

## 'Pure Native,' 'Too Much Sun,' 'Home': Three plays about home

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The cast of 'Pure Native,' from left, Tonantzin Carmelo, Kyla Garcia, Darrell Dennis, Joseph Valdez, Kalani Queypo / Craig Schwartz

LOS ANGELES—Three plays running now in L.A. are centered around notions of home. Let's start with the one actually called *Home* (seen March 10).

Writer/performer Nancy Ma spins a 90-minute, one-woman coming-of-age tale about growing up in New York City's Chinatown as one of two daughters born in America to new immigrants from the Chinese mainland, specifically from Toisan. Taishan, formerly romanized in Cantonese as Toishan, or in local dialect as Hoisan or Toisan, is a coastal area in the southwest of Guangdong province, China. Facing the South China Sea, just west of Macau and Hong Kong, Toisan is referred to as the "First Home of the Overseas Chinese," as many of the earliest Chinese immigrants, not only to America but elsewhere as well, came from this maritime region that opened to the world.

Ma spoke the Toisan dialect at home and displays her fluency in the language on stage as she depicts more than a dozen of her close relatives and friends. The new home her parents sought out is tightly constricted between a small studio apartment in Chinatown whose main room

quadruples as living room, dining room, bedroom and kitchen, and the sweatshops and other low-wage jobs at which her parents are able to work. Aspirations for their daughters are limited to success at school, a good job, and a good marriage.

Like other immigrants from almost every culture, the children are torn between loyalty to the ways of the Old Country and the opportunities available to English-speaking, native-born Americans. She studies hard, is accepted to New York's prestigious, competitive Stuyvesant High School, and then attends Williams College, a small distinguished liberal arts institution in Western Massachusetts. She makes her big break when she accepts a high-paying job at a law firm in San Francisco, then after what seems to be a few years gets bored of it and follows her acting muse to L.A. In the theatre and film community she finds where she feels she has always belonged.



*Nancy Ma in 'Home' / Andrew Vasquez*

Ma has performed her turn at the Los Angeles Women's Theatre Festival, United Solo and the ONE Festival in New York City, and Phillips Academy. This time around, the solo is directed by Geoffrey Rivas, whose bio in the program calls *Home* a "world premiere," so I'm not entirely sure this show is what Ma has performed elsewhere or is substantially different. Rivas is currently appearing in Canyon; both shows are projects of the Latino Theater Company, of which he is a founding member and associate artistic director, and both can be seen at the Los Angeles Theatre Center in downtown L.A.

Ma is not only accomplished as a linguist but as an actor, mastering mime, gesture, body, and vocal expression, tone, emotion, movement, and dance. In some scenes showing the only romantic relationship she talks about, with her college boyfriend Michael, she has virtual sex

with him. Yee Eun Nam provides useful projections that situate us in the various locales of Ma's presentation. Itzul Virgen's lighting design and Ivan Robles's sound design add significantly to the ambiance.

Ma describes what she imagines what her parents' wedding was like in China, a fun-filled holiday for the village, but she is vague as to exactly when this took place. If I am guessing correctly, Ma would appear to be in her late 20s, or maybe about 30. Let's say 30. She was born not long after her parents arrived in America, so that would mean her parents left China sometime around 1985-89. America turned out not to be such a golden land for them, but Ma doesn't really explore what motivated them to leave China in the first place, nor does she say anything about ever wanting to visit China to see her ancestral homeland or possibly to meet remaining relatives there.

Accounts of school, achievement, her abbreviated law firm career, and her current theatrical profession are offered in great detail, but rarely do we come away with what she took, what she learned from each of these phases of her life. Her Williams experience, for example, was "four years of many firsts," but aside from expanded food options and Michael, we don't hear much about any others, nor about any social issues that her schoolmates might have been engaged in or concerned about. Unless I missed it, she doesn't even say what she majored in, nor what professors or courses inspired her to fresh ways of thinking.

