



Adelaide Theatre Guide

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THE EMPRESS AND ME

Grist To the Mill Productions Ltd

Studio at Bakehouse Theatre

Until 2 March

Review by Paige Mulholland

When you come from mixed heritage, where do you belong? If people look at you like a foreigner and treat you like a foreigner, no matter where you are, is anywhere home? "The Empress and Me" is set in the 1920s, but its themes of race, culture and belonging feel very current and hit home for many Australians.

"The Empress and Me" tells the true story of Princess Der Ling, or Elizabeth White. Born to a Chinese father and a Eurasian mother and growing up in Japan, France and China, she doesn't know where she fits in, or if she fits in anywhere. But when she becomes part of the Chinese imperial court and quickly falls in with the Empress herself, the pressure mounts to be Chinese, and just Chinese, or risk losing her family, her social standing and her future.

The show is true edutainment, teaching the audience about Chinese court traditions and Parisians school uniforms as much as it is entertaining them with a fascinating story of a girl caught between cultures. Beginning with a factual recount of her story and only truly analysing Der Ling's feelings towards the end of the show, the narrative can feel a little stiff and factual at times – more of a lecture than a play. Particularly in a one-woman show in a cosy space like the Studio at Bakehouse Theatre, the audience is expecting an intimate account, not just a history lesson. And while "The Empress and Me" does start to reflect on its central themes towards the end, more reflection and emotion woven throughout the show wouldn't go astray.

The costumes, ranging from elaborate Chinese finery to smart Western dresses, are very well done, helping the audience picture the ever-changing, ever-moving life that was Elizabeth's.

Michelle Yim plays Elizabeth with grandeur and melodrama, and while it seems like both of these traits were part of the real Elizabeth's personality, they sometimes feel overdone, particularly in such a small theatre where the audience are so close. Overall though, her performance is strong, polished and confident – it would be interesting to see what Yim would do with a more emotively-scripted version of this story

Elizabeth White's story is a fascinating one, full of ambition, politics and cultural tension. And while the script sometimes feels a little wooden, if you're interested in history, you'll enjoy, and be educated, at "The Empress and Me".

Rating: 4 stars (out of 5)