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AMA

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Sarah Lawrence College
ABSTRACT

A Reddit-esque Ask Me Anything for my dying Chinese grandmother in the Philippines except the audience is doing the asking and I’m portraying my grandmother and at some point I get the audience to reenact the 1941 Imperial Japanese invasion of Luzon right before I inflate a pool toy/facsimile of a Type 94 Tankette. The audience enters the space with the text audience handouts taped to the back of their chairs, and the piece will begin once the first audience member comes up to begin to read the running script. A video recording of my first performance is accessible through a YouTube link on the last page of this document, given that this piece does not have a script per se. Submitted as documentation for the Embodied Thesis portion of this author’s theatre program’s thesis requirements (the written thesis being a separate submission).
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I wish to thank Kelsey Cheng for being that one person who believed in me until enough other people did;

the professors and staff at Sarah Lawrence College, none of whom were paid nearly enough to deliver the quality of education, attention and guidance that I got from them;

my friends from AADA, for teasing me about finding another place to hide from my career for two years;

my Filipino friends for coming to my shows and indicating when audiences are allowed to laugh;

my family, for driving me out here;

and finally my classmates, for all their emotional, artistic and material support, and for making joyful work that will continue to inspire me until the day I die.

Thank you all for showing me what peace can feel like.
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N/A
(Kindly take this paper and keep it with you.)

(After the entrance door closes, it would be nice if just one of you could come up onstage, stand in front of the white folding chair, take the stack of papers on that chair, and read the first page, following its instructions. Bring your reading glasses if you need them.)

(Whoever comes up onstage can leave this paper near their seat.)

(If more than one person stands up, I recommend reveling in the ensuing politeness standoff until the sole survivor makes it onstage.)

(Below, in bold, are your words. Feel free to ignore them for now, but you'll need them later. For words separated by the slash, the first is the literal translation and the second is the idiomatic.)

LOVE

EAT

DONE

WHAT

EXPENSIVE

FINE

GOING

FRIEND

DELICIOUS

CHEAP/GOOD

LITTLE INCONVENIENCE/PISS

BEAUTIFUL COUNTRY/UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

CENTRAL COUNTRY/PEOPLE’S REPUBLIC OF CHINA

OUR PEOPLE/CHINESE PEOPLE IN THE PHILIPPINES EXCLUDING NEWLY ARRIVED CHINESE PEOPLE FROM THE PEOPLE’S REPUBLIC OF CHINA

FOREIGNER/FILIPINO WITH NO VISIBLE CHINESE TRAITS AS DETERMINED BY OUR PEOPLE
(Kindly read the following aloud)

Hi.

(Await response)

Can you hear me ok?

(Await response, and then adjust your volume as needed)

I’m (say your name).

I want to say before anything else that Kenneth, here sitting next to me, stole this audience spokesperson device from the theater group 600 Highwaymen’s performance of A Thousand Ways Part 3: An Assembly.

Kenneth may try to tell you afterward that it was “adapted from” or “inspired by” 600 Highwaymen, but that’s probably bullshit.

Content Warnings for misogyny, body shaming, homophobia, war, a reference to a historical period of sexual slavery, racism, death, terminal illness and loud noises.

(go to the next page, ‘accidentally’ letting this current page fall to the floor in as dramatic a fashion as you feel comfortable with)
(continue reading aloud)

Don’t worry, I meant to do that.

If I or anyone else after me accidentally drops ALL the papers, would you all be ok with helping us reorder them? They’re numbered on the upper right hand corner, and Kenneth won’t mind because it’ll eat up runtime.

(await response)

Thank you. Also, here behind me is a chair. (indicate the chair)

If I or anyone else after me is like, totally over standing, we can sit on it. No biggie. (sit on the chair if you’d like)

If I or anyone else after me is like, totally over speaking, or would rather not read something out loud, we can ask for someone else to take over. No biggie.

We will do this by holding our stack of papers over our head until one person from the audience comes up and takes the stack from whoever is currently holding it. I will now demonstrate.

(Let this current sheet fall to the ground; afterwards, hold the remaining stack of papers over your head and hand it to the next audience member who comes up.)
Hello.  

I’m (say your name).  

Can you hear me ok?  

(adjust volume as needed; also, don’t worry about pronouncing the words Hokkien or Fujian correctly. I appreciate your best effort)

On your handouts are the fifteen words Kenneth knows in Hokkien, which is the native language of Kenneth’s grandmother, who was born in the Fujian province of the Chinese mainland. Kenneth’s grandmother led the family from postwar ruin into prosperity by working until she was 95.

Now, using just those words, kindly answer the following questions from Kenneth’s grandma, who is now 97 years old and lying on her home hospice bed in the Philippines.

Because Kenneth believes that subtext is for cowards, that over there is Kenneth’s grandma.

(point to me in the wig and dresser)

(go to the next page, letting this one fall to the floor)
(Please read the following question aloud.)

Are you going to lunch with mom and dad? Are they at the office?

(Kindly now solicit answers from the audience, who you should encourage to speak their answers out loud using the words on their papers, until you feel satisfied. Then, let this current sheet fall to the floor and see the instructions on the following sheet.)
(kindly read aloud)

I miss the office. I miss work, and lunch breaks, and solid food. Can I come?

