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San Francisco International Arts Festival: Cho-In Theatre Transcends Language

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A monumental and moving evening from South Korea's Cho-In Theatre, part of the sixth annual San Francisco International Arts Festival (SFI AF), made me realize a few things. I need to see a lot more theater, for starters, like this.

Settling into the seats of the [Cowell Theatre](#), one of a cluster of buildings comprising the [Fort Mason Center](#), present-day life was whisked away by the breathtaking story of The Angel and the Woodcutter. The popular Korean folk tale of an angel coming to earth and discovered by an aging mother and her son, as re-told by Cho-In Theatre, is a testament to the craft and discipline necessary for such a performance. Brought by the extraordinary talent of Cho-In, the folk tale speaks without words, transcending the barriers of language.

The stylistic movements of the actors, show, masterfully, the progression from the mother and son stealing the angel's ethereal garment (rendering her powerless to return to the heavens) to her forced position as wife of the woodcutter. Woven throughout, flashes of sound play against watercolor washes illuminating the background. Puppetry, a simple set imaginatively created and re-created, thunderclaps and crescendos of music descending to quiet backdrops of sound, illumine the actors' anguish and joy, jealousy and awe.

Which brings me to another realization: my own awe at Cho-In's adeptness of conveying the familiar in an electrifyingly fresh way, demonstrating that beyond language we share the same story. Through misty eyes, I watched a familiar story, yet one entirely unrelated to me at the same time.

The story of family, of loving and living and life and death. The atrocities of war and its ill-fated after-effects. Humanity, outlasting even the most brutal violence. Finishing, before the lights faded, with an impression of life's cycle repeating itself: the young mother, child held to her chest.

We are left to gaze on three red paper lanterns suspended in the darkness, bobbing brilliantly like planets in the solar system, a reminder of the vastness of the world and beyond, of human humbleness and the similarities we hold.

Cho-In Theatre plays at the Cowell Theatre during the week. For a detailed view of the calendar for this and other SFI AF performances, please follow the link below.