

BREAK THEIR LINEAGE, BREAK THEIR ROOTS...

Theatre review by Aziz Isa Elkun and Rachel Harris

On Friday 4th November, at Rich Mix theatre near Brick Lane, now one of the most popular areas of London, Sohaya Visions in collaboration with iceandfire presented BREAK THEIR LINEAGE, BREAK THEIR ROOTS. The show focuses on the ongoing repression of Uyghurs, Kazakhs and other Turkic Muslim peoples in East Turkestan / Western China. This work is the first time that the theme of the Uyghur genocide has been addressed on the stage in the UK. In the audience were several Uyghurs and nearly 100 British theatre goers.

The play is based on the direct words of survivors of China's internment camps, built entirely around interviews with four people who were interned or worked as teachers in the camps and managed to flee abroad after their release. This is the first time that we have seen verbatim theatre in action, and we found it a powerful tool to convey survivors' real-life experiences in their own words. We did not expect to be hit so hard. We knew the stories of these people from previous public testimony and media reports, but confronting their experiences in the theatre space was completely different. Hearing their words voiced in English by young Londoners, somehow served to humanise and universalise the experience of the camp survivors. The writer, Raminder Kaur, served on the panel of judges at the Uyghur Tribunal last year. Along with Christine Bacon's effective dramaturgy and direction, she has done an extraordinary job of distilling the months of harrowing testimony and official documents presented at the Tribunal into a hard-hitting one-hour theatrical experience that can speak to wider audiences with little understanding of the immediate political context.

The play highlighted many important things about the nature of the repression. The intrusive surveillance endured by people inside and outside the camps was brilliantly captured by the stage designer, Nicola Hewitt-George, through the use of projection and models. The intertwining of the brutality and the bureaucracy of the system was deftly expressed, as was the system's emphasis on self-criticism and personal reform, smiling and gratitude to the Communist Party. A brilliantly absurd sequence themed around the Chinese term "zuguo" (motherland), showed the characters integrating their individual stories into Chinese propaganda narratives, performing exaggerated folkloric dance moves while balancing precariously on plastic stools.

The play is structured by a constant interplay between the individual accounts, which worked well to provide pace and to build the impact of their collective experiences. Rather than simply focusing on their suffering within the camp system, the play takes a longer look into the lives of the survivors, before and after the camps. This serves to highlight the extraordinary courage of these individuals who have chosen to speak out, often with serious personal consequences. It also highlights the kinds of people who have been targeted in this campaign: the good citizens, the educators, the influencers. The show ended very movingly with a lullaby sung by Nadia Nadif and a message of hope for the next generation, provoking tears among the audience and deep sympathy for those who were persecuted. The actors were outstanding, especially Avin Shah who played Abduweli Ayup and Nadia Nadif who played Qelbinur Sidik. We strongly hope that this production will find its way to wider audiences.