

Seattle's Yun Theatre takes on intersection of Chinese and American stories

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Yihan Lin and Zoe Ding in Yun Theatre's "Young People Social Death Archive." (Elodie Li)

By [Gemma Alexander](#)

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"I wanted to live my dad's American dream," said Christie Zhao, who left China in 2017 to study computer science at the University of Washington. But a funny thing happened on the

way to the comp sci degree: Zhao discovered theater.

“When I took the first drama class, I just felt this kind of enlightening. It completely changed my path, because I grew up where all of school is about getting the right answer. There’s no discussion or participation on where society is currently and what we want to have in the future. I never experienced that until theater.”

Now Zhao is artistic director of Seattle-based [Yun Theatre](#). Now in its second year, the experimental theater company takes on current social issues in new works that reflect the intersection of Chinese and American ideologies. Yun Theatre is starting its 2024 season with the world premiere of

“Young People Social Death Archive,” a play by Siming Lu that deals with social awkwardness and the challenges of adulthood. The play will be performed in Mandarin Chinese with English subtitles at Theatre Off Jackson from Feb. 16-18. Each show concludes with a dance party with live music from [Yuelan](#). Preshow collaborative poetry games and red paper-cutout workshops are free with advance registration.

Yun Theatre started as online play readings during the pandemic.

“‘Yun’ in Chinese means ‘cloud.’ I was a computer science major at the same time. So, it means we can do theater on the cloud, on the internet. But ‘yun’ also means ‘to speak’ in Chinese,” said Zhao.

Angered by a news story in 2022 about a trafficked woman discovered in chains, Zhao put out a call for collaborators online. The result was Yun Theatre’s first live, in-person show, “Monologues of n Women,” presented in Mandarin with some Shanxi and Sichuan dialect and English subtitles.

“There were Chinese women coming to me saying they had never seen themselves represented like that in a play or that the play said a lot of things they are scared to say,” said Zhao, who quit her software job to dedicate herself to Yun Theatre, now a registered nonprofit.

Lu was an arts management student at Ohio State University when she responded to Zhao's call and became one of the primary writers of "Monologues." Now living in Hangzhou, China, Lu wrote "Young People Social Death Archive" for the 2023 Shekou Theatre Festival incubation program in Shenzhen, China. "This play is quite personal," said Lu.

Inspired by sketch comedy, the play follows two museum employees (performed by Zoe Ding and Yihan Lin) as they explore an archive documenting the awkward failures of young people trying to function in adult society.

"Social death went viral in recent years in Chinese social media," said Lu. "It means that sometimes when you do something extremely awkward you want your social identity to disappear. ... Adulthood is a process everyone goes through. It's a universal subject."

Yun is one of a handful of local theater companies using language to make their plays more accessible to a multicultural audience.

"Having different languages is sort of breaking down the hierarchy of English being the dominant, 'correct' language. I think language carries true diversity. When we did 'In Between' we did so many different languages and when the actors are speaking in their native language you can see the energies they radiate are so different," said Zhao.

"In Between" collected seven short plays about migration and cross-cultural identity in various combinations of Chinese (Cantonese and Mandarin), Spanish and English. In December, Yun partnered with two other local theater companies for a stage reading of "The Gaza Monologues," written by the ASHTAR Palestinian theater group in 2010 in response to the blockade of the Gaza Strip. Together with Latino theater group [eSe Teatro](#) and [Dunya Productions](#), which focuses on Middle East, North African and Arab voices, the show at University Heights Center was presented in English, Spanish, Arabic and Mandarin.

As the newest addition to a robust Asian American theater community in Seattle — Zhao credits Roger Tang of [Pork Filled Productions](#) and Kathy Hsieh in Seattle's Office of Arts & Culture as mentors — Yun is mostly young, Chinese-born artists, which creates a unique perspective.

"We have the pressure from both societies. A lot of our families are still in China. When we were doing 'Monologues of n Women,' people were scared because it's about a

censored issue in China. If we want to speak out, even living in Seattle, there's still that fear.”

Zhao also notes that financial imperatives and cultural pressure to enter STEM are barriers to arts education for many Asian immigrants. So, Yun hosts community workshops on performance, design and even drama therapy. Most recently, Yun offered an English-as-a-second-language public speaking course taught by Chilean journalist Iveliz Martel. After each production, Yun holds book clublike gatherings to read plays that discuss issues related to the show. These events are announced on social media and held in Mandarin or English.

“We also do open mics — Chinese, feminist, queer open mics [the quarterly [SeaUni](#) performances]. Gender issues are also pretty sensitive topics in Chinese media,” said Zhao.

By comparison, “Young People Social Death Archive” is Yun’s least political production, and its first comedy. For Zhao, it is a welcome break from heavy topics, just in time for the Lunar New Year.

“This February is the Spring Festival. We want to celebrate a more lighthearted side of our community. We want to celebrate our complexities — that we have sadness and grief, but we can also hold joy and life.”

“Young People Social Death Archive”

Feb. 16-18; Theatre Off Jackson, 409 Seventh Ave. S., Seattle; in Chinese with English subtitles; performance space is ADA accessible; approximate runtime: 50 minutes, excluding pre- and post-performance activities; \$16-\$35; 206-340-1049, yun-theatre.com

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