

24/10/01

Dear Claudia,

How are you? I have recently finished my first performance in John Misto's play "The Shoe Horn Sonata". At first glance, I thought it was quite a different title for a play. However, I soon learned that it had thoughtful depth on a topic most people do not talk about. I played the <sup>main</sup> character of 'Sheila', a British ~~woman~~ <sup>nurse</sup> sent across to aid the soldiers in <sup>World War 2</sup> ~~the war~~. I played alongside the other main character, Bridie, and we both experienced a horrendous ordeal as prisoners of war in a Japanese camp. However, the play is set in the future and we reminisce about our memories. The difference in this play is that there are the usual conventional dramatic and theatrical techniques <sup>such as symbolism and humour</sup>, but in addition Misto's use of mixed media including projected images and sound effects. All of these techniques I found challenging to contend with while acting out the first performance.

Symbolism was used by Misto to convey powerful and significant meanings. For example, the shoe horn was a prominent symbol as the title suggests and its meaning dynamically evolved according to the chronology of the play. In the beginning, it

represented family love as it was given to her from her father. In its first appearance when 'Bridie' and 'Sheila' were afloat it represented the will to struggle and survive against the arduous weather. And towards the end it represented the enduring nature of friendship and love. So as you can see, this unusual symbol of a 'shoe-horn' became a challenging object to come to terms with. Kowtowing was also a bizarre concept to understand as it meant knocking one's forehead while bowing. It represented obedience and submissive. This became a challenge to carry out when needed.

Humour was also used to show that the human spirit can still laugh at the face of adversity even though they were living in atrocious conditions. Humour became a challenge because Misto's play was based on such a serious subject, however, the humour provides the audience with entertainment. For example, the Lavender Street incident showed the women being forced into prostitution while they were in a vulnerable position. Even though this was not a line from my character, Bridie commented 'That night turned me off blind dates forever' after the Japanese

failed to initiate such a situation. Black humour was also used when the Japanese passed on a message from Australian Prime Minister, John Curtin to "keep smiling" even though we were suffering from starvation and exhausted through our hardship. It rapidly became apparent that this play was based on the truth and at times, became challenging to even try and understand the suffering of the women in war.

The projected images were used to make use of the mixed media available by Misto in this technological age. This became a challenge while reciting lines because the images were projected onto the walls of the stage while I recited my lines. It became <sup>difficult</sup> to divert my attention to the audience instead of glancing across at the images. The audience were able to engage in the play as they were able to see the horrific images of the camp and the exhausted women through their films in the camp. As I empathised with the character, the pictures visually complemented my understanding of the situation and this became a challenge as I was sickened at times.

Sound effects were also used in the play to convey the extent of the sufferings of the women in the war. This also became a challenge as it intensified the situation and added more meaning to it. For example, when I was retelling my sexual experience with Lipstick Larry the noise of the jungle crickets were broadcasted. It became louder and louder to a point where it was deafening. The impact it had on the audience is that they fell to a silence, listening intently to what I was saying, engaged in the experience.

All of the aspects I found challenging in the play as I tried to empathise with the character. As a woman, it became difficult and frustrating to understand the suffering caused by the Japanese. However, I was glad to perform this role as I served a symbolic figure of the women in the war and to act out the truth from a female's perspective of the war.

Yours Sincerely,

Sheila