She does say that although her parents and other family members were not religious, she was instinctively drawn from an early age on, to a local Sunday school where she imbibed a profound sense of gratefulness to God. Strangely, to me anyway, she speaks little or nothing about Jesus, so I'm not clear what denomination she was active with. I got the feeling that being unappreciated by anyone at home, or even later by her boyfriend, God was about the best she could get in terms of validation and support. Among her proudest volunteer jobs, she cites working with her church youth group but never cites the issues and dilemmas she faced there.

The rest of her recitation, accomplished though it is with quick linguistic switchbacks, physical energy, and vocal agility, struck me as similarly superficial, recounting the surface events of her life but not digging deep enough to make those events of sustained interest or meaning to a listener. Recalling her high-paying San Francisco job, she says, "I got to where I am by myself," and she may sincerely feel that, but surely she has to acknowledge her parents' soul-crushing hard work to sustain a family and inspire their children toward success.

In L.A. she confronts type-casting, racism, and rejection. Everyone asks her, "Where are you from?" and they are only interested in her if she knows martial arts and whatever else is "hot" for Asian features at the moment. "Why could living my own life make everyone else so angry?" she wonders, but we hardly ever hear of her engaging in any collaborative work with fellow actors.

Ma seems to acknowledge that "I push everyone away," so the rejection is not a one-way street. But why she does that goes unexamined except to own that aside from her demanding parents

and relatives, "I'm difficult too."

I am not usually in the business of speculating publicly on other people's sexuality, but if a performer in a solo appears to lay everything on the table yet seems to set aside one whole area of her life, I frankly wonder if Ma is not yet able to confront (at least publicly) what appears to be an unsatisfying history with men. The way she presents herself, barefoot, in trim jeans and a t-shirt, with her boyish haircut, suggests to me, at least, that there may be more to her story than she is willing to deal with right now. If I am wrong, so be it, but I'm only going by what she has laid out before us. This vacuum of introspection would go a long way toward explaining why she is ultimately so emotionally reticent.

Toward the end of this inner-directed journey, she seems to have a crisis of faith and questions why God has left her. But then, miraculously—again in a way Ma doesn't choose to explore—God speaks to her and reassures her of his love. "Wherever I am, I take my story with me and I find myself home."

I don't believe the hour and a half we spent with Ma was well rewarded with such a mundane truism as its quasi-evangelical message that we are asked to accept. I hesitate to even call this a "play," because although evolutionary and chronological, it lacks depth, conflict and convincing emotion. A "solo show" is a more apt term here, a showcase for what she can do. Having said which, Nancy Ma does indeed display an admirable range of proficiencies which could be put to fine use in any number of theatrical or film roles. Her bio does cite some experience, and I hope she gets more of a chance to grow in her chosen profession.

*Home* plays through March 24 on Thurs., Fri., and Sat. at 8 pm, and Sun. at 4 pm at the Los Angeles Theatre Center, 514 S. Spring St., Los Angeles 90013. To purchase tickets, call (866) 811-4111 or go to <http://thelatc.org/>.

### **Home on the rez**

Native Voices at the Autry presents the world premiere of *Pure Native* (seen March 8), a new play by Vickie Ramirez (Tuscarora) directed by Randy Reinholz (Choctaw).

Native Voices at the Autry is devoted to developing and producing new works for the stage by Native American, Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian, and First Nations playwrights. The company is currently celebrating its 25th year at the Autry, presenting not only Native playwrights but actors and theatre professionals. *Pure Native* was workshopped as *Corn Soup*.

*Pure Native* shares a similar theatrical ethos as *Home* in that it, too, examines what makes a place home, and whether or not it is wise to abandon the culture of the traditional ways and adapt to a modern capitalist and commercial mentality. The entire action takes place in upstate New York, along a riverbank on the Haudenosaunee Rez [*sic*, according to the program].



I had not heard of the Haudenosaunee, but among North American tribes it is apparently one of the stricter ones in terms of matriarchal lineage and how difficult it is to be accepted as one of the clan. People from outside the longhouse can marry a member of the clan, but they will not necessarily be inducted into the clan nor will their children. Orthodoxy has its price.

