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Comedy and snappy dialogue add punch to social commentary in "Cowboy Versus Samurai"

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BY WINNIE WONG
Examiner Contributor

Michael Golamco's "Cowboy Versus Samurai" is a blast. His romantic comedy is a modern-day "Cyrano de Bergerac" where race transplants physical beauty as the impediment to love.

The story takes place in Breakneck, Wyo., where the population is as sparse as the set at Richard Hugo House is efficient. The minimalist set design is primed for quick set changeovers in between scenes; it also evokes the desolate landscape of Breakneck.

Prior to the arrival of Korean American Veronica (played by Khanh Doan), there were two Asian Americans in town: Travis (Ray Tagavilla) is an educated, thoughtful but reserved Korean American who left Los Angeles to teach English in Wyoming; and Chester (Jose Abaoag) is an adoptee who knows nothing of his ethnicity, never mind his parentage. It is tough to be Asian Americans in an otherwise all-white town, where the only ethnic restaurant is called Taco Tuesday. Life is tougher still if you are Travis, when your only friends in Breakneck are the militant B-A-A-A (Breakneck Asian American Alliance) president, Chester, and the sweet cowboy Del (Travis Myers) who happens to be a little dull. The monotony of life in a small town is finally broken when the beautiful and smart Veronica arrives from New York City. Both Travis and Del fall for her, but who will Veronica choose?

Judging from the warm reception that she gets from locals like Frank and even Bobby Sorenson (who "keeps making chinky-eyes at [Travis]"), she can go out with anyone she wants. Travis knows that he does not stand a chance with her, having been told early on that she is only attracted to white guys. But how about his verbally challenged friend, Del? Does he have a chance at love if Travis takes over the letter writing for him?

In choosing the equally hunky Tagavilla to play Travis, director Miko Premo makes Veronica's choice for a lover a painful reminder to anyone who has had to overcome powerful preconceptions. Yet, despite the tension that arises with the fear of rejection and commentary on the disastrous effects of stereotyping, the crisp dialogue and a talented cast make "Cowboy Versus Samurai" a hilarious and lighthearted look at

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interracial dating and the forging of personal identity. Abaoag is highly effective as the comic foil and his outrageous antics generate most of the laughs. Doan is, well, beautiful, and a talented actress. Myers convincingly plays a cowboy from the backwoods of Wyoming. But it is Tagavilla's nuanced portrayal of Travis that drives home the message that in love, as in life, race should matter little, if at all.

"Cowboy Versus Samurai" runs through Nov. 18 at the Richard Hugo House, 1634 11th Ave., Seattle. Show times are Fridays at 8 p.m. and Saturdays at 3 p.m. & 8 p.m.

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