

# Inspired by the Caricature of North Korea in “Your for Me for You”

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*Playwright Mia Chung.*

Intercultural translation always poses challenges.

American playwright Mia Chung was intrigued by the challenge of understanding North Korean culture. “I felt very alienated from North Korea,” says Chung, who believed the isolated nation served “as a bizarre massive brainwashing experiment.”

“In short, I was very susceptible to the simplistic caricature of North Korea that it presents to the world and that the West is only too happy to proliferate,” Chung says. “It just seemed like a crazy place run by an insane and insanely inhumane dictator, and the people seemed like followers of a cult.”

But in the summer of 2009, two events led her to explore North Korean culture further in her new play, “You for Me for You.”

Two American journalists, Laura Ling and Euna Lee, were captured by North Korean forces inside that country’s border, and former President Bill Clinton was engaged in obtaining their release.

Later that summer, kidnap victim Jaycee Dugard was freed. Thinking about Dugard's psychological experience as a kidnap victim, Chung reports, "I became obsessed with Stockholm Syndrome. I was obsessed with how something so wrong can last, can become a stable reality."

Chung then applied these thoughts to the diplomatic events and cultural environment in North Korea. "I started to think more carefully about what keeps North Korea stable — as opposed to what makes it so weird, from our American perspective," she says. "My new paradigm for North Korea is that its rulers have basically kidnapped its citizens."

Chung then turned this concept on its head. "When I started to consider how the U.S. might appear to a North Korean woman, someone who has not had early and increasing exposure to Americanisms, as so much of the developed world has," Chung says, "I started to consider how the U.S. (and most any culture, honestly) is programmed and develops its own propaganda and blindnesses."

Chung is eager to bring "You for Me for You" to Seattle this month. Currently living in Rhode Island, this will be her first visit to Washington state, and she looks forward to connecting with the theatre community in the Pacific Northwest.

Following the staged readings of this play at ACT Theatre and the Icicle Creek Play Festival, Chung plans to continue developing her ideas on intercultural understanding in "You for Me for You" toward an eventual full production. Inkwell will present a staged reading of the play at the Kennedy Center's Page to Stage Festival over Labor Day weekend, and then Chung will fine-tune the play with a writing group in New York City during the coming year.

*Mia Chung's play "You for Me for You" will be presented on August 20 at Icicle Creek Music Center in Leavenworth, and August 23 at ACT Theatre, 700 Union St, Seattle.*