There are five characters in the play, who have known each other since childhood. Four of them are married. There's Gary Smoke (Darrell Dennis, Secwepemc nation), who is the tribal chief, married to Connie (Kyla Garcia, Taino). And there's Art Farmer (Joseph Valdez, Navajo), a former military man with occasional eruptions of PTSD, and his pregnant wife Karen (Tonantzin Carmelo, Tongva and Kumeyaay), who runs a café on the rez. Connie and Art are sister and brother.

Appearing after an absence of some eight years is the well-dressed Brewster White (Kalani Queypo, Blackfeet, Hawaiian), who has cleaned himself up from a nasty drinking habit and now works for a large food conglomerate in the city that is interested in commercially bottling the pure, unadulterated water of the river on the reservation. He has already sent a company scientist out to the river for tests. He must persuade the tribal council to lease the reservation's water rights. The only problem is his close friends and family aren't on board, and his old love Connie is fiercely opposed. Although not a clan member herself, Connie has adopted the most traditional and most protective stance toward the tribal rights.

Will the community vote to change their recipe for traditional life with a proposal to bring hundreds of jobs to the rez if it risks dramatically changing their daily lives? Will the new plant spoil their pristine river? Do the Haudenosaunee allow water to become privatized, even if the tribe itself will financially benefit? Can traditional values support economic development? Can the Native community ever be an equal partner with big business?

The play mixes politics with tradition, food with humor, romance and marital strife with deception, old grudges, and fears. Opposing voices for tradition and change are the loudest, but perhaps the wisest ones are somewhere—but where?—in between. The original title *Corn Soup* refers to the introduction by the invaders of salt pork into the traditional recipe for the dish, which was originally only the "three sisters" of corn, beans, and squash. In the end, says Gary, in a metaphor to the temptation of modernity, even though the salt pork is less healthy for you, "balance is the key."

Vickie Ramirez tells a compelling and relevant story which does not require a conclusive ending to be effective. It is quite enough to raise all the issues she has, without tipping her hand as to where her own sympathies lie. Several characters have lyrical monologues in which they look into the future, or convene with the spirits, that are real jewels of Native writing. Most of the expository dialogue, however, sounds stiff and earnest, though well acted. Her title suggests how hard, and maybe how harmful it can be, to presume to be "pure" anything. Ramirez has a gift for subtle and nuanced situations.

This is one of the best productions I have seen from Native Voices. Scenic and props designs by

Christopher Scott Murillo are clean and simple. E.B. Brooks (Sami, Abenaki, Wampanoag) does very good work with the costuming.

Pure Native plays through March 24, Thurs. and Fri. at 8:00 pm, Sat. and Sun. at 2:00 pm. The theatre is located at the Autry Museum of the American West, 4700 Heritage Way, Los Angeles 90027. Weekday matinees take place on Fri., March 15 and 22 at 11:00 am—if your class or school is interested in attending one of these performances, please contact Janet Jung at [jjung@theautry.org](mailto:jjung@theautry.org). See [here](#) for reservations.

### ***Too Much Sun***

Nicky Silver's 2014 off-Broadway play *Too Much Sun*, which starred Linda Lavin in the lead role of celebrated actress Audrey Langham, receives its splendid West Coast premiere at the Odyssey Theatre (seen March 9).

The six-character play starts off on a Chicago stage where the great diva Audrey Langham (Diane Cary) is running through her lines for a production of Euripides's *Medea* that will open the following night. She has trouble remembering her cues and constantly complains about her costume and the staging, and she seems to be fighting off the sniffles too, saying she really has no idea what she is doing up there on that stage in that play which makes no sense. True, the language of the play is absurdly hyperpoetic and difficult to render with communicativeness, but that, after all, is the actor's and the director's job. But in the end, it's not working for her, and she imperiously walks out of the production leaving sold-out houses for the run of the play stranded without a star.

