

REVIEWS

Chinglish

Berkeley Repertory Theatre and South Coast Repertory Lyric Theatre, HK Academy for Performing Arts
Reviewed: Mar 1

David Henry Hwang's comedy about miscommunication and misunderstanding between two cultures has garnered much acclaim in the US, winning the Chinese-American playwright a Joseph Jefferson Award (for best new work) in Chicago where it premiered two years ago.

Now running as part of the Hong Kong Arts Festival, will the bilingual play – and Hwang's humour – translate as well here where audiences are more familiar with the Chinese language and culture?

Inspired by the English translation errors commonly found in mainland signs – such as “The slippery are very crafty” (slippery slopes ahead) and “F*** the certain price of goods” (dry good price valuation point) – *Chinglish* follows intrepid American businessman Daniel Cavanaugh (Alex Moggridge) to

Guiyang, the capital of Guizhou province, where he tries to secure a contract to supply correctly translated sign posts for the city's new arts centre.

Ironically, Cavanaugh speaks no Putonghua and has to rely on one English expatriate, Peter (Brian Nishii), who promises to help him to interpret, and to circumvent the cultural minefield when negotiating with Minister Cai (Raymond Ma) and his deputy Xi Yan (Michelle Krusiec). Cavanaugh is told, for instance, to always put himself down as that is acceptable social etiquette when dealing with the Chinese.

The problems and comedy begin when communication is jarred, not only by the language barrier, but also by interpretations that are tainted with cultural prejudices and hidden personal agendas on both sides.

Directed by Leigh Silverman, *Chinglish* is a relevant piece of contemporary theatre reflecting the growing number of American companies setting up business on the mainland; many are eager to learn not only Putonghua but also the local customs and traditions to

increase their chance of success. However, the work also plays to dated cultural stereotypes, rendering the portrayal of the Chinese characters unrealistic. Many mainland Chinese in senior positions in the public and private sectors are very savvy and speak fluent English today. The lightning romance between Xi Yan and Cavanaugh also seems far-fetched.

Moggridge is convincing as the bewildered and somewhat naïve Cavanaugh while Krusiec's seductive Xi Yan is, at times, emotionally confused (but that has more to do with the writing than her acting). Ma, Nishii and Celeste Den (who plays an interpreter) all give comic relief to an otherwise dialogue-heavy play. Those long pauses during moments of miscommunication also begin to wear towards the end.

A highlight of the production is the set from David Korins, which smoothly and swiftly morphs into different locales after scene changes.
Kevin Kwong

Chinglish, part of the 2013 Hong Kong Arts Festival, runs until tomorrow

Les Musiciens du Louvre Grenoble

Concert Hall, HK Cultural Centre
Reviewed: Mar 1

The appearance of Marc Minkowski's 40-member ensemble on Friday as part of the Hong Kong Arts Festival seemed a great way to start the weekend. The players' skill was assured; the packaging carried the question marks.

It was a two-item programme, the second half filled by Rameau's *Une Symphonie Imaginaire*, imaginary because Rameau did not write discrete orchestral music to fill half an evening.

Minkowski, therefore, did it for him by assembling a potpourri from his operas and ballets: 17 interludes that variously displayed the composer's talent for dramatic turns and the musicians' finesse in execution.

Coming in at nearly 50 minutes, but bereft of the balletic movement and operatic vocals that would have originally surrounded the material, it began to outstay its welcome. Putting the longest movement at the end (the concluding chaconne from *Les Indes Galantes*) challenged the concentration. Better to have departed with the penultimate item replaying in one's head: a sublimely delivered Entrée de Polymnie from *Les Boréades*.

Music from Gluck's ballet *Don Juan ou Le Festin de Pierre* struggled to qualify as a first half, barely reaching the 25-minute mark.

It would have been shorter if Minkowski hadn't preceded each part with a description of what it was about to portray, already printed verbatim in the programme notes. After some feeble, jokey asides and a string of ums and ers, he wisely just let the music roll.

After a blandly played first movement from Schubert's Symphony No 5 as the first encore, Thibault Noally, the ensemble's lead violinist, stole the show with a scintillating performance of the Rondo from Mozart's Haffner Serenade.
Sam Olliver



Photo: Julien Benhamou