

The Adans The4atre, Adams, MA
Comfort Girl, by Stephanie Chou..
Reviewed by J. Peter Bergman.

“Half happy, half ashamed, my heart beats”

In the era of World War Two more than 22,000 girls and young women were abducted by the Japanese army to serve as “Comfort Women” in hotels throughout the region, women whose job was to service Japanese soldiers sexually. Musician and composer Stephanie Chou has chosen to focus on one such girl, a sixteen year old bride abducted from her wedding and taken to a Manchurian hotel, still a virgin, to be raped and assaulted multiple times. Lian, the girl around whom composer Chou has based her story, is innocent, fragile yet determined to end her misery at any cost. Her determination flies in the face of reality, and yet her urgent need for redemption and return provides a symbolic look at the emotional and physical needs of the women of that time. Chou has set this all to jazz inflected music on an Asian scale.



Stephanie Chou (center) and members of her Quintet; Photo: Michael Yu

Manchuria, in 1942, was a Japanese state on the Asian continent to the Northeast of mainland China (it was restored to China in 1945) so the actual nationality of Lian is in question here. But at least the final quest of the girl, her need to return home, is made more credible since she doesn't have to cross the sea to return to Japan. The story is a personal one that doesn't delve deeply into the plight of the women forced into unpaid profligacy by the government. As public prostitutes these women were mistreated terribly. With only a few survivors left it is a burning question as to whether or not this story reflects a real person or only a fictional one created for this work. There were only two vocalists in this presentation, Chou and Lito Villareal who sang Lian's fiancé Ming as well as the soldiers and others who voice political statements.



Stephanie Chou;
Photo: John Abbott

Chou is a genuine talent on multiple levels. She created the work, book, lyrics, music, sang the lead role and played alto saxophone in the ensemble. She is a beautiful woman to look at, listen to and appreciate on all these different levels but perhaps doing so much has blinded her to the work that needs to be done to create the finest opera possible. American jazz had infiltrated Japanese culture in the 1930s altering forever the sound of native popular music. It was our of favor in the 1940s when Japan was at war with the United States, but clearly it is back. Japanese harmonies and melodic structure over jazz accompaniment creates a unique sound that was both pleasant and alarming at the same time. Chou has handled this dichotomy brilliantly. Her songs and her strictly musical moments further the drama she is offering here.

The various members of her musical ensemble played the score vibrantly and beautifully. String player Andy Liu handled viola, violin and erhu exquisitely. Pianist Angelina Ai gave a magnificent performance. Drummer/Percussionist Roman Itzik was truly a driving force with this score and Ike Sturm on the Bass was a joy to hear. Zoe Laiz was fine as the unseen narrator. A worthwhile presentation by the ever-growing Adams Theater has added a fine piece to the Berkshire summer arts. It's sad not to have a second performance available, for only a limited audience got to hear this new, vital work-in-progress.

+ 09/15/2025 +



Chou in performance; Photo: Michael Yu

Comfort Girl was seen at the Adams Theater in Adams, Massachusetts. If it comes your way, see it. It will grow with you.