

Teen drama plays out in “BFE”

Category/Issue: Arts & Entertainment, Volume 35 No. 04

BY ROXANNE RAY
IE Contributor

“Being a teen can really suck.”

So remembers SIS Productions’ Artistic Director Kathy Hsieh. She’s also referring to the lead Korean-American character, a 14-year-old girl named Panny, in SIS Productions’ upcoming production of Julia Cho’s play “BFE.”

The play’s title – an acronym for a far-away location to be revealed during the play – reflects what Hsieh appreciates as “the aching isolation that exists in modern-day relationships.”

This production is both a bit of a homecoming for Hsieh, director Leticia Lopez, and composer Byron Au Yong, as well as a stretch for SIS Productions, which is known for its long-running dramatic series “Sex in Seattle.”

Hsieh had participated as an actor in a staged reading of “BFE” that the Seattle Repertory Theatre and Hedgebrook co-produced in 2003 as a part of their Women Playwrights Festival. “It was terrific getting to work with Julia as she developed the script,” Hsieh says, “and that was actually my first introduction to her work.”

The reading turned Hsieh into a fan of Cho’s work. “The audience response for the script was amazing,” Hsieh reports. “Knowing that audiences in Seattle (even with the Seattle Rep audience being older on average and a lot whiter than our audience) connected with the script is also one of the reasons why we chose to do ‘BFE.’” Lopez had seen both a reading of Cho’s play at the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles, as well as a full production at Playwrights Horizon. Hsieh says of Lopez: “When she found out we had the rights to do the West Coast premiere, she emphatically expressed her desire for us to consider her for the position of director.”

Yong had also seen the Playwrights Horizon production, and readily responded to Lopez's interest in his original music by agreeing to compose new music for SIS Productions. Hsieh says, "He has assembled an amazing group of musicians to record his score and that is one of the truly exciting aspects of this production."

Lopez found an immediate fit with the SIS Productions artistic team. "The SIS women were very supportive of whichever direction was taken in casting so, to begin with, we looked for young women—in their 20's," Lopez says. "This is how both the workshop reading at the Mark Taper Forum and the subsequent production at Playwrights Horizon was handled."

But Lopez soon rejected this strategy. "When I saw a nearly-teen actor read the role of Panny, it illuminated the play differently for me," she says. "Suddenly, something —this story — that lived in my head resonated in my body; my own memories as an adolescent were in the room with me and it was powerful."

Lopez decided to take on the challenges associated with working with teens. "I didn't want to deny the audience that same visceral and utterly real encounter with a teen girl," she says. "It is a voice—especially that of the teen woman of color—that is rarely heard from to begin with, and when it has emerged, it is usually channeled through white male writers."

This casting direction offered its own challenges. Hsieh reports, "We had the most extensive audition process that SIS has ever had. It literally took us months to completely cast the show."

During this time, SIS Productions began its community outreach for "BFE." "We asked everybody and everyone about every teen actor they had worked with that might fit the roles we were trying to cast," Hsieh says. "We're very blessed in that for the two Asian American teenage roles we found two gals, both of whom have had training via the Seattle Children's Theatre."

Two of the actors cast are teens Leah Cohen-Sapida and Maia Lee. As a director, Lopez recognizes that these casting choices will affect SIS Productions' goal to offer its audiences high-quality acting. "A good adult actress can remember this time for, and with us,

superbly; she'll both reflect and comment on adolescence through her acting," Lopez says. "But the play is even better without that particular agreement to suspend disbelief. What you risk losing in actor skill level is made up for by these young women in immediacy."

SIS Productions chose the script because it explores a range of issues common to Asian American women and girls. "'BFE' addresses the struggle that women in particular face — that of being judged by 'looks' and having to meet societal standards of beauty," Hsieh says. Panny feels insufficient beside her "blonde and gorgeous" best friend. And Panny's mom, Isabel, "is starting to reach the age where being called 'ma'am' can definitely wound one's ego."

SIS Productions also plans to open up new opportunities for teens to view this production. Group tickets are discounted, but Hsieh says, any youth or high school group "can contact us and we can make special arrangements to get them in to see the show on a space available basis."

Reflecting the young Asian American female experience is a primary goal of SIS Productions. "We really want to create the opportunity for especially Asian American teenage gals to see the show," Hsieh says. And teen actor Cohen-Sapida says: "I love what Panny symbolizes for all people who are searching for a sense of identity, a place to feel safe and a place in which they feel they belong."

"BFE" runs through March 16, 2008, at Richard Hugo House Theatre, 1634 Eleventh Ave., Seattle.