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# S'pore native acts out the lives of Asian transsexuals

NEW YORK: The life of a transsexual in Asia is limited to sexual work—such is the searing viewpoint of Singapore native Leona Lo, who travelled to New York to present a first-person, three-act play on the subject.

The “Ah Kua Show” is a collage of experiences on the difficulties of being a transsexual person in places like Malaysia, Hong Kong or Bangkok.

The show, on stage at the “La Mama” alternative theatre in Manhattan’s East Village, is one of 197 events that are part of the XIV New York Fringe Festival.

The shows are staged on 18 small and experimental theatres, and are a far cry from the glitzy, big-budget Broadway productions.

“The idea is to open up the eyes of the world and to apply a bit of pressure on these countries to grant these women official recognition,” Leona told AFP after a recent presentation.

Leona – formerly known as Leonard – Lo was born 35 years ago to a middle-class family of Chinese descent living in Singapore.

Lo’s difficult teenage years, mandatory military service, school in England,

and finally the sex change in Thailand are the subject of a 2007 book.

Transsexuals have different experiences across Asia, and the show, which includes song and dance numbers, attempts to portray this variety.

The “Ah Kua Show” covers a broad range, from ‘ladyboys’ in Thailand to transgender women in Malaysia.

Islamic clerics often turn the Malaysian transgenders in for counselling, “and they can only have jobs as sex workers,” said Lo.

In Thailand, Lo said, transgenders “can only be show girls” because they are discriminated against and cannot find regular jobs.

In Hong Kong, Lo said, transsexual men who have not undergone an operation are in high demand.

However, in Singapore “we are ahead of a lot of Asian countries,” said Lo. “I can marry a guy and I have a passport.” Nevertheless, she said, “there is a lot of silent discrimination for being a transsexual.”

Last year Lo became involved in the Asia Pacific Transgender Network, the first group of its kind in the region.

“HIV is a huge problem among transgender women in Cambodia and Pakistan,” said Lo. “Forty percent of all Pakistani transgenders have HIV/AIDS.”

In Malaysia and Indonesia “they have a huge problem with religion, preventing them from living as women. In Hong Kong we have a case right now where a woman is struggling to get married and we are supporting her.”

Also, the group “just helped a transgender woman to escape from Mongolia and she has a refugee status in a European country right now.”

The show’s name, Ah Kua, are words in local Chinese dialect describing an effeminate or transsexual man.

The show also mentions frustrated encounters with white western “heroes” who promise eternal love and a ticket out of the world of prostitution and cabarets.

Sadly, this dream often ends up being a nightmare.

“There are lots of so called foreign guys who are looking for a transgender

woman to bring back to the country and to abuse them,” said Lo.

“Until I met my present boyfriend, I was in and out of several unhealthy relationships because I also had an illusion of getting the ideal boyfriend and everything else in my life would change.”

Lo’s advice: “Be happy with yourself, be happy where you are, but do something constructive with your life.”

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