

'Mama Mia' highlights role of father

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I just enjoyed the play “Mama Mia” on the stage of the Bai Lien Theater on my campus. Only moments ago, I walked from the hugs that followed the show (can't help but be proud of those students) directly to my computer.

The stars of tonight's performance were Iris Huang and Ashley Cheng. They played the roles of Donna and Sophie, mother and daughter, respectively.

It so happens that Iris and Ashley are imports to Taiwan. They are exchange students from China. They made memories for themselves tonight that they will treasure forever.

Their classmates, whose opportunities have been so different in life, seem to have quite easily accepted the fact that Iris and Ashley's desire to succeed on stage, their dedication to “the annual play,” and their raw talent earned them the right to stand in the spotlight tonight. In the eyes of their friends in Taiwan, where these two students come from or how they define their nationality doesn't matter a fig.

For the record, Ashley was to share her role in alternating shows. Melody Chang of Taiwan played Sophie in two of the production's four performances this weekend.

“Mama Mia” is the story of a single mother (Donna) who grew into adulthood during the liberal 1970s, close on the heels of the so-called sexual revolution. When she finds herself pregnant and unmarried, she is afraid to seek consolation from her mother, who she pictures as morally judgmental and lacking in compassion.

The play builds itself around the question of paternity. Extreme as it sounds, Donna cannot be sure which of her three lovers is the father of her child.

You can imagine how I, a priest (“shen-fu”), squirmed around in my seat at a few of the most juicy moments of the script, XDXD. All her life, daughter Sophie has missed having a father. With all her heart, she wants to have her daddy walk her down the aisle on her wedding day.

That is all in the plot that I need to give away. The questions of what it means to be a father, of how important fathers are for their children, and of the different ways a man can be a father, have always fascinated me.

My story is almost the direct opposite of Sophie's story.

“Almost” I say, because I did have a mother and, indeed, a mother who loved my siblings and me very much. But Mom suffered horribly from mental illness, was frequently hospitalized for long periods of time when we were children, and eventually was confined to an institution until the day she died. Mom left us when I was 16 years old. My little brother was only 11.

“Mama Mia” is riveted on the question of paternity. A young bride desperately longs to meet and to know the father she never had.

There were times in my life as a child when it honestly seemed the only thing we kids had was Dad.

He was a remarkable man. Not by word, but by example, Dad single-handedly taught me more about being a “shen-fu” and a teacher than any person I have ever known.

What does it mean to be a father? It is obvious that any healthy male has what it takes to be a father in the physical sense of the term. I look to my Dad as a lesson in what being a father really means. Being a father means, of course, so much: being reliable, being strong, tender, patient. Being a father may sometimes mean recognizing the right moment to talk about difficult subjects, or the moment to be silent and to listen. I cannot recall Dad and not see his loyalty to my Mom, his affection for us all, his humor, his soft, other-centered ways. What Sophie never had in the play, I had mountains of in my childhood.

As a “shen-fu,” people often call me “Father.”

There are moments when that title scares me half to death. Usually, however, that special word is a push and constant challenge to be a better me than I've yet managed to be.

For some, “Mama Mia” may mostly be about the famous songs, or the dancing, or the wild, racy plot. This was a play that was much more than only that for me.

Congratulations and thanks to student director Andy Pan, actresses Iris and Ashley and the other fine performers, and friend and faculty advisor, Cecilia Liu.

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