

# 'Secret Ingredient' – Macedonian movie in Moraga



"Secret Ingredient"



Photos provided



**By Sophie Braccini**

Macedonian movies are somewhat of a rarity in the U.S.; having one presented at the Rheem Theatre in Moraga is probably an all time first. "Secret Ingredient" is part of the International Film Showcase that opens on July 12 for a week and is a unique opportunity to discover the charming and a little old-fashioned humor of a nation where the middle class, like everywhere else, tries their best to make a better life for their loved ones.

North Macedonia is an independent state located north of Greece; it is

a former piece of defunct Yugoslavia and has one of the lowest per capita GDPs in Europe. Macedonia has a film-making history that started over a century ago with the Manaki brothers, who were cinema pioneers of the Balkan Peninsula at the turn of the 20th century. "Secret Ingredient," directed by Gjorce Stavreski, follows a long tradition of creating movies that portray the life of ordinary people and their adventures.

Vele is a young mechanic who works on trains and lives with his father, a difficult old man suffering from advanced lung cancer. Vele loves the

old man and will take extreme risks to get him a "secret ingredient" to alleviate his pain and seemingly get him to remission. The chances taken to get the ingredient, and the gangsters who try to get it back, create the first layer of the movie, which includes action and suspense with a bit of physical violence.

The extent of the secrecy the son has to go through to get his father to try the vilified substance, the gullibility of the people who see Vele as a powerful healer once the cat is out of the bag, create the second layer – the gentle and often sweet humor of the movie. Of course in a state that has legalized cannabis consumption, this entire imbroglio could appear to be a bit dated, but this is another country that seems to be a bit stuck in the 20th century.

But the real crux of the movie is not, in fact, the secret ingredient, or if there is a secret ingredient, it is not the illegal substance, but the difficult love between a father and a son who have been struck by drama and have such difficulty communicating. This layer is indeed the most endearing and touching aspect of the movie – how two very stubborn men can finally manage to

tear away the cloak of silence that has frozen their relationship in a state of banal frustration without deep connection and love.

Also interesting is the documentary aspect of the movie. North Macedonia is said to be the poorest of the former states that formed Yugoslavia. In the movie, the characters live in rundown apartments, take care of old trains with mostly manual tools, and drive beat-up cars. The health care system seems to be understaffed, and there are constant remarks about the Macedonian way, which appear to imply selfishness and bureaucracy. Not that different from parts of the U.S., after all, it just gives the feeling of having been filmed in 1990 and not in 2017. Once the father and son leave for the countryside, the audience finally gets a glance at the natural beauty of this Balkan country.

The actors have interesting physical characteristics, like anyone you might cross in the street, and they play their roles with genuine talent. The ending, which is very refreshing, will certainly surprise the American audience.

**The movie opens at the Rheem Theatre in Moraga on July 12 for at least one week. Info:**

[www.orindamovies.com/location/1629/Rheem-Theatre-Showtimes](http://www.orindamovies.com/location/1629/Rheem-Theatre-Showtimes)

# 'The Good Person of Szechwan' in Orinda



Photos provided

**By Sophie Braccini**

The first Bertold Brecht play chosen for the magnificent Bruns theater in Orinda by Cal Shakes is "The Good Person of Szechwan," an epic fable set in an imaginary Chinese province sometimes in the past, leading to a very contemporary reflection on the nature of good, human decency, and the possibility to stay true to one's principles in a corrupt society. The play also shows that communities put individuals in a box with a defined set of attributes and expectations that can be alienating. In response to this

constraint, "The Good Person" finds a unique and interesting way to regain a degree of freedom.

The play takes place in a metaphorical very poor region of China, sometimes in the past, where most people are struggling to make a living while others prosper. In a fit of desperation the gods come down to earth in this forsaken place looking for one authentically good person before giving up on the whole human race. In this pit of despair where cheating, lying or stealing is the norm for survival, the only good person is Shen Teh, the young prostitute who would rather love only one

man, but needs to sell herself to survive. For one night, she gives up on her income to offer housing to the gods. To thank her, they give her a little purse of silver coins that allows her to buy a small business that should lift her from poverty.

No sooner that Shen Teh becomes a little better off than her poor surroundings, a flock of parasites descends on her to live off her generosity. She cannot say no; she is the good person. To save herself from this onslaught, she invents and personifies a male cousin of hers, Shui Ta, who is business savvy, kicks out the bloodsuckers, and regains

some economic footing. Then love comes knocking on her door, sending her to other extremes of naivety and generosity.

All the elements of Brecht's view of the world are present in this play. The German playwright who wrote during the first half of the 20th century, exposed the difficult living conditions of the working class and its impact on human nature. His epic theater is written to bring social elements to the fore. Shen Teh is locked in a no-win scenario: she wants to be a well-doer, but people around her are so poor themselves that they scramble to take advantage of anything, including the one they have affectionately called the angel of the outskirts.

Shui Ta is Shen Teh's opposite, selfish and harsh. Interestingly enough, Shui Ta manages to create good for some, by being demanding rather than giving. Beyond the obvious weak-woman/ tough-man contrast created by the two personas, the play shows how people refuse to see anything else in Shen Teh than the simplistic image they have constructed of her. Having the courage to invent a new character for herself, to switch paradigms, lets her stretch her abilities, and interestingly it does so for others around her.

The audience will appreciate

the complexity of human nature rendered with mastery by the excellent German playwright: no one is really good, no one is really bad. There is no message of hope at the end. Instead, the audience is asked to find the response for themselves: Is there a possibility to be good in the society we live in? Brecht's personal answer, at the time he lived, having fled Germany when Hitler rose to power, was that society had to be changed.

Kudos goes to the excellent actors of the play directed by Eric Ting, Cal Shakes' artistic director. They all present very convincingly their multifaceted characters. Francesca Fernandez McKensie is most impressive as Shen Teh/ Shui Ta, giving a nuanced and touching rendition of her character(s); Lance Gardner as Wang, the water seller is fun and energetic, adding an excellent humorous vibe; while Armando McClain as Yang Sun the unemployed pilot is alternately seductive, terribly repulsive, and finally honest, all of it quite convincingly.

Cal Shakes' "The Good Person of Szechwan" runs through July 21 at the Bruns Amphitheater in Orinda. More information and tickets at [www.calshakes.org](http://www.calshakes.org).

