

nytheater now



Ann Starbuck | Annie Lesser

In 1988 Ann Starbuck went to the Beijing Teachers College for her junior year abroad. It didn't matter that she struggled with the language, or that her well-meaning parents had misgivings. Annie runs to Beijing hoping to release the fiery dragon within her. From her first meeting with "gangster Buddhas" who help her find a place to stay, No dragon here, Annie is a fish out of water.

Happily for the audience, Annie makes friends which she recreates in funny, sometimes bitterly sweet ways. Her friend Mei Mei, one of the many that go on a hunger strike in the Tiananmen protest takes her to the black market to change money where she meets an extraordinary old woman with lotus feet (a polite way to say bound feet) and an old sassy attitude. This is just one of the remarkable characters Ann Starbuck (both writer and actress) creates. Ann's depiction of all these people is colorful, and by turns sad and playful, and her "self criticism" is flat out funny.

When CNN hires American-speaking students to help with a planned visit from Gorbachev, Annie signs up for the extra cash. But when the protests in Tiananmen Square turn into an uprising, Annie finds herself escorting dissidents, teaching Bernard Shaw how to pronounce Chinese names properly, and then, she helps get a wireless fax machine using cigarettes as currency, not knowing how important it would turn out to be.

Jeff Gardner's sound design is subtle and successfully highlights Ann's journey, and the piece is well directed by Richard Embardo. Ann Starbuck captures the audience's attention and is enthralling as she tells us about those fraught days in China.

No spoilers here; the events of Tiananmen Square shook the world, perhaps inspiring the fall of the Berlin wall, the velvet revolution of Czechoslovakia, Poland, and Hungary. But whereas the revolutions in Europe were successful, the Chinese military overran Tiananmen Square, killing and arresting an unknown number of people. Tiananmen Annie was there, witness to a seminal moment in history, even if it's a history that's been suppressed in China. It's a riveting tale, and an unfinished one, because the fate of so many is a tragic mystery.