



Off-Broadway Theater Review: C'EST DU CHINOIS (Public Theater)

by [Sarah Taylor Ellis](#) on January 16, 2013
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BREAKING THE LANGUAGE BARRIER

The French expression “C’est du Chinois” means “It’s all Greek to me” – or, literally translated, “It’s Chinese.” The phrase is typically flippant and dismissive of cultural differences, marking a refusal to engage a linguistic barrier. Yet the play *C’est du Chinois*, conceptualized and directed by Edit Kaldor, creates a rather astounding moment of cross-cultural understanding.



The Yao and Lu families (played by Nucheng Lu, Siping Yao, Aaron Chun Fai Wan, Lei Wang, and Qifeng Shang) unload overstuffed bags of random items on an empty stage: coffee, chocolate, maps, a rice cooker, a baby doll. With eager grins and overenthusiastic gestures, these families from Shanghai offer the audience a fun and interactive hour-long Mandarin lesson. An actor holds up an object, says the word in Mandarin, blows a whistle – and the audience repeats. Hen hao! (Very good!)



New York, kung fu, father, mother, love, tears. Through an accumulated array of objects and gestures, the Yao and Lu families engage their audience in a foreign language tutorial that never uses English and rarely drags; the characters' onstage quips and quibbles with one another are often as entertaining as the lesson itself. Vocabulary gradually builds so that the actors can piece together simple sentences and share a story about the challenging immigrant experience in the United States.



Most effectively, *C'est du Chinois* offers a visceral understanding of the language barrier for immigrants. Despite the friendly Mandarin lesson leading up to the tale, the (English-speaking) audience's understanding of the families' story is always fragmentary. It is precisely the confusion and even occasional frustration of this language gap that leads us to genuine empathy by the play's end, not to mention the desire to continue learning and expanding beyond our own borders.

photos by Tom Croes (additional photos by Raquel Belli and Luc Vleminckx)

C'est du Chinois

Under the Radar Festival at The Public Theater
scheduled to end on January 20, 2013
for tickets, call 212-967-7555
or visit [The Public Theater](http://www.thepublictheater.org)