

SINGLE ASIAN FEMALE

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LA BOITE
THEATRE COMPANY

BELVOIR 

CURRENT THEATRE SERIES

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Theatre Program at the end of the playtext

Single Asian Female was first produced by La Boite Theatre Company at the Roundhouse Theatre, Brisbane, on 11 February 2017, with the following cast:

KATIE	Emily Burton
PAUL	Patrick Jhanur
ZOE	Alex Lee
MEI	Courtney Stewart
PEARL	Hsiao-Ling Tang
LANA	Emily Vascotto

Director, Claire Christian
Set and Costume Designer, Moe Assaad
Lighting Designer, Keith Clark
Sound Designer and Composer, Wil Hughes
Fight Director, N-J Price
Stage Manager, Peter Sutherland
Assistant Stage Manager, Katie Hurst

Belvoir subsequently presented the La Boite Theatre Company production at Belvoir St Theatre, opening on 17 February 2018, with Lucy Heffernan playing the role of Lana and Keiren Smith as Assistant Stage Manager.

CHARACTERS

PEARL, 50s. A Chinese migrant who moved from Hong Kong to Australia 30 years ago. She's an overprotective and proudly traditional Chinese mother, however she's quite progressive in other ways—she's a feminist, foul-mouthed and runs her own business. She recently divorced her abusive husband, a decision that drove a wedge between her and her daughters. Pearl is desperate to preserve her relationships with her westernised children; when it comes to them she's grappling with generational as well as cultural barriers.

ZOE, 29. An A-type musician experiencing a quarter-life crisis. Zoe is desperate to secure a job in an orchestra so that she can gain independence from her smothering mother (Pearl), who is pressuring her to settle down, and be a good role model for her younger sister (Mei). She has chronic anxiety and is prone to panic attacks. Zoe is the golden child who extinguishes fires within the family and has always been Pearl's right-hand woman. She has an awkward relationship with Mei and struggles to connect with her.

MEI, 17. A self-hating Asian who's desperate to fit in with her Anglo peers. She's embarrassed by her Chinese family, especially her mother Pearl. Mei lashes out to conceal her vulnerability; deep down, she is more like the dutiful and loving Asian daughter stereotype that she's trying so hard to reject. Reading is her passion and she uses it as a way to escape drama at home. She resents Zoe and Pearl's closeness and misses her father. Mei feels like she doesn't quite belong anywhere, both at home and at school.

PAUL, 30s. Zoe's love interest and Pearl's lawyer. Paul was a refugee; he and his family sought asylum in Australia when he was a child. He works immigration cases at Legal Aid, fighting for those people he recognised needed help when he was growing up. He's self-deprecating and awkward in a very charming way. And he's caring enough to handle Zoe's anxiety.

KATIE, 17. Mei's best friend. Katie is a bit of a social outcast, but she doesn't let it get to her; she's proud of who she is and her nerdy love of cosplay and manga. Katie loves Asian culture and Mei's family, and is earnest in a way that makes her unintentionally funny. She recognises that Mei is going through an identity crisis but doesn't want to interfere.

LANA, 17. Mei's frenemy. Lana bullies Mei and Katie in both overt and underhanded ways to distract herself from her fractured home life; she wants to regain some semblance of control. Lana takes joy in belittling Mei because her own father is engaged to a young Asian woman of whom Lana is jealous.

CLAUDIA, a violinist.

SETTING

A dated, family-run Chinese restaurant on the Sunshine Coast, Queensland.

An interval can be taken in Act Two between Scenes Three and Four.

PROLOGUE

SCENE ONE

Evening in a dinky Chinese restaurant decorated with paper lanterns and fairy lights. PEARL stands on a small stage as the instrumentals for 'I Will Survive' by Gloria Gaynor plays. PEARL sings the first verse.

PEARL: This is one of my favourite songs, and I sing it to you tonight in celebration of my divorce being officially finalised! I left my dickhead husband years ago, but at last Pearl is a free woman: a reborn virgin. And if you only count good sex, the kind that finishes with the capital 'O' Orgasm, then technically I have been a virgin for most of my life with this man. But now! Now, I am an oyster. No. What is the saying? Ah! The world is my oyster. It may surprise you to know that it was never Pearl's dream to run a restaurant, although I do it very well. Many people assume that all Chinese people love to cook, that it runs in their blood, that it's their passion in life. *So stupid.* When we leave our home countries we open restaurants because what else can we do? We are second-class citizens. Third-class citizens. When my father was a young man he migrated from China to Malaysia and opened a restaurant in Ipoh. 'If you start a business, make it a restaurant,' he used to say. 'Why? Because we all share hunger in common.' Even if you are the dirt under a shoe and people call you 'Ching Chong' and do the slit-eye thing, they will still smile, eat your food, yummy yummy, get fat, hopefully have a heart attack sooner than later. They go to Bali for their holidays to buy cheap clothes and drink too much and have sex with young girls and boys. And then they come back with a Buddha statue, pop it on their lawn and vote for Pauline Hanson.

