

A Reason to Talk offers a compelling family commentary: review

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A Reason to Talk

We're told the least we can do is call our mothers on Mother's Day. But the conveniently timed run of Sachli Gholamalizad's solo performance *A Reason to Talk*, which opened in a presentation by Why Not Theatre the night before parents and children convened for flowers and brunch on Sunday, reminds us that the lines of intergenerational communication are not always so clear. Though it's what she wants most from her familial relationships, nothing about *A Reason to Talk* is direct and straightforward. Gholamalizad, an Iranian-born Belgium-based artist, does not turn to face the audience until her curtain call. Instead, she sits at a desk with a computer, keyboard, and a webcam that feeds into a monitor beside her—it feels like a one-sided Skype call for reasons that will continue to build throughout the show.

Above her is another screen that projects home videos and messages she types on the keyboard in real time. Centre stage is the looming elephant in the room, a giant screen that takes up the generous Theatre Centre stage, which displays intimate interview clips with Gholamalizad's mother—a stunning woman who moved her children out of a war zone in Iran when Gholamalizad was 5 years old, cared for them alone for two years waiting for her husband to join them, and made a life in a new country with new languages, traditions, and values.

The latter would prove to be a dividing force between her and her daughter, who rebelled against her mother's rules at 15, kick-starting an unfixable rift between them that continues in their inability to communicate the darker, unhappy aspects of their lives and relationship. Gholamalizad says, or types rather, that a broken relationship basically pauses any maturation on either side. So though she has practically doubled in age, the interviews are a moving window into this period in time when generations and cultures began to clash. Simultaneously, we see the digital reflection of Gholamalizad in the present, revisiting their relationship in every performance with regret, anger, frustration, and sorrow written clearly on her face.

You can also plainly see the pain in her mother, which is what makes these interviews so compelling—the closer she comes to breaking the barrier between her own life and her daughter's, the easier she seems to cover it with platitudes like “You should always think positive” and “I'm happy if my children are happy.”

Above all, *A Reason to Talk* is about where talking falls short. And Gholamalizad fills in the gaps with images, words, sounds, and songs that cut through misunderstandings or miscommunications. A short list of insensitive questions that Gholamalizad received as an Iranian immigrant living in Europe, from how to pronounce her name to more sinister accusations, reveals the potential for these two women to connect over their immigrant experiences in a new culture—but we also know that was never able to occur. In the videos, Gholamalizad's mother believes she's protecting her children by not discussing the hardships of living in Iran and in living in Belgium, when that's exactly the thing that could bring them closer together.

Screens get a bad rap for breaking down communication lines and making humans more isolated. But if those lines just aren't available face to face, Sachli Gholamalizad uses them ingeniously to build them back up again in unexpected ways.