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**REVIEWS** Nov 10, 2005

New York

## Cowboy v. Samurai

 Reviewed By: [Dan Bacalzo](#)
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"Race has nothing to do with being attracted to someone," says Travis, the protagonist of Michael Golamco's **Cowboy v. Samurai**. But in this witty, satiric comedy, that statement is challenged over and over again as the playwright updates and adapts Edmond Rostand's *Cyrano de Bergerac*, substituting race for an oversized nose as the central issue.

The action is set in present day Breakneck, Wyoming, a small town whose idea of an ethnic restaurant is something called Taco Tuesday. Travis (Joel de la Fuente), an English teacher originally from Los Angeles, came to Breakneck after being dumped by his girlfriend. He's formed a friendship with the town's only other Asian American, Chester (C.S. Lee), an adoptee who's unsure of his parentage and even his specific Asian ethnicity. Enter Veronica Lee (Hana Moon), a beautiful Asian American woman from New York. Travis and Veronica quickly strike up a friendship, but an early conversation makes it clear to Travis that Veronica only dates white men and that he doesn't stand a chance in the romance department. So, when his Caucasian friend Del (Timothy Davis) expresses interest in Veronica -- as well as intimidation, since he feels he's too inarticulate to communicate with her -- Travis agrees to help him out by writing a series of love letters on his behalf.


 C.S. Lee and Joel de la Fuente in *Cowboy v. Samurai*  
(Photo © Sarah Lambert)

While all of the play's major plot points are based on *Cyrano*, Golamco's focus is on contemporary race relations. He establishes a generally humorous and whimsical tone early on, and this makes the more heavy-handed aspects of the script palatable. Racial humor is prevalent in the play as Golamco satirizes militant views on racial purity and skewers stereotypes that inform the ways in which Asian Americans are perceived. *Cowboy v. Samurai* also addresses more complex issues of self-identification and self-hatred; a particularly effective scene is an exchange between Chester and Veronica wherein they trade loaded questions about