(After you feel that the audience has answered this question to your satisfaction, let this current sheet fall to the floor and hold the remaining stack of papers above your head to indicate that you’d like someone else to take over reading.)
(kindly read the following questions aloud)

Why isn’t your sister married yet? Is it because her opinions are too strong, or because she’s gay?

(Kindly now solicit answers from the audience, who you should encourage to speak their answers out loud using the words on their papers, until you feel satisfied. Then, let this current sheet fall to the floor and read the following sheet.)
Why aren’t you married yet? Is it because you’re gay?

(Take answers from the audience until you are satisfied. Then, if you have never been asked this question by a relative, leave this sheet of paper on the table by the United States flag. If you have been asked this question, leave this sheet on the table by the Philippine flag. Afterwards read the next sheet of paper.)
Did theater make you gay?

(Field answers from the audience until you are satisfied. Then, if you have never been asked this question by a relative, leave this sheet of paper on the table by the United States flag. If you have been asked this question, leave this sheet on the table by the Philippine flag. Afterwards read the next sheet of paper.)
Do you still go to [insert most applicable place of worship here]?

(Field answers from the audience until you are satisfied. If you have never been asked this question by a relative, leave this sheet of paper on the table by the United States flag. If you have been asked this question, leave this sheet on the table by the Philippine flag. Afterwards read the next sheet of paper.)
Do you still pray?

(Field answers from the audience until you are satisfied. If you have never been asked this question by a relative, leave this sheet of paper on the table by the United States flag. If you have been asked this question, leave this sheet on the table by the Philippine flag. Afterwards read the next sheet of paper.)
Your sister is just a girl. A girl can’t be in charge of a business. When will you take over the family business?

(Field answers from the audience until you are satisfied. If you have never been asked this question by a relative, leave this sheet of paper on the table by the United States flag. If you have been asked this question, leave this sheet on the table by the Philippine flag. Afterward, hold the rest of the papers up above your head to indicate that you would like another person to come up and read.)
You are so fat. Why? It’s disgusting.

(Field answers from the audience until you are satisfied. Then, if you have never been asked this question by a relative, leave this sheet of paper on the table by the United States flag. If you have been asked this question, leave this sheet on the table by the Philippine flag. Afterwards read the next sheet of paper.)
When are you giving me grandchildren? Hurry! You’re getting too old to give me grandchildren.

(Field answers from the audience until you are satisfied. Then, if you have never been asked this question by a relative, leave this sheet of paper on the table by the United States flag. If you have been asked this question, leave this sheet on the table by the Philippine flag. Afterwards read the next sheet of paper.)
Why did you leave?

(Field answers from the audience until you are satisfied. Then, if you have never been asked this question by a relative, leave this sheet of paper on the table by the United States flag. If you have been asked this question, leave this sheet on the table by the Philippine flag. Afterwards read the next sheet of paper.)
Are you happy there?

(Field answers from the audience until you are satisfied. Then, if you have never been asked this question by a relative, leave this sheet of paper on the table by the United States flag. If you have been asked this question, leave this sheet on the table by the Philippine flag. Afterwards read the next sheet of paper.)
We worked so hard to give you everything. Why aren’t you happy here?

(Field answers from the audience until you are satisfied. Then, if you have never been asked this question by a relative, leave this sheet of paper on the table by the United States flag. If you have been asked this question, leave this sheet on the table by the Philippine flag. Afterwards read the next sheet of paper.)
I love you. When are you coming back?

Each success you have for yourself is a failure of our family.

Each thing you are proud of brings us shame.

Your accomplishments there are so small and insignificant.

When will you do the right thing? Get married to a good woman, give me grandchildren and take over the business.

You know I got married when I was eighteen. The correct age!

Well, it was also to protect me from becoming a comfort woman to the Japanese soldiers.

Who’d like to play a game? As many people as you’d like can come down, there are plenty of tanks to spare. You just push down, pull back and they’ll roll forward.

Your goal is to hit as many American soldiers and Philippine conscripts as possible! Don’t worry. You’ll win eventually.
(Kindly read aloud.)

Wait, is that a rough facsimile of an Imperial Japanese Type 94 Tokosho Keninsha Tankette? Oh no! Better put in some ear protection everyone. Also here are some visual references for the upcoming lecture. Take one each, please.

For those of you playing the game, feel free to either sit back down or hang around and keep playing for the duration of either 300 years, 48 years or 4 years.

(I will hand you a stack of papers to hand off to the audience. Please ensure that each audience member has one, and that you and all of them put in your previously supplied earplugs.)

(You can then sit down for the lecture. I will now begin to deflate the tank.)
(kindly read this aloud)

Wow. I, (your name here) never knew that. Thank you for sharing that vital context. Tanks sure are cool.

Can I please have five people from the audience come up and form a circle surrounding Kenneth? They will give you numbered sheets to read aloud in order. Kindly wait on Kenneth’s signal before you start reading the first one, then go in order.
1. Why can’t you speak more of our language?
2. I speak Mandarin, Hokkien, Cantonese, Shanghainese and Filipino; you only speak Filipino and English.
3. Down to just two languages.
4. Soon you’ll only speak one.
5. Then you'll really be American.
Link to performance:

https://youtu.be/jhRv4qKQZNs