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Caught, by Interact Theatre Company

By Mark Cofta

Anyone who loves smart plays about smart people discussing smart subjects — plus unpredictable stories, fascinating characters and theatrical inventiveness — should see InterAct Theatre Company's brilliant premiere of *Caught.*

Playwright Christopher Chen explores ideas of responsibility in art and journalism, citing real-life cases like Mike Daisey's famous exaggeration of Chinese workers' conditions on PBS' *This American Life* and Oprah's exposure of James Frey's "fictional autobiography," *A Million Little Pieces*, to examine what truth can, should be and seldom is in art, news and relationships.

Exactly how he does this is best left unexplained, but suffice to say that little is what it seems. When we enter the Adrienne Theatre, we're in the Mana Gallery, seeing photos by Chinese artist and "sym-bol of all Chinese suffering" Lin Bo. He shares ideas about "hypothetical art" and his crowning achievement, an "imaginary protest."

The bland art displayed — photos of people looking at artwork — slyly hints at what's coming, which will rocket beyond the many cases of China's suppression of artists it echoes.

"A lie," a *New Yorker* executive tells Lin in the play's next layer, "is like a cockroach: If you see one, there are a hundred you're not seeing." We're treated to a passionate debate about the nature and purpose of truth, and then Chen's play explodes (propelled by Elizabeth Atkinson's understated sound design) into another dimensional layer, and another and another. I daren't spoil it — the ride is just too thrilling, and relies on us not knowing what's coming.

Underappreciated local actors Justin Jain and Bi Jean Ngo, as both Chinese artists and American artists of Chinese descent coping with "arcane American truth battles," give brilliant performances in multilayered roles, making Chen's dizzying levels of dramatic reality feel real for us. Jessica DalCanton, Christie Parker and Ames Adamson shine in equally challenging supporting roles.

To their credit as well as Chen's and director Rick Shiomi's, the characters are not talking-head constructs, but genuine people whose emotional lives intertwine with their professional decisions. Shiomi's detailed, expertly paced work — ably supported by Melpomene Katakalos's flexible set, Peter Whinnery's incisive lighting and Rachel Coon's witty costumes — should fulfill Shiomi's hope that *Caught* will be "a watershed moment in the emergence of Asian-American theater in Philadelphia," an event long overdue.