

THEATRE REVIEW

Father's unreliable storytelling makes for an inspiring play

Gold Mountain is an immigrant's odyssey

PAT DONNELLY
GAZETTE THEATRE CRITIC

Talk about a match made in heaven. The combination of the multimedia expertise of Montreal's Les Deux Mondes theatre company and the rare and fascinating tale of a Chinese sailor who settles down in England, written by David Yip and Kevin Wong, co-produced by the Unity Theatre of Liverpool and Les Deux Mondes, makes for inspiring, memorable theatre.

Gold Mountain, now playing at Aux Écuries, is a remarkably succinct immigrant's odyssey loosely based on the life story of Yip's father. But Yip and co-author Wong make it clear from the outset that this elder was not a reliable narrator. In some ways, the minimalist Gold Mountain is reminiscent of the Canadian Jewish classic, *Lies My Father Told Me*. A father's dreams of financial success (in this case, finding a mountain made of gold, or winning at the gambling tables) lead to a huge letdown for the entire family.

Yip has said it was only in his later years, after taking up Buddhism, that he found the forgiveness and empathy necessary to draw out his father's story, through a series of taped interviews. At the time, his father was in the early stages of dementia, so the lines of reality were doubly blurred.

In the play, the son (played by Eugene Salleh) frequently calls his father (played by Yip) into account. Following the old man's anecdote about meeting Sun Yat-sen, founding father of the Republic of China, the son reminds him that Sun Yat-sen had died before he was born. As for the letters that the father claims to have written to Chairman Mao, telling him how to run his revolution — it turns out that they were never mailed. Whether he was actually involved in a seamen's strike remains in question as does how he avoided the cruel deportation and repatriation of Chinese seamen from Liverpool in 1945.

Daniel Meilleur's imagistic direction of Gold Mountain aptly con-

veys the quasi-mythical nature of the play while strong, credible performances by Salleh and Yip add an element of psychological realism. Subtle shifts of lighting make silhouettes of bodies or masks of faces, while deft use of projections of scenes from China and Liverpool (by Yves Dubé) and a richly textured soundscape (by Michel Robidoux) set the scene. Symbolic props like a golden sailing ship suggest the dreamlike nature of the past.

According to the paternal account, it was the militant wing of the Kouimintang, the political party co-founded by Sun Yat-sen, which drove him out of Canton. After fleeing across China on foot, he arrived in Hong Kong where he signed on as a seaman and found his way to Liverpool. There, he courted a British girl named Mary whose smile, he says, could bring sunshine to a rainy day. He promised her lots of children and many laundries. Multiple children soon arrived. But he lost the one laundry he ever owned in a card game and took up selling opium from the house.

The marriage went downhill from there. Once Mary landed a job, she moved out, leaving him in a state of confused despair from which he never fully recovered.

In Gold Mountain, Mary is idealized, rather than brought forth in the flesh. She remains forever young and stunningly beautiful in wedding-photo images projected onto two giant fans for one scene, and onto a cylindrical tent of mosquito netting (with Yip standing inside) for another. There's a suggestion of romance fading into the mundane within a narrative that avoids pathos and sentimentality by maintaining a certain distance.

This lyrical, fragmented gem leaves us wondering why we don't hear more diaspora stories from our own Chinese communities across Canada.

Gold Mountain, by David Yip and Kevin Wong, continues, in English, with French surtitles, until April 27 at Théâtre aux Écuries, 7285 Chabot St. Tickets \$12.50 to \$25. Call 514-328-7437 or www.auxecuries.com.

pdonnell@montrealgazette.com
Twitter: patstagepage



SAM HEATH

From left, David Yip and Eugene Salleh in Gold Mountain by David Yip