, you may not wish to. The morbidity, nastiness and contradictions of the real Highsmith, a woman whose American parents managed to put her through a brutalizing childhood, led to her repressed and abrasive adult life as a talented and successful author, but miserable woman. She was an outspoken bigot, racist and anti-Semite. Her writing similarly liked to shock, with some use of lesbian themes and protagonists chosen to be morally corrupt.

Not exactly a barrel of laughs. The fictionalized events in this new play, forged by Australian playwright Joanna Murray-Smith and woven into a taut 95 minutes on the Skirball stage at The Geffen by director Mark Brokaw, is titillating. But only just. It is an exchange between a young man from Highsmith's American publishing house who shows up on her doorstep in the Swiss Alps, and the rancorous writer who wants no part of him or his interest. Until the tables turn.

Laura Linney and Seth Numrich are the players who bravely take on these improbable characters and their verbal punches and counterpunches, plus the intricate games they play that careen between threatening and vicious, with the occasional dab of macabre and the even less frequent funny.

As a whole, this is an unfortunate decision of a play commissioned by The Geffen. The performances are worthy enough, although Highsmith is an uncomfortable reach for Linney, who is not old and certainly not ugly enough for the part. But the premise itself is specious. Murray-Smith's play has no center and her ending feels expedient. It's all verbal fencing for its own sake, with clever turns of phrase, but unattractive characters, improbable twists and a meaningless outcome.

Short of a trip to Switzerland, you should enjoy Anthony T. Fanning's breathtaking scenic design of the writer's lair, with its spiral staircase to the heavens and sprawling vistas of the surrounding Alps. But substance? Just don't say that you were not forewarned.

WHAT: *Switzerland*

WHERE: Audrey Skirball Theatre at the Geffen Playhouse, 10886 Le Conte Avenue, Los Angeles, CA 90024.

WHEN: Tuesday-Friday, 8pm; Saturday, 3 & 8pm; Sundays, 2 & 7pm; Through April 19. Note: NO performances March 22 or April 15.

HOW: Tickets \$99-\$119 currently, available at the Geffen Playhouse box office, at 310.208.5454 or online at www.geffenplayhouse.com. Fees may apply.

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