Layered and Complicated, Just Like Family

Staff Reviews

Fa'alavelave: The Interruption is a lot to unpack. It is a credit to the playwright Kiki, a.k.a. Kiana Rivera, that she was able to weave this story focusing on family, Samoan culture, one's sexuality, and how relationships are affected by these things and more. I had to sit at my computer for two hours wondering where to start.

"Where to start" is a question I thought Mele (Katherine Wong) would ask herself frequently throughout the play. It starts with her riding a high- she is gearing up for an art exhibition and there is a surprise birthday party being planned for her- then she gets news from her Aunty Pina (Dorothy Mane) that her estranged father, Malosi (Tom Perelini), has died and it's her duty to come and help with the funeral preparations and taking care of her late father's affairs. Her fiance, Sefina (Vaganafetelai Mamea) is supportive through this process. Sefina sees that Mele is adamant about not wanting anything to do with her father's affairs, but she also knows that it's something Mele must do and thus pushes her to go. Together, they fly from Honolulu to Puna (on the Big Island) and meet Malosi's sisters, Pina and Samaria (Alex Savusa). There, the play begins- unfolding and unwinding as Mele begins to learn more about her father, her aunties, and even herself as well as Safina.
Fa'alavelave is ripe with meaty drama that only family can provide. From a Youtube tutorial opening sequence to your aunty still trying to reconcile with the fact that you're a lesbian to a long distance call to Samoa that drops a bomb on you, there is no shortage of times to laugh, wince, and cry. The play was a brief window into Samoan culture and how a family deals with death, both rare occasions to see on stage, and it was exciting to be in the house tonight. Kiki is a staunch indigenous artist, writing and creating plays to represent the voices and experiences of Pacific Islanders. Not many opportunities exist for this kind of theatre, and that alone makes it worth seeing, not to mention the rich story that she has written and woven.

A few factors slow this production down. Wong and Mamea's deliveries seemed unfocused and inconsistent, sometimes seeming like they were saying lines just to say lines. While they both had strong moments of clarity, the in-between was lacking. The transitions in the production were soft and confusing. A couple of times during the production, I was disoriented about where and when we were because of them. The lights would dim, but stay on warm and bright enough that you'd see the remaining actor on stage doing their business. A music cue would start, which I often take as the passage of time between scenes, but when the next scene would start up it seemed like only a couple of minutes or so had passed - which made me question the light and music transitions in the first place. Not all of them were like this; the transitions in act two felt more akin to what I'm used to.

This show does get a lot of things right. Mane and Savusa's portrayals as the aunties is dynamic and wonderful to watch as they stretch and bicker and come back together to get each other's back. The video projections ranged from creative (a Youtube video tutorial, FaceTime on a hanging screen) to beautiful (the walking trees that were present in the whole show, the transition to Samoa). Perelini hustled as three distinct characters, and while onlt two of them had lines, he was a sight to see. The audience and I especially liked his Hercules as he delivered tales about Malosi's promiscuity.

LGBT issues. Single parents. Adoption. Commitment to family, commitment to culture. Religion. Secrets. Samoa. There are a lot of things that make up Fa'alavelave, and yet it all works very well. Kiki, alongside director Laura Clark Greaver, have come together to bring a very important show to see to life. I hope you can come and witness Fa'alavelave: The Interruption.

The production runs now through December 3. Thursday-Saturday, 7:30pm, and Sunday at 2:00pm. Tickets range from $8-18, and are available at the Kennedy Theatre box office, etickethawaii.com, and (808)944-2697. There is a post-show rap on December 1 if you are interested in engaging with the cast and crew about the process and creation of this play.