

Order of excitedness:

1. Cambodian Rock Band
2. Macbeth
3. Alice in Wonderland
4. How to Catch Creation
5. Between Two Knees

Cambodian Rock Band

Cambodian Rock Band, written by Lauren Yee, is the play that I'm most excited to see out of our five-play lineup. Pol Pot's name is globally associated with genocide and military coups, and the damage that the Khmer Rouge inflicted upon Cambodia is notorious both for its abhorrence and its specificity, wherein they imprisoned and killed 90% of the country's artists. *Cambodian Rock Band's* leading character, Chum (Joe Ngo), was one of the artists that they imprisoned, and the majority of the play is him recalling the story of his life in Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge to his daughter, Neary (Brooke Ishibashi), who is gathering evidence to incriminate the fictional former Khmer Rouge official Duch (Daisuke Tsuji), whose character is based on the real-life Kang Kek Leu. The very real historical setting of *Cambodian Rock Band* which is both horrifying (in 1978) and vibrant (in 1975) is one of the reasons I'm most excited to see this play, especially because of the extensive research that Yee underwent while writing this play which I feel will add a lot of authenticity to the setting.

Contrary to what you might think, Chum is described by Ngo as "really funny." He says that Chum's "survival mechanism is jokes," that "[Chum] choose[s] to make a joke out of something and that's the way [he has] survived." Yee says that Chum "tries to assimilate himself [into] and absorb American culture, as a means of starting over." Chum's character strikes me as a different take on a former-refugee character than I've seen before, and is another one of the reasons I'm most excited to see this play.

The music of *Cambodian Rock Band* consists of Cambodian pop songs from the decade or so before the Khmer Rouge put a sudden halt on its production, original songs by the Cambodian pop revival band Dengue Fever, and one Bob Dylan cover. All of the songs (except the Dylan one) are in Khmer, the official language of Cambodia. The Cambodian pop scene just before the genocide was heavily influenced by the Western and European pop scene at the time, but also was “bubble-gum, infectious pop music,” and there was something “special and sparkly about them,” according to Yee. This unique soundtrack, which highlights the music that was extinguished back then and is being revived right now, is another reason why I’m most excited to see *Cambodian Rock Band*.

Macbeth

“The Scottish Play” is basically the entire reason we’re going to Ashland. The only reason it’s not first on my list is that *Cambodian Rock Band* is new to me, whereas I’ve experienced this story many times throughout many mediums. I’ve read Macbeth, in both written form and graphic novel, listened to Macbeth, and seen Macbeth as a movie. Come to think of it, the only other way I haven’t experienced it (that I’m aware of existing) is performed live.

Macbeth’s character provides an intimate glance into a relatively moral person’s descent into wanton violence and serial murder, all for the sake of ill-fated ambition. Lady Macbeth’s ambition is far greater than Macbeth’s, but far more fragile, as she is driven insane by her close proximity to her lofty goals while being unable to achieve them or even retain that proximity for long. Banquo’s friendship with Macbeth at the start of the play makes those ambitions seem all the more horrible, for that friendship was easily severed by the awakening of Macbeth’s aspirations to leave a legacy. Macbeth becomes so fixated on legacy that he is determined to be the only person to have one, even though the opposite is the truth. This obsession leads him to

erase Macduff's entire family, while not understanding how that could mold Macduff into his arch-rival. Macbeth's tragic character in particular is what makes this play stand out to me so much.

In any case, this story is legendary, the characters are memorable, the setting is vivid, the themes are intriguing, and the writing is phenomenal (as everyone already knows; it's Shakespeare).

Alice in Wonderland

This classic story by Lewis Carroll (whose real name was Charles Lutwidge Dawson) is famous for how its incredible storytelling and surprising themes far surpass what could be expected of a children's book. *Alice in Wonderland* satirizes many aspects of then-contemporary life, such as the educational curriculum, the royal family, politicians, and the class system. Some of its most memorable characters have very dark inspirations, such as the Mad Hatter, whose characteristic insanity is based on the saying "mad as a hatter," which arose from fashion workers who used mercury to cure felt in hats, who would later feel the insanity brought on by mercury poisoning. As silly as it may first seem, the way that the characters in Wonderland use language as a means to disorient Alice and change her perception of normalcy to that of themselves is quite frightening, as the hijacking of language as a way to control the mind is a theme used in a similar way in 1984, a book generally considered to be far darker.

