

REVIEW: A REASON TO TALK (WHY NOT THEATRE)

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***A Reason to Talk* is documentary style theatre exploring mother-daughter bonds in Toronto**

[A Reason To Talk](#), Sachli Gholamalizad's award-winning multimedia production currently running at [The Theatre Centre](#), is a fascinating documentary about Gholamalizad's rocky relationship with her mother who emigrated from Iran to Belgium with her two small children and who also waited years before her husband could join them. I use the term documentary, because when it soars, it soars, but I'm not entirely sure why it's a theatrical production, rather than a film.

As the audience enters, Gholamalizad, back to the audience, presses a series of photos to the computer camera, heartwarming family snaps and embarrassing childhood and young adult photos alike projected on two screens (video design, by Steven Brys, is overall crisp and effective).

After we begin to get a sense of her background, she types to us in real-time, sharing her fears of speaking out, among many insecurities that will strike a chord with just about anyone. This typing includes entertaining deliberate (and non-deliberate) typos, which might be the best argument for the form on stage – a modern-day version of Shakespearean characters speaking with a strange rhythm when they're nervous.

While there's a beginning, a middle, and an end here, and they all relate to each other, they don't completely cohere into an arc, plot-wise or thematically. The beginning in particular had

moments of great beauty, (and later, every time Gholamalizad sings is a treat), but each section of it seemed to stretch a little further past necessity. This and the general lack of theatricality do contribute to the feeling of disconnection (from one's family, country, peers) that the playwright is going for.

Gholamalizad doesn't face the audience; we only see her face over the screens. This is an interesting choice, but it's also one that never changes. The bulk of the piece, and its biggest strength, is a well-directed interview with her mother, who tries tentatively to bridge the gap between them that might never be crossed.

Ironically, her mother, only seen on screen, seems more present in the space; perhaps this is because no part of her is actively turned away from the audience, and her screen is large and central. Having the screens showing her daughter off to one side means that, if you want to read mom's subtitles (which you will, if you don't speak Farsi), you can't concentrate on Gholmalizad's reactions to what her mother is saying.

Her mother is definitely a figure worth documenting, engaging, sympathetic, and sometimes frustratingly impenetrable. She likes to put a positive spin on everything, but we can see the pain in her eyes — sometimes literally, as she wipes away tears but resumes the façade. She's reserved but bright and lovely; seeing her daughter relentlessly chip away at her is painful but adds serious intensity. It's easy to like her *and* to understand how it might be difficult to deal with her on a daily basis.

Even when she tells us she's being completely honest, she's still guarded. This comes the closest to dropping when she tells a couple of very specific stories which evoke the piece's most moving images, regarding the most frightening moment of her life, and the sacrifices she made to ensure her children slept through the night.

Later, there's another great scene with Gholamalizad's grandmother, as she tries to make her way through an old familiar song but keeps making mistakes; "erase that," she says to the camera. It's genuinely, achingly human, but again, defies cohesion — why do we only see the woman in that moment, particularly because of the supposed importance of the relationship?

I can see why [A Reason to Talk](#) has a number of prizes to its name; it tells a thought-provoking story in an eye-catching way. That being said, I usually like more *theatre* in my theatre. Regardless, the documentary film aspect of the play is extremely compelling, and I feel like I might have had a different appreciation of the work if I'd seen it at Hot Docs down the street. It's Mother's Day on Sunday – maybe bring your mom to this one. It will definitely give you a reason to talk.

Photo of Sachli Golamalizad provided by the company