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- Home
- Listings
- Reviews
- Theaters
- Articles
- Staff
- Weekly Update
- About Us
- Contact
- Links
- Search
- Staff Login
- Design Credits
- Rights and Policies

Cyrano Out West

by Amy Krivohlavek

Cowboy v. Samurai reviewed November 6, 2005

Like attracts like. Or

something like. Despite the best efforts of sociologists to pin down the hows and whys of human attraction, there are always, always, exceptions to the rule. In *Cowboy v. Samurai*, Michael Golanco's freshly acute (and hilarious) reinvention of the classic *Cyrano de Bergerac* story, characters negotiate the sketchy terrain of romantic attraction as they wrestle with expectations, reservations, pride, and prejudice. The National Asian American Theater Company has produced a superb incarnation of Golanco's script.



CS Lee and Joel de la Fuente

Welcome to Breakneck, Wyo., where out of 1,000 inhabitants, only two are Asian: our Cyrano, Travis (Jose de la Fuente), a high school English teacher who escaped from Los Angeles after a disastrous relationship, and Chester (C.S. Lee), the assistant manager at Taco Tuesday, the only ethnic restaurant in town. (The irony isn't lost on him.) The militant Chester also leads the Breakneck Asian Alliance (population of two), but everything changes when Veronica (Hana Moon), a beautiful Korean woman from Flushing, Queens, arrives to teach biology at the high school.

Travis and Veronica strike up a fast friendship, swapping stories about their families and lamenting the lack of tofu at the local grocery store. As the conversation shifts to past relationships, however, Travis is offended when it becomes apparent that Veronica, as a rule, does not date Asian men. "Race has nothing to do with attraction," Travis argues, but it is clear that, at least for Veronica, race figures predominantly into the equation.



Joel de la Fuente and Hana Moon

Although he is falling for Veronica, Travis knows better than to pursue her; instead, he decides to help his friend Del (Timothy Davis) win her over. Del is a lovable, dimwitted hunk of a cowboy who teaches phys ed at the high school. While he is also smitten with Veronica, Del is threatened by her intellect and enlists Travis to write letters to her on his behalf.

COWBOY V. SAMURAI

Rattlestick Playwrights Theatre

Category: unknown

Written by: Adapted from Rostand's *Cyrano de Bergerac* By Michael Golanco

Directed by: Lloyd Suh

Produced by: none

Opened: November 4, 2005

Closed: November 27, 2005

Running Time: 1 hour, 45 minutes

Theater: Rattlestick Playwrights Theatre

Address: 224 Waverly Place

New York, NY 10014

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BOX OFFICE

Tickets: \$19.00
group sales available

CREDITS

Creative Team

Written by: Michael Golanco

Directed by: Lloyd Suh

Produced by: National Asian American Theatre Company

Artistic Associate: Joel de la Fuente

Lighting Design:

Stephen Petrilli

Travis's letters are poignant, clever, humorous, and wise, and, at least from our perspective, they could not possibly be written by Del, who uses "dumb" as a noun. But Veronica, after ascertaining that Del's sock drawer contains no Asian porn, happily launches into a relationship with her Wyoming cowboy. When things begin to turn sour, however, she turns to Travis for comfort. The secret of Travis's masquerade inevitably leaks out, and he must face his fears and restraints, while Veronica must account for, as Travis calls them, her "preferences."

Under Lloyd Suh's polished direction, the cast delivers crystal-clear performances. At the show's center, de la Fuente gives a graceful arc to his performance, effectively evoking the complexity of Travis's friendship with Del and the angst of his growing affection for Veronica. Moon makes a lovely Veronica, and she puts aside her sarcastic exterior to find something more delicate in a late-night confrontation with Chester. Thankfully, Davis moves beyond the stereotype of the hick cowboy; instead, his Del is an intriguing portrayal of a sheltered local boy forced to expand his perspective.

With expert comic delivery and impeccable physicality, Lee all but steals the show as Chester. An Asian man of indeterminate heritage (his adoptive parents never took the trouble to find out where he was born), Chester grew up in Wyoming as a self-described "island of yellow in a sea of white." Without any definite lineage to draw from, he adopts aspects of Asian culture to create his own Asian-ness, as it were. Chester worships Bruce Lee (the "Gospel of Bruce"), dresses as a ninja (complete with grappling hook), and criticizes Veronica for "playing a piano without any sharps or flats" (dating only white guys).



Joel de la Fuente and Timothy Davis

While it contributes to the show's humor, Chester's insatiable desire for racial definition also stirs up pathos. He wrestles with isolation and rage, and his aforementioned confrontation with Veronica exposes the self-hatred that paralyzes them both.

The show's design is strong overall, but Stephen Petrilli's lighting is a standout. As Del reads from his (actually Travis's) letters, he is bathed in a spotlight; Travis sits at his desk in the background, where only subtle streaks of light touch his face. Late in the show, Travis says, "When you write something down, you become the words." In this expert bit of staging, he sits out of the light—while he may have written the words, he stops himself short of truly becoming them.

Robert Murphy also contributes highly effective original music and sound design. Melancholy guitar chords create seamless transitions as they evoke the Western landscape.

While its comedy is often simple and direct, *Cowboy v. Samurai* successfully avoids becoming a one-joke (or one-note) show. Instead, the precise performances of four distinct characters eloquently explore how we create identity, all brought into stark focus within the barren landscape (or blank canvas?) of a tiny Wyoming town. With exquisite

Original Music/Sound Design: Robert Murphy
Set Design: Sarah Lambert
Costume Design: Elly van Horne
Fight Choreographer: Qui Nguyen

Cast

Timothy Davis as Del
 C.S. Lee as Chester
 Joel de la Fuente as Travis
 Hana Moon as Veronica

Crew

Postcard Illustration and Design: Jeanie Lee
Company Photographer: Ching Gonzalez
Stage Manager: Karen Hergesheimer
Assistant Stage Manager: Keiko Green
Technical Director: Evan Schlossberg
Press: Sam Rudy Media Relations
Marketing Intern: Michelle Yuan Zhao

moments of truth, hilarity, and despair, the play is a thoughtful, thoroughly compelling piece of theater that abandons the simple question of whether like attracts like. Instead, we are left wondering, *Should* like attract like? Why or why not? And at what cost?



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