Pause.

Uh ... but I'm not talking about you, my loyal customers! Seeing your beautiful faces each week is a joy to Pearl and please don't forget that the special tonight is free corkage with any serving of vegetarian spring rolls.

Pause.

I am sick of this place. Everything in this place smells like oil. It gets into your skin. I've been a slave in this restaurant for most of my life. How funny, right? You move somewhere for a better life and instead you find yourself thinking every day, 'I wonder if things would have turned out better if I'd stayed put. I wonder what would have happened if I married my ex-boyfriend instead of this man.' Every day: 'Pearl! Cut this beef!' On my birthday: 'Pearl! Peel these carrots!' On our anniversary: 'Pearl! Wash my clothes!' On Chinese New Year: 'Feed the babies, I'm going to mah jong with my buddies.' Hello? Am I a fucking robot? Excuse my language. But where is Pearl's relaxation? Where are Pearl's buddies? Oh yeah, I forgot: Pearl has no friends. I can never go to see a movie. I can never wear nice things like this *cheongsam*. This is a dress my mother bought for me before I left Hong Kong. 'You're married now. You have to follow your husband,' she said.

Pause.

I could have been a CEO. I could have a degree. Pearl, with a doctorate. [*Giggling*] Why am I laughing? I like the sound of Doctor Pearl. I could have married someone good—no! I could have stayed single. All of the women here should know that in this modern age, the world is your oyster. And you definitely do not need a man in that oyster. There is such thing as a vibrator.

The backing track to 'I Will Survive' starts up again.

Now, you can clap along if you like. But not too loudly because you still want to hear my beautiful voice, of course.

[*Singing*] And so you're back
 From Hong Kong
 I just walked in to find
 That you were seeing call girls all along
 I should have changed that stupid lock
 I should have kicked you on the streets
 If I had known for just one second
 You'd try to screw up my life

Go on now go
Walk out the door
Just turn around now
I'll run the restaurant all alone
Weren't you the one who tried to hurt me—

She speaks above the music.

First with the cheating—all the overnight 'business' meetings, then the gambling, then the abuse, physical and emotional, but emotional still counts, it still leaves a big scar. Oh, sorry—

The music plays on and PEARL sings the chorus.

The word 'SINGLE.' flashes above PEARL in neon lights, much like the 'OPEN' sign you might see at a Chinese restaurant.

SCENE TWO

Afternoon in Mei's bedroom. MEI moves around the room in damp swimmers, shoving any identifiably 'Asian' objects into a garbage bag. Her best friend KATIE watches on helplessly.

MEI: And then she just casually kept playing volleyball as if nothing had happened, like I'd just imagined it.

KATIE: She could have been talking to someone else. There were heaps of people on the beach.

MEI: Katie! She wasn't. Can't you just trust me on this?

KATIE: You know Lana has weird anger issues. The other day, Kelsey said she was getting the same colour formal dress as Lana and Lana literally kicked her in the vagina. She had to get stitches. And just because Kelsey was getting the same colour dress! Not even the same style. So, you know, Lana could have easily been going off at someone else and you were just standing in the firing range.

MEI: She called me a gook.

KATIE: Oh.

MEI: And a fob.

KATIE: What's a fob?

MEI: Someone who's 'fresh off the boat'. [*Shoving a soft toy into the garbage bag*] This has got to go.

KATIE: Mei, you're getting rid of Rilakkuma? I got him for your birthday.

MEI: Sorry. It's just part of the purge. Look at all the Asian stuff in this room! Lana was right: I didn't even realise how much of a fob I was.

KATIE: You're not a fob! You were born in Nambour. That's the most Aussie you can get. Kevin Rudd was born there and look what happened to him!

MEI: He learnt how to speak Mandarin?

KATIE: No, that's a bad example.

MEI: I didn't realise until today that there are no other Asians at school.

KATIE: What about Christopher?

MEI: I mean Asians that I'm not related to in some way. And no-one ever pays Christopher out because he's basically white anyway. Remember on his first day he couldn't even talk properly because he'd lived in Hong Kong his whole life. 'Hurro, hurro.' He just followed me around every day and sat next to me in class because he needed me to translate everything the teacher said. Now he ignores me and just hangs out with the rugby crew.

KATIE: What makes you a fob and Christopher not, though? I don't see the difference between him and you.

MEI: Racist much.

KATIE: I didn't mean it that way!

