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Theater review: 'Cowboy' lassos stereotypes

Review Cyrano de Bergerac becomes an Asian-American looking for love in Wyoming with this funny retelling of the classic story.

Christy Desmith, Special to the Star Tribune

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The recycling of Cyrano de Bergerac continues, this time as playwright Michael Golumco imagines Cyrano as an Asian-American awash in the American West. "Cowboy Versus Samurai," in a Mu Performing Arts production, roughhouses with all manner of Asian-American stereotype.

There are but three Asian-Americans in Golumco's fictional Breakneck, Wyo.:

Travis, a high school English instructor doubling as our Cyrano-inspired poet-hero; Chester, an adoptee of unspecified national origin, and Veronica, a new arrival lured by the prospect of a teaching position. Veronica (Jeany Park) is quite lovely, and -- we all know what comes next -- she draws the attention of Travis (played by the ever-smirking Kurt Kwan). However, Travis discovers that Veronica has "preferences," having dated only white men. So in the fashion of Cyrano, he volunteers his letter-writing services to his friend Del (John Catron), a blond-haired, blue-eyed "big hunk o' man" who's lusting after the new girl in town.

Golumco's script favors punchy, politically incorrect one-liners. There are jokes about "Twinkies" and some deification of Bruce Lee. The playwright is also dissecting stereotypes: Veronica, for example, lives in fear of the submissive sex kitten typology.

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Chester, as played by the relentlessly comic Sherwin F. Resurreccion, experiments with the kind of Asian identities a Big Sky country kid must've caught on television -- everything from ninja to Maoism. But all that goofiness gets shot through with interludes of heart-heavy prose that, as delivered by Catron in his twangy lilt, sounds like cowboy poems. In other words, this is a text that's unconcerned with literary pretense. The writing feels nimble, conversational and contemporary -- it's funny yet sweet, in the spirit of Kaufman and Hart's "You Can't Take It With You."

Mu's production, directed by Raul Aranas, has some minor imperfections. For one, Kwan's inveterate smirking seems to undermine the sincerity of his character. Even more frustrating, the seemingly sexy Park keeps sucking her teeth, rolling her eyes and engaging in other fussy behaviors. But those flaws can do little harm to the script. The cast can't go wrong, really, because the playwright got it so right.

Christy DeSmith is a Minneapolis writer and assistant editor at the Rake magazine.

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