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Cowboy V. Samurai

THEATRE

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OPENED

November 8, 2005

CLOSED

November 27, 2005

PERFORMANCES

Tue - Sat at 7pm; Sat - Sun at 3pm
also Nov 25 at 3pm
no perf Nov 24

RUNNING TIME

1 hour, 45 minutes

TICKETS

\$19
212-352-3101

CAST

Joel de la Fuente, C.S. Lee, Hana Moon, Timothy Davis

AUTHOR

Michael Golamco

DIRECTOR

Lloyd Suh

SETS

Sarah Lambert

LIGHTING

Stephen Petrilli

COSTUMES

Elly van Horne

SOUND

Robert Murphy

FIGHT DIRECTOR

C.S. Lee and Joel de la Fuente in a scene from Cowboy V. Samurai (photo © Sarah Lambert)



Cowboy V. Samurai is a new play by Michael Golamco. It's described as a contemporary retelling of *Cyrano de Bergerac* set in the mythic American West. This synopsis is from the press materials: "When a mysterious and beautiful Asian American woman moves to Breakneck, Wyoming, everyone falls in love with her--the samurai, the cowboy, and especially Travis (*Cowboy V. Samurai's* Cyrano), the Asian

American teacher who doesn't stand a chance. In this romantic comedy, love letters are sealed and bound, horses set ablaze, and the history of the railroads are deconstructed, all the while the hand of the fair maiden is at stake."

This play is the first in a new phase of the National Asian American Theatre Company's work, the presentation of adaptations of classic works by Asian American playwrights.

nytheatre.com review

Martin Denton · November 8, 2005

Cowboy v. Samurai, the new play by Michael Golamco at National Asian American Theatre Company (NAATCO), is a very funny, very pertinent, and very smart riff on Rostand's classic romance *Cyrano de Bergerac*. It takes place in a tiny, remote town called Breakneck in the middle of Wyoming, in the present day. Here, Travis Park, a handsome 30-ish fellow of Korean descent, works as an English teacher in the local high school. In his spare time, he's also the secretary of BAAA (the Breakneck Asian American Alliance), a modest organization whose president and only other member is Chester, a foundling raised by Caucasians whose specific

Qui Nguyen

STAGE MANAGER

Karen Hergesheimer

PRODUCING COMPANY

National Asian American Theatre
Company

ethnic heritage is unknown and whose Asian American Pride is as strong and uncompromising as, well, Cyrano's faith in his oversized nose.

And then one day Veronica Lee shows up. A New Yorker (also of Korean extraction), Veronica has come here to teach and to find some breathing room, following a stretch of ill-starred love affairs. Travis and Chester are excited and, when they meet her (for she's a

knockout, of course), more than interested. But Travis soon learns that Veronica has what she calls "preferences": she only dates white guys.

Travis's pal Del—a white guy: a cowboy whose rugged good looks and good nature compensate for his lack of intellect—falls for Veronica too. Del's a substitute P.E. teacher at the moment; he doesn't think he's got what it takes to woo the brainy and sophisticated Veronica. So he asks Travis if he'll write a note to her on his behalf. Travis does, and it turns the trick, and soon he's supplying Del with a steady stream of poetic stories and letters that lead in short order to Veronica inviting Del to move in with her.

Eventually Veronica learns the true identity of the author of the notes she's fallen in love with, and this leads to some serious exploration of self-identity and internalized racism by her and by Travis and Chester. What's up with her "preferences" regarding men? Why is Chester so worried about his ethnicity and about stereotypes of Asian men? What did it cost Travis and Chester to be the first and only Asians ever encountered by their isolated "all-American" neighbors?

All of this is valuable and worth discussing: Golamco's script frames its discourse shrewdly in very personal contexts so that it never feels polemical or, more important, theoretical—non-Asians in the audience understand clearly and feel keenly the effects of prejudice that Travis, Chester, and Veronica are reeling from. One of the really fascinating choices that Golamco makes here is to illustrate the divided soul of the contemporary conflicted Asian American man by breaking the Cyrano character into two parts. Chester is the one with panache—the quixotic warrior for noble causes, in this case that of an Asian American community of two; the one given to grand gestures and romantic ideals (at one point in the play, he steals the Golden Spike that commemorated the first transcontinental railroad, deeming it a symbol of repression of his Chinese ancestors). Travis is the one with the soul of the poet and the loneliness of the hopelessly rejected; when he elects to help Del win Veronica, how much of his fantasy self as a non-Asian man is he projecting into the love letters that pour out of him?

So Golamco's title, which at first glance appears to be about the conflict between Travis and Del, really refers to the dichotomy represented by Travis and Chester—they are cowboy and samurai, dueling aspects of a self-image in need of cohesion and repair.

NAATCO's production of *Cowboy v. Samurai* is excellent, featuring sharp, well-paced direction by Lloyd Suh, a terrifically spare but evocative set by Sarah Lambert, and outstanding production values. A brief fight sequence between Travis and Chester, featuring nunchucks and choreographed by the expert Qui Nguyen, is a particularly fun highlight. Joel de la Fuente, C.S. Lee, and Timothy Davis all do fine work as Travis, Chester, and Del, respectively; Hana Moon's portrayal of Veronica comes off as a bit cooler than might be entirely desirable however—she makes the heroine of the piece a little bit hard to root for. But overall this is really commendable work, not least for bringing a provocative and entertaining play to the stage that raises some valuable questions about the potent side effects that racial identity and stereotyping can have on how we see each other and ourselves.

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