

American frictions at Fringe: ‘Passing’ and Ada Cheng’s ‘Not Quite’

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Ada Cheng in her solo show “Not Quite.” (Elizabeth McQuern)

There are two strong entries in the ongoing Capital Fringe Festival, which winds up the bulk of its programming over the weekend: Amanda Erickson admires Ada Cheng’s solo “Not Quite,” and Maia Silber is generally impressed with the adaptation of the 1925 novella “Passing.”

“Not Quite: Asian American by Law, Asian Woman by Desire”

“Not Quite: Asian American by Law, Asian Woman by Desire” begins with a list: Chicago, Austin, New York, Taipei.

These, performer Ada Cheng tells us, are some of the places where she has lived. So when people ask where she’s from, she doesn’t always know how to answer. “Where is home?” she asks. “How do you define it?”

Those questions echo throughout the show, a searing one-woman storytelling tour-de-force that takes viewers through Cheng’s efforts to immigrate to the United States; her struggles to convince her students to take her — a small woman of color — seriously; and the discrimination she and her Mexican partner faced in Austin.

Cheng weaves her own story through a political lens, talking about the isolation and oppression immigrants face in the hands of the state.

At one point, she recounts trying to sign up for Obamacare and realizing that she needs to provide an alien registration number. Cheng has been in the United States for more than two decades. And even though she’s been granted citizenship, she still needs to prove that she belongs. “Everything about me marks me,” she says.

Not everything works. I could have done without the Q&A session at the end, mostly because the audience comments weren’t nearly as interesting as Cheng herself. The show, directed by Jonald Reyes, could probably stand to be tightened a touch.

But Cheng is captivating throughout, fierce, angry and energizing. You can’t take your eyes off her. Her story demands to be heard.

— *Amanda Erickson*

60 minutes. July 20 at the Pursuit Wine Bar, 1421 H St. NE.



At the Fringe Festival, the drama “Passing: A Stage Play.” (Julie Simser)

“Passing: A Stage Play”

After her friend’s husband interrupts a living room conversation with a racist tirade, Irene Redfield, the protagonist of “Passing: A Stage Play,” does not know how to respond.

“Well, it was rather a joke,” she ventures. “On him and on us and on her.”

The friend’s husband does not know that Irene is black, or that his wife, Clare, is black, too. Both women “pass” as white, crossing an ideologically rigid but sometimes permeable color line. Through their relationship, “Passing,” adapted by Nileah Bell and Mary Nyingi from Nella Larsen’s 1925 novella of the same name, examines the moral and existential dimensions of a liminal space in a system both tragic and absurd.

The adaptation, directed by Andrew Watring, reimagines Larsen’s novella as short vignettes, jumping back and forth in time. We learn that Clare (Angeleaza Anderson) has “passed” since her father’s death, marrying a wealthy white man with no knowledge of her racial identity. But after reuniting with her childhood friend, Irene (Jocelyn Hunt), Clare longs to rejoin the black community she once disowned. Clare’s presence disturbs Irene not least because it makes her examine the fraught ways she’s negotiated her own identity.

Watring employs a minimalist set — only folding chairs serve as props — and a number of actors play multiple characters. Instead of exiting backstage, actors stand or sit onstage in scenes in which their characters do not appear. For the most part, these devices, confusing our sense of time and place, effectively amplify breakdowns of identity and ethics. In the final scene, though, they make a climactic series of events difficult to follow.

Anderson plays Clare, both protected and alienated by “passing,” with great pathos. Hunt’s performance is less even, and she often loses the nuance of the love, envy, pity and anger Clare inspires in Irene. Thomas Shuman plays Clare’s racist husband with convincing rage, but Jeremy Keith Hunter, as Irene’s husband, shows little emotion. Overall, though, this show is a Fringe highlight that tackles important themes with skill and sensitivity.

— *Maia Silber*

75 minutes. July 19 at Logan Fringe Arts Space, Trinidad Theatre, 1358 Florida Ave. NE.

IF YOU GO: Fringe tickets \$17, plus one-time purchase of a \$7 Fringe button. Available online at www.capitalfringe.org, 866-811-4111 and at Fringe venues.

More from the Fringe Festival:

[“Lakeboat”](#)

[“Aflight”; “The Regulars”](#)

[Hexagon’s “Let Freedom Zing”; “J-Swizzle’s \(and D-Man’s\) Epic Awesome Swaggy Broventure for Sweet Rhymes”](#)

[“There Ain’t No More!”; “Caveat”](#)

[“The Dream Dancer”; “Morningstar”](#)

[“Love and Other Lures”; “Clara Bow: Becoming ‘It’”; “I’m Margaret Thatcher, I Is!”](#)

[“Exit, Pursued By a Bear”; “Mr. Taken”; “Comedian Elected to Town Council in New Jersey”](#)

[“Macbheatha”; “Abortion Road Trip”; “Constructive Fictions”](#)

[“Ladies in Waiting”; “Nevertheless, She Persisted”; “Thomas Jefferson: Hoochie-Coochie Man”](#)

[“Howl in the Time of Trump”; “Wit and Wrath: The Life and Times of Dorothy Parker”; “Ready to Serve”](#)

[Sadie Dingfelder previews the festival and finds politics](#)