



MY THEATRE

08 MAY 2016

A Reason to Talk: Subtle Storytelling at its Best

By Thea Fitz-James // Theatre (Toronto)

A Reason to Talk, produced by Why Not Theatre, has already started when you walk into the Theatre Centre mainstage. There creator Sachli Gholamalizad holds old family photos up to her laptop's camera, which are projected in real time on to the screen above her. In this evocative way, Gholamalizad introduces us to the subtle world of *A Reason to Talk*: a complex weaving archival footage, soundscapes, and live video that explores questions on family, culture and home.

Back to the audience, Gholamalizad sits at a kind of motherboard through which she controls the show. She appears to us through a screen, as she sings, types and dives deep into her complicated relationship with her past and, by extension, her mother. There are three screens happening all at once: one large screen playing video and other filmic elements that help illustrate Gholamalizad's telling; another medium screen through which Gholamalizad types her fears, hopes, worries, and truths, the sound of her hands on the keyboard punctuating these moments with an atmosphere of intensity; and a small screen through which we can watch Gholamalizad herself, 'unmediated' in real time. The interplay of these screens, along with the filmic content, words and images that appear on them, create the dense visual world of the play. Through these screens Gholamalizad shares a syncopated personal history: her memories of living in Iran; interviews with her mother on their difficult relationship, and their immigration to Belgium; obscure archival footage of her past and upbringing; and beautifully performed multi-generational family songs, to name only a few. Through these diverse mediums, she digs deep into her flaws, her hopes, her fears, and her family, creating a visually dense, and conceptually brilliant performance.

While hyper-visual, Gholamalizad never actually turns towards the audience; this exemplifies both one of the most conceptually interesting aspects of the show, as well as its most frustrating. *A Reason to Talk* creates a terrain of complex intimacy: we are physically close to Gholamalizad, but far from her; she tells us her truth, but leaves much unexplained. When playing a filmed interview of her mother for instance, in a fervent quest to know her past, her off-screen voice continually asks why her mother always lies, why she can't tell the truth. These questions leave the audience thinking that there is more story to be told, that there is something unmentioned, unexplored. Perhaps *A Reason to Talk* merely scratches the surface of a complex story involving culture, family, immigration and mother-daughter relationships. This is, of course is intentional; Gholamalizad desires to be close to her mother, to hold her, to tell her she loves her, and yet for some reason she can't. The entire play, we discover, is simply a reason to talk to her mother. And in that estrangement, that difficulty, we find Gholamalizad equally unwilling to turn to us, the audience, to connect with us, while simultaneously displaying a desire to be heard, to be seen, and fear to of being misunderstood. The complexity of this push and pull between intimacy and estrangement is the both heart of the show, and, for this reviewer, its biggest downfall. *A Reason to Talk* divorces itself somewhat from the audience in an attempt to portray Gholamalizad's difficult relationship with her mother and with herself. And so it is perhaps unsurprising that I left wanting more: wanting to hear her voice unedited, to see her face unmediated. I wanted her to talk to us, and not through a screen or through her mother. But I know, frustratingly, that this is the point.

A Reason To Talk takes us on a methodological ride into a complex and subtle world of culture, immigration, and family dynamics. Gholamalizad holds the space in the theatre with grace, patience, and great care; taking the audience into unexpected and unexplained terrain. The performance is for the audience member who is looking for a unique theatrical experience, one that is more visual poem, or theatrical composite, than your traditional narrative. It's for the theatre goer looking to hear a voice not often represented on Canadian stages, and further, a first/second generation immigration tale that defies our expectations, that takes us, unapologetic, into the personal, the pain and the hidden history. We don't get reconciliation, we don't get a perfect nicely tied up story; and in this lies the power of this performance.