MEI: Well ... I eat Chinese food for lunch every day. No-one else at school does that. Everything I own smells like mothballs. I play the violin. I'm so short-sighted I'm basically blind. And my nose can't even hold my glasses up properly. My name literally means 'Rice' in Cantonese!

KATIE: I'd love to eat Chinese food for lunch every day.

MEI: I don't know why you're so obsessed with Asian culture, Katie. You should be happy you're white. [*Pulling clothes from the wardrobe and tossing them on the bed*] Blouse for Chinese school. String ensemble trousers. Jelly shoes. Doraemon face mask. Hello Kitty pyjamas. Puffy vest. I just want to start over.

KATIE: Hey, these shoes are really cute. Such a great colour! You should wear them to the formal. And so comfortable! [*Removing the shoes*] Oh, sorry! No shoes inside. I always forget.

MEI: Can you imagine what I've stepped in, wearing those shoes? I wore them in Hong Kong at the Ladies' Market and in squat toilets. There could even be poo on them! Sorry, I'm overreacting. It's fine.

KATIE: It's my fault.

MEI: No, it's fine! You can even wear them on the bed if you want. That's what you'd do at home, right?

KATIE: I guess so ... I haven't really thought about it. Are you sure it's okay? [*Off* MEI's look] I'm taking them off. I'm stretching them, anyway.

MEI: You can have them if you want.

KATIE: Really?

MEI: You can have any of this stuff.

KATIE: Can I have the vest?

MEI: [*nuzzling against the vest*] Ooh, so soft. No! Just take it. Whatever you don't take I'm going to donate anyway.

KATIE: But this is like, all of your clothes.

MEI: I'll buy new clothes. I've been saving the pocket money my dad gives me.

KATIE: We could go op-shopping. Oh! What if you found your formal dress there? It'd be one of a kind. Can you imagine what people would say?

MEI: Probably nothing good. I've already picked a dress, anyway...

KATIE: Really! Can I see?

MEI: [*furtively*] It's at my dad's and I don't want to bother him.

MEI removes her glasses and moves her arms around blindly.

KATIE: What are you doing?

MEI: I want to try something. Pick something up and throw it at me.

KATIE: What?

MEI: I want to see if I can get around without my glasses. Contacts make my eyes really itchy. Are you throwing anything yet?

A book hits MEI in the face.

Ow. Not a book, Katie! Jesus.

The word 'ASIAN.' flashes above MEI in neon lights.

SCENE THREE

Afternoon in an audition waiting room. ZOE sits with her violin case in her lap. She wears a baggy men's shirt and pores over sheet music. Another woman, CLAUDIA, tunes her violin nearby, watching ZOE intently. ZOE receives a text message and giggles at it before typing out a response.

CLAUDIA: [*whispering*] Zoe? Hey, Zoe.

ZOE: Hi, Claudia.

ZOE smiles politely and goes back to texting.

CLAUDIA: Phones need to be on silent.

ZOE: Right! Sorry. [*Putting her phone away*] How are you feeling?

CLAUDIA: Good! But I wore my lucky socks just in case. I know it's silly.

ZOE: I eat a chocolate muffin before every audition.

CLAUDIA: [*surveying Zoe's outfit*] Did you get much rehearsal in yesterday?

ZOE: Just in the afternoon. I don't want it to sound overcooked.

CLAUDIA: Oh, there's no way it could! You're too talented. Jeremy and I were just saying that you played so gorgeously at our wedding. His brother Lucas was asking about you afterwards.

ZOE: Was he the one who lives in Beijing?

CLAUDIA: Lucas is one of the last good guys out there. Honestly, I fear for any woman still braving the dating scene. You should let me know when you're free—I'll set you guys up.

ZOE: That's really sweet of you ... but I'll have to check my diary first. Sorry, I don't mean to be rude, but ...

ZOE points at her sheet music.

CLAUDIA: Absolutely! I'll shut up, let you get in the zone.

After a beat, CLAUDIA starts sniffing the air.

Is that ... are you wearing cologne? It smells like Intimately Yours by David Beckham.

ZOE: [*distracted*] What?

CLAUDIA: Who is he?

ZOE: Who's who?

CLAUDIA: Don't play dumb. You had sex last night!

ZOE: That's none of your business.

CLAUDIA: Oh, my goodness. Is it Kyle from percussion? He's liked you for ages.

ZOE: [*hissing*] Can we talk about this later? Away from here? [*Sniffing herself*] And it's Tom Ford, not David Beckham.

CLAUDIA: Zoe Wong, you snake in the grass! I thought you were single!

ZOE: I am. I just met this guy online and we hung out last night.

CLAUDIA: You mean, like ... from Tinder?