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Review: La Jolla Playhouse's 'Family Album' a heartbreaking but moving musical about self-acceptance

The world premiere 90-minute musical is the story of a singer-songwriter running away from her family and her past



Aury Krebs, left, as Mia and Claire Kwon as Young Mia in La Jolla Playhouse's world-



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Songwriters always draw inspiration from their life experiences for their music. But what if those experiences are the product of long-unprocessed trauma and deep family dysfunction?

That's what happens in "The Family Album," a gorgeously scored world premiere musical that opened Sunday at La Jolla Playhouse.

In this heartbreaking but empowering and very funny 90-minute musical, 33-year-old Mia is a struggling Asian American singer-songwriter who is both running relentlessly between low-paying gigs and running away from her family and her past, singing: "I'm all journey, no destination / up in the air is my foundation."



Eleven years in the making, “The Family Album” started out in 2017 as a single song named “Quiet” that L.A. native MILCK (aka Connie K. Kim) co-wrote with AG (aka Adrienne Gonzalez). It’s about MILCK’s decision to defy family and societal expectations about women and speak out about the trauma she experienced in her youth. ([The song](#) would become the anthem of the 2018 Women’s March in New York City).

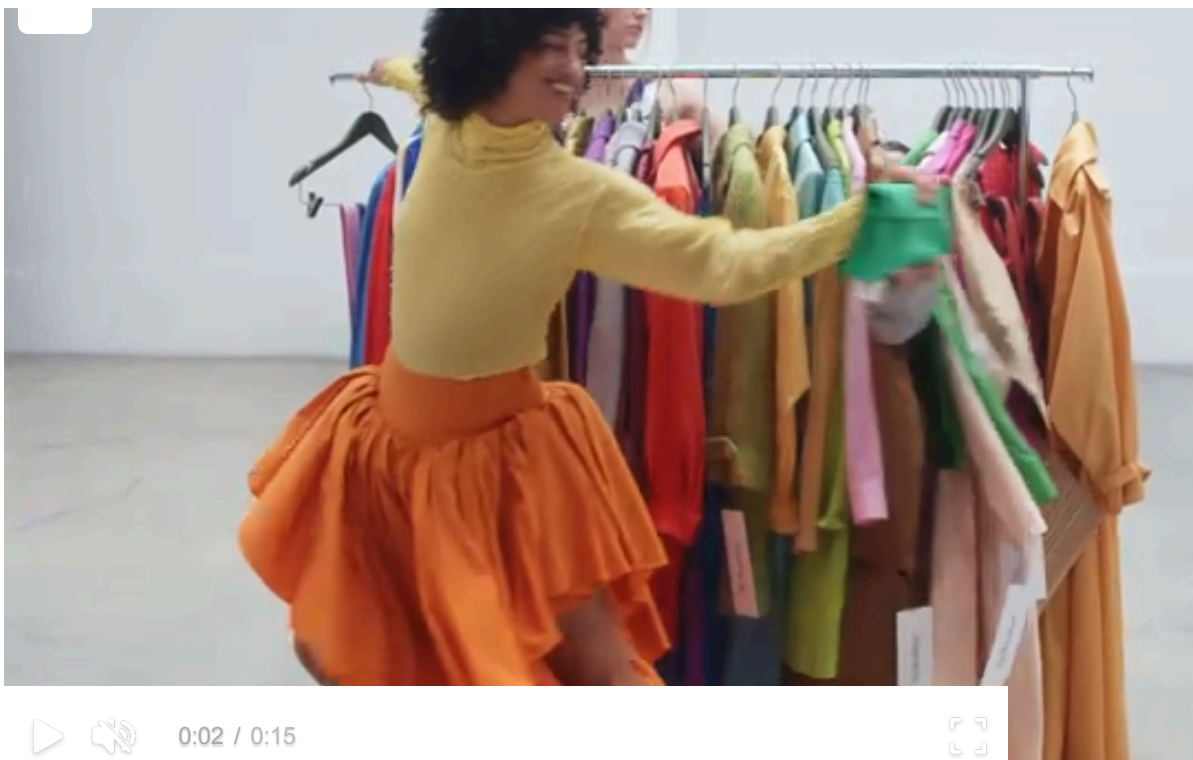
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“Quiet” planted the seed for the Playhouse-commissioned 24-song musical “The Family Album,” which MILCK co-conceived with the musical’s director Jess McLeod, a story by MILCK, McLeod and bookwriter Sam Chanse and music and lyrics by MILCK and AG, who also served as orchestrator and arranger.

“The Family Album” tells the story of an Asian American family, but it’s one many immigrant families will recognize about the pressure on children to succeed and not make any waves that could draw unwanted attention to their family.

Set during the COVID-19 pandemic, when anti-Asian hate was at a fever pitch, Mia is called home to L.A. by her more successful siblings, elder sister Charlotte, a doctor, and younger brother Daniel, a wealthy financier, because their mother may be dying. The reunion does not go well.

The fiery and wounded Mia struggles to reconnect with her emotionally distant parents, Sylvia and Henry. And returning to her childhood home stirs up haunting memories, which are brought to life by a 14-year-old version of herself. Mia may have inherited a family history of mental illness, and her



Aury Krebs is outstanding as the grown-up Mia, with a rich and precise coloratura voice that can perform MILCK's signature staccati singing style, and a warm, funny and engaging stage presence. Mia's songs, along with those she duets on with the rebellious Younger Mia — played with grit and ferocity by power singer Claire Kwon — are the musical's best, including "Quiet," "Dopamine Lottery," "No Home At All" and the tearjerking finale "Oh Mother."

As dark as this show may sound, the musical is filled with many humorous and heartwarming moments. One of the best is the song "Golden Child," a hilarious duet by sisters Mia and Charlotte about how their little brother Daniel is their parents' favorite.

There's also the cleverly written duet "Dot Dot Deleting," where Charlotte (Courtney Reed) and Daniel (Marc delaCruz) speak via text in a conversation filled with unspoken thoughts and missed opportunities. And the song "Stir It Up," performed by Mia's parents Sylvia (Jodi Long) and Henry (Paul Nakauchi) as they cook a Chinese meal together, is a metaphor for their recipe for family control and harmony.

Because so much of the story is told through its songs, McLeod's direction has a live concert vibe, with just a few pieces of scenery by Wilson Chin and a live four-piece onstage band led from the keyboard by conductor/music director

The musical's humorous subplot involves Mia's battle for musical independence in a recording industry that manufactures pop acts with sexually provocative marketing. In real life, MILCK did struggle to find her voice in the industry before breaking through with "Quiet." And in "The Family Album," there's hope that Mia is on that journey, as well.

'The Family Album'

When: 7:30 p.m. Tuesdays-Fridays; 2 and 8 p.m. Saturdays; 1 and 7 p.m. Sundays. Through Aug. 23

Where: La Jolla Playhouse's Potiker Theatre, 2910 La Jolla Village Drive, UCSD, La Jolla

Tickets: \$30-\$99

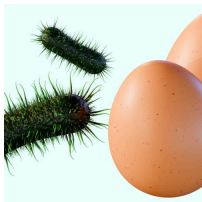
Online: lajollaplayhouse.org

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