Upon which she hightails it out to Cape Cod, where her daughter Kitty (Autumn Reeser) and her husband Dennis (Bryan Langlitz) have rented a house for the summer. There Kitty can unwind from a challenging year of teaching grade school children and Dennis can take a break from his advertising career and finally write his novel. Audrey settles in to Dennis's workspace in the spare room and announces she is staying indefinitely. The fact is that she has so mismanaged her personal life, that she no longer has a home in Manhattan, which Kitty hoped one day she would be living in and is pursued by debt, liens, and lawyers.

Shortly, Gil (Joe Gillette) follows Audrey out to the Cape; he is the young assistant to Audrey's Broadway agent, and his job is to get Audrey back to Chicago, but she is not budging. Audrey meets the next-door neighbor, a courtly gentleman named Winston (Clint Jordan), to whom she takes a fancy. Audrey has already gone through five husbands (the first was Kitty's father) and is eyeing Winston as a potential sixth. Winston has a gay dope-dealing son Lucas (Bailey Edwards), who is supposedly off to UCLA in the fall, but he is still reeling from the trauma of his mother's death.

Outsized histrionic characters are this playwright's stock in trade. He is often grouped alongside Joe Orton and Christopher Durang, with perhaps a glance back to Oscar Wilde, and I would add the current writer Rajiv Joseph, for the darkly absurd situations into which he sets his

problematic characters. He assures that the audience will have plenty to laugh about, but part of that comes from the exaggerated high drama, which feels real enough to make these characters believable.

Kitty loves her mother dutifully, but there are issues: Audrey was always out of town on tour with a show at important moments of Kitty's life, and Audrey kept her daughter from ever getting to know her father. To this day she tells embarrassing personal stories about Kitty's childhood. From the sounds of it, considering Audrey's neglect of her daughter while on tour and while juggling four subsequent marriages, it's a wonder Kitty had not been placed with relatives or in an orphanage.

By the time all the issues get sorted out, the six characters have learned something important about themselves and move on, though it's not all sunshiny for everyone. Director Bart DeLorenzo says, in an interview with John Paul King in the Los Angeles Blade, "This is a play about how you can remake your life. It starts out with one character making a dramatic change, and by the end, every single character has made a huge transformation, for better or for worse."



I owe this insight to my Jungian psychotherapist friend Jane, who joined me seeing this play: Why Medea? Clearly, Medea is what most people would call a bad mother: Driven half-mad by her lover's desertion, leaving her with two young kids, she proceeds to take her revenge on him by murdering the children. It's an often freely adapted Greek myth that most theatergoers are familiar with. So Audrey subconsciously is terrified by this play, acknowledging on some level

that she has been an extremely poor mother to Kitty, and literally cannot get through it. The rest of the play unfolds as a still unconscious expiation of her guilt. She returns “home”—that is, to Kitty and Dennis’s home—to start the work of repair.

Kitty is seen throughout the play constantly munching on M&M’s and cookies—feeding herself when she is clearly not receiving the nurturance she needs from either her mother or her husband.

The unit set is by Alex Calle, and lighting by Rose Malone: You can really imagine yourself on the Cape Cod shore. Sound design is by Christopher Moscatiello, and costumes by Michael Mullen.

It’s a wonderful production that is a representative example of this playwright’s quirky offbeat work. It also helps seeing the hilarity in the lousy hand life sometimes deals out. Highly recommended!

As an Indie Chi production, *Too Much Sun* plays through April 21 at the Odyssey Theatre on Thurs., Fri. and Sat. at 8 pm, and Sun. and 2 pm. The theatre is located at 2055 S. Sepulveda Blvd., Los Angeles 90025. Call (310) 477-2055x2 for tickets, or go to the Odyssey website.

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Eric A. Gordon

Eric A. Gordon is the author of a biography of radical American composer Marc Blitzstein, co-author of composer Earl Robinson’s autobiography, and the translator (from Portuguese) of a memoir by Brazilian author Hadasa Cytrynowicz. He holds a doctorate in history from Tulane University. He chaired the Southern California chapter of the National Writers Union, Local 1981 UAW (AFL-CIO) for two terms and is director emeritus of The Workmen's Circle/Arbeter Ring Southern California District. In 2015 he produced “City of the Future,” a CD of Soviet Yiddish songs by Samuel Polonski.



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