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Stephen Henry

Congratulations, Get Rich! is a glittering ghost story where emotion is lost to theatrics

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Merlynn Tong's new play, [Congratulations, Get Rich!](#), bursts onto stage with all the colour and flair you'd expect from a work set in a struggling Singaporean-style karaoke bar.

Currently playing at Brisbane's La Boite Theatre, the play opens with Mandy (Tong) and her doting boyfriend Xavier (Zac Boulton) caught in a literal and metaphorical storm on the 7th night of Chinese New Year, as the couple fight to save their failing business, Money Money Karaoke.

As tension mounts, two women from Mandy's past materialise – her long-dead mother (Seong Hui Xuan) and her equally deceased grandmother (Kimie Tsukakoshi). Both women, returned as “hungry” ghosts, clamour for power and attention (and bok choy), as they air their unresolved grievances and reclaim what they have lost.

Unapologetically hectic and at times hilarious, the work is an ambitious blend of spectacle and soul-searching. A collaboration with Sydney Theatre Company and Singapore Repertory Theatre, it is also La Boite's first international co-production in its 100-year history.

However, buried under sequins and showy songs, this generational ghost story ultimately privileges theatrics over tension and fails to forge an emotional connection.

Glitter, grief and intergenerational trauma

As a supernatural drama, the play grapples with big questions. What do we inherit from our ancestors? Can we escape the grip of the past? Are our lives determined by fate, or the choices we make?

At its heart, this is a story about cultural obligation and family dysfunction. In particular, it explores the inheritance of shame, silence and unresolved grief between mothers and daughters.

But the play feels like it's trying to say too much, too quickly – as though it's not sure if it's a meditation on loss, or a musical comedy about self-reinvention.

The songs that punctuate the action are satirical, in a somewhat forced counterpoint to the dark circumstances of the drama.

The character of Xavier, Mandy's white husband, provides some sharp commentary on "white saviour" tropes, but ultimately functions more as a dramatic device than a person. His underdevelopment makes it difficult to care about the couple's relationship or future.

When the emotional climax of the play arrives – "I will make my own tradition" – it feels too neat, too expected.

Get Rich! is a collaboration between La Boite, Sydney Theatre Company and Singapore Repertory Theatre. Stephen Henry

The lighting is magical. And the movement work is delightfully choreographed, especially in its campy, supernatural moments.

Yet the story itself feels out of reach, as though trapped inside all that theatre.

Suicide and stigma

Cultural myths about trauma and grief can be powerful, but they can also misinform.

In 2020, [Everymind](#), in partnership with the Australian Writers' Guild and [SANE Australia](#), published evidence-based guidelines for theatre makers whose work includes representations of mental ill-health and suicide.

The [guidelines](#) warn that dramatised portrayals of suicide can perpetuate stigma, and discourage individuals from seeking help if the suicide act is romanticised or sensationalised.

Stage productions should avoid glamorising suicide through music, lighting or setting. They should frame suicide as a tragedy, not a solution. And they should show suicide as the result of multiple complex and interacting factors, rather than a single cause.

Tong is no stranger to turning personal grief into public theatre. Stephen Henry

In *Get Rich!*, the consecutive suicides of Mandy's mother and grandmother arguably normalise suicidal ideation as an acceptable, and inevitable, course of action.

The family insists they carry "the suicide gene". While this is deeply evocative and dramatically inviting, it serves to reinforce a deterministic view of mental health in which families are "doomed" by their biology, leaving little room for agency, hope and the possibility of recovery.

We learn Mandy's mother takes her life because she struggles to cope with the collapse of her marriage and her resulting financial hardship. Mandy's grandmother, a member of a gang known as the Red Butterflies, jumps off a bridge to evade police arrest.

The fact that suicide is used not once, but twice, with little exploration of the underlying causes and warning signs, diminishes the profound complexity of [familial transmission of suicidal behaviour](#), and ultimately desensitises the audience to its real-world consequences.

Importantly, the Everymind guidelines also recommend contact details for support services are provided at the end of a piece, or as part of the drama.

At the play's conclusion, once the hungry ghosts are exorcised, Mandy rapidly releases herself from her cultural baggage and internalised trauma when she realises, in a moment of epiphany, she can forge a new way forward.

Technically slick but emotionally elusive

Tong's decision to both personalise and fictionalise the trauma sets up an uneasy reception.

She describes the work as a [fantastic autobiography](#) in which she "allowed [her] imagination to run wild".

Tong herself grew up in a karaoke bar. At the age of 14, she lost her mother to suicide after her father passed away from cancer and her mother struggled to keep the family business afloat. In a recent [interview](#), Tong explained that growing up, she "heard rumours that [her] grandmother may have passed the same way".

However, much of the play's emotional weight is conveyed through flashbacks, acted out by the performers behind a TV screen at the karaoke bar. While these retrospective moments are theatrically striking, the screen creates another layer of distance between the audience and characters.

We don't hear Mandy – or Merlynn – give voice to the unspeakable pain of losing two generations of women to suicide.

If the point is that trauma is unspeakable, then the theatrical choices make sense. But the heart of the play remains largely in shadow – its emotional core obscured by glitter and gloss.

Congratulations, Get Rich! is playing at La Boite until September 20, at Singapore Repertory Theatre from October 29, and at Sydney Theatre Company from November 21.

If you or someone you know is struggling, help is available. In Australia, you can contact Lifeline at 13 11 14 for confidential support.