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THEATER/FINE ARTS

Tuesday, October 24, 2006

'Cowboy Versus Samurai'

The thing is, in "Cowboy Versus Samurai" there's no real cowboy and there's no real samurai. Those identities exist only to befuddle and frustrate characters who have high capacities for befuddlement and frustration.

Playwright Michael Golamco's romantic comedy about three Asian Americans and one Caucasian takes place in rural Wyoming. Del is the Caucasian. As played by Travis Meyers at Richard Hugo House, Del appears to be a Marlboro Man in reduced circumstances. Del sometimes works on his father's dude ranch, entertaining tourists. Also, he's a part-time gym teacher at the local high school.

Travis and Veronica are Korean Americans. They also teach at the high school -- he, English; she, science. They are both there as refugees from urban life and failed romance -- he, from Los Angeles; she from New York. They get no help in assimilating into life in Breakneck, Wyo., from Chester, the town's only home-bred Asian American.

Adopted as an infant by a local family, Chester cultivates militant Asian protest politics when not working as the assistant manager of Taco Tuesday. As played by Jose Abaoag, Chester is sometimes ludicrous and sometimes touching and always desperate.

Veronica, portrayed by Khanh Doan, goes in mostly for teasing, when she's in a good mood, and scorn when she is not. Veronica only dates white men. She falls for Del, mostly because Travis provides enthralling love letters to enhance Del's macho cowboy image. As Travis, Ray Tagavilla is a fascinating mix of pride and humility, goodwill and fear.

Director Miko Premo's staging is engaging and entertaining. Laborious set changes between scenes hamper comic momentum, but interludes of Cowboy Junkies music heard while furniture is being lugged on and off help sustain a mood of rueful nostalgia. The cowboys are gone, the samurai are gone. Their places have been taken by globalized existential angst.

"Cowboy Versus Samurai," a Sex in Seattle production, runs through Nov. 18 at Hugo House, 1634 11th Ave. Tickets are \$12, students, seniors and actors \$8; 206-323-9443 or tickets@sis-productions.org.

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