

British Theatre Guide

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Oikos

Simon Wu
The Red Room
Jellyfish Theatre
(2010)

Is it raining as you read this? It certainly is in this new play which is a warning to all those who live Thames side and it is impossible not to also think of the thousands in danger in Pakistan's floods and elsewhere.

Oikos was the ancient Greek word that came to mean not just family but house and household in the wider sense of dependent community. It is the root for our word ecology and this is the first play in a project by the Red Room to present plays that reflect ecological issues in a temporary theatre that has been built by volunteers from donated recycled materials in a school yard in Southwark for a season that lasts until 9th October, after which it is due to be demolished.

On the surface Wu's play is indeed a family drama. Salil, a poor Indian boy living beside the Ganges loses his family in a flood and is adopted by a relation married to an English man. The play starts years later when Salil is a successful City of London financier setting up a multi-million pound deal. While his mind is on his female assistant, with whom he may already be having an affair, his wife Assana is out buying him a birthday present. Meanwhile in his memory we shift back into his childhood where he interrupts an elaborate game his sister is playing.

When both Salil and Assana return to their elegant Georgian home beside the Thames it is raining heavily, there are flood warnings out and the river is beginning to rise. Their daughter Lily is out with university friends and they are worried about her until she turns up drenched, probably high on substances and urging them to get out before the river cuts them off.

Neil d'Souza has a fluency as the little boy that is lacking in the adult Salil, who tends to chop his delivery into short phrases which, while destroying spontaneity, does perhaps suggest the distancing of his preoccupation with possessions and status. As Assana, Dido Miles captures the awkwardness of a woman who hates having to give dinner parties and struggles with the kind of society that, for her husband, marks success. Salil may be thought a financial wizard by his city colleagues but neither he nor his wife has picked up the dress sense or taste to match the station to which he aspires. This however may not be director Topher Campbell's intention but the result of the theatre's re-use approach for I have never seen a less inept set of props and furniture for a supposedly elegant Georgian setting. Since almost no practical use is made of most of them why have them? Deliberately token props would be more believable as truly treasured items.

The production uses the whole length of the building in a traverse staging which places considerable strains upon actors who are frequently required to conduct one-sided conversations with people who are not there - so there is no other character's response to the person whose face much of the audience cannot see. In fact, things are so under-lit (and I don't mean those scenes that take place after the electricity has failed which rely on torchlight) that the actors have to push

their performances to the limit. Again it may be cost or recycling policy affecting availability of equipment, though two projectors have been obtained to show video which creates a background mood with images of offices, street scenes etc projected on two corners of the space.

Video is also used for dialogue sequences with what I took to be 'Mother' Ganges and her daughter but may in fact have been Salil's actual mother and sister, though on stage the sister is doubled by Amy Dawson's Lily, playing an engagingly balletic original game like magic hopscotch, presenting a past of childhood innocence in contrast to the contemporary world depicted.

Although a flood is integral to both parts of this story the play is not about climate change and responsibility for ecological disaster. Indeed, at one point Salil blames such disaster not on human irresponsibility and global warming or even on the gods but on being poor. Individual human responsibility, nonetheless, is at the heart of its message as Salil begins to come to terms with the past. The concentration on self that saved him but stopped him helping his mother and sister and still comes between him and his present family whether he is worshipping Shiva and the Ganges or the making of money.

The play centres on Shalil; we discover less about his wife and daughter, but even his journey is as much beneath the lines as in the written text. This was sometimes rather awkwardly brought out. It may be typical of a certain sort of male arrogance to stand there issuing orders if there are females or underlings available but and making him refuse to lift a finger when desperate to save a prized possession from the flood makes it strongly - but it is difficult to believe a man so agitated would do nothing himself when things are almost within arms reach.

Things seem more natural when, minutes later, he is down on his knees rolling up a carpet but the use of space sometimes gives a very confusing message. This sequence gives us another layer of value when an old doll suddenly become more valuable to him than all his other possessions - but the doll has not been clearly established for us beforehand, although we have seen it. I doubt if many of the audience would have known what he was looking for. I hadn't a clue until he found it.

Clarity in this acoustic and against Adi Billinge's powerful sound effects places demands the actors don't yet meet. My companion, who has excellent hearing thought they were searching for a dog, but as the play runs in such problems should disappear.

This is a play that ambitiously tries to set a very real experience alongside one that parallels it in a more poetic form. It savagely shows the hurts that fester in so many relationships but though Salil seems to gain some understanding of himself not one of these characters shows any concern for anyone outside their household. How like the attitude of too many of us to the rest of the world. These are strong themes to handle in a story that has some similarities with a Hollywood disaster movie.

The theatre itself, with its seemingly haphazard order makes an extra reason for a visit. I thought its long straight seating a mistake leaving those at the far end of rows too distant. The audience needs to be drawn closer in which might help both communication and audibility but the project is a splendid demonstration of how much we waste. Everything here was on its way to the tip before it was donated. It seems a pity that a building that represents so much effort on the part of the Red Room, The Junction, the Architecture Foundation, architects Köbberling and Kaltwasser and the many volunteers and schoolchildren who worked on it, should have such a short life but its building was part of the London Festival of Architecture last July and it was conceived not as a permanent structure but to demonstrate just what could be done, meeting all the building regulations and safety requirements while using scrap..

Run ends 18th September 2010

Reviewer: [Howard Loxton](#)