Carroll's writings in the *Alice* books also retrospectively told us many things that psychologists only found out decades later about the nature of dreams, after the interest was sparked (largely) by Freud's work. Lucid dreaming wasn't accepted as possible until recently, since researchers didn't believe that consciousness could be more complex than an on or off switch, and yet Carroll's work shows us different levels of dream consciousness more than a

century before it began to be understood. These elements coalesce to make Wonderland appear less like reality and more like a dream, perhaps even a nightmare in dream's disguise. This unreal quality, which is a large factor in how much I love Neil Gaiman's books, specifically *The Ocean at the End of the Lane*, is executed so well in this story that not only is Alice disoriented by the extreme contrast of it all, the reader/play-goer is too, which makes it all the more authentic to its dreamscape setting. I'm looking forward to this play mostly because of the incredible qualities of its story, which I am curious to see translated into a live performance.

How to Catch Creation

How to Catch Creation strikes me as a play that I will probably enjoy immensely, but one that I cannot be certain about until I've seen it. From reading the article about it, it seems to me that it's set up to be a comedic play which touches upon interesting cultural and historical motifs that are not often shown in theatre. The characters all seem to be interesting people, and their interactions, as far as they have been outlined in the article, seem like they will be both funny and thought-provoking. The synopsis honestly reads like the concept for a good sitcom, but it really doesn't tell me much about how the story will play out, as the majority of the article is about the playwright, Christina Anderson, the black feminist movement that this play represents, and the playwrights that taught her and inspired her. However, Anderson is a very unique person with very thought-provoking things to say, so it's not like the article is anything but a good read nonetheless. I do enjoy this quote from Anderson which asserts that theatre is a "powerful thing where adults are still willing to pretend . . . We can have someone holding a toy boat and we can agree that he's on a real boat." The movement that the piece represents is definitely one that needs more plays devoted to it, but I like that, while she knows that she's writing something that's "politicized," she would rather focus on "[writing] good characters and

think[ing] about the choices they'd make in the circumstances they're given" than write a story that's justified only by that which it represents politically. The fact that this play is centred on queer black people just stems from the fact that those are the characters she decided to write this particular story about. This focus, rather than a more of a political-message focus, is why I am more excited for this play than I am for *Between Two Knees*.

Between Two Knees

The story of *Between Two Knees* is, similarly to *Cambodian Rock Band*, written about people surviving a historical tragedy, and the aftermath of that. Then, why is one at the top of my list, while the other is at the bottom (though it's my 5th *most favourite*, not my least favourite)? The main reason is the difference in the use of comedy. In *CRB*, comedy is a means for the protagonist to cope with the tragedy; here, it seems to be used to make the play more appealing to the audience, and at an extreme contrast with the Wounded Knee Massacre, and the violence that the family written about seems to be subjected to every generation, and all leading back in some form to the U.S. military. The secondary reason is that this story doesn't seem as interesting personally than that of *CRB*.

However, that's not to say that I don't think the play will be good. It still has a very interesting premise, with a journey through the generations of a family who will always be affected by their past and the peaceful existence that they were robbed of. I find generational stories really quite enjoyable, especially when each generation's story becomes more interesting because of the previous generation's, and this one seems to be set up in a way that could be exciting.

I do understand that media created by minority groups is often highly political, but at the same time I find it very admirable when the creators of a work strive to create a story that is

wonderful on its own merits and not just because of its political significance. The authors of *Between Two Knees* are obviously making a great story (most people who set out to write a story are trying to make it great), but they also do seem to politicize the story to a higher degree than seems necessary to justify it, especially when the only justification it should need to exist is that it's entertaining.

Honestly, the premise is more than enough to compel me to watch it, even if I find the political statements to be off-putting. Even though I do have some issues with the play, I'm still looking forward to it quite a bit, and I think that its story will be more than entertaining enough to justify its existence.