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Hear moving stories from Asian Australians

by Lloyd Bradford Syke



(<http://www.crikey.com.au/2010/01/22/visit-a-snarky-alternate-universe/somethingtodo2/>)

Directors William Yang and Annette Shun Wah have sought to and have succeeded in reminding us how elemental great theatre can be, and how easily it can connect, hearts and minds, even when they are seemingly split asunder, by what sometimes appear to be impassable cultural divides.

Stories East & West — part of an Asian Australian performance series at Sydney's Belvoir Street — consists of six discrete stories from the lives of people living them, and grew out of storytelling workshops conducted by Yang, for Performance 4a, a couple of years back. The format's nothing new to Yang, who's been performing monologues, with image projection and music, since 1989. The character of his monologues is reflected in these, the histories and herstories of others: autobiographical tales, tragic and comic, in the way life double-deals this dialectic. We hear firsthand accounts of cruelty, questionable cultural practices, growing up gay, intra-racial prejudice, self-harm and much, much more.

Collectively, it reaches nether, hidden corners of the psyche and soul other theatre rarely, if ever, touches. It is deeply moving, deeply personal, brave and binding, in the sense that both despite and because of the differences between people the stories shine a spotlight upon, there is a universality, a lifeline, an umbilical cord that ties us tightly together. It dispels all cynicism, restores faith in and hope for humanity. Composer Nicholas Ng has introduced each vignette with a diversity of musical colours that distinguish each presenter.

Daphne Lowe Kelley defies stereotypes and expectations. A Chinese woman with a broad Aussie accent, married to a husband of Hungarian-German parentage. Like her fellow presenters (bar one, captured on video), she walks in a dignified, unceremonious fashion, into the spotlight, standing in front of a huge screen of snapshots to which she can, of course, relate, but which we can, too. We're allowed in, invited in, welcomed to her world, her perspective.

We follow Joy Hopwood's real-life dream sequence: her emergence from caterpillar to butterfly, as she slogs away at an abhorrent, deadend telesales job, while using her initiative to talk her way into auditions as a *Play School* presenter, a springboard for a diverse career as a television and stage actor, author and ambassador, for Mission Australia. Paul Cordeiro is an out-and-proud performer and choreographer, of Portuguese, Malaysian-Chinese and Malay extraction. His success in musicals, with Opera Australia and Sydney Olympics opening ceremonies seems dramatically out-of-step with his humble quest for racial identity. Mary Tang was not wanted: steeped in the chauvanism of Confucius' Three Obediences, her life has been one of defiance and emergence, as an award-winning poet. Mai Nguyen-Long gets up-close and personal, even confiding her ongoing propensity for self-harm. A prize-winning visual artist, her works are challenging, if not downright confronting, which has caused her to rub up hard against the political correctness of her own community.

I can't imagine a work of greater elegance, poignancy, simplicity, humility or dignity. I'm in awe of Shun Wah, Yang, and all the contributors. I feel close to them. Almost like I've known them all my life. Or do now. If theatre can do that, it can do just about anything. Inspirational. I hope it becomes a phenomenon.

The details: *Stories East & West* is playing as part of [COOLie \(http://www.belvoir.com.au/CustomContentRetrieve.aspx?ID=1100524\)](http://www.belvoir.com.au/CustomContentRetrieve.aspx?ID=1100524) — an Asian Australian performance event — Belvoir Street's Downstairs Theatre until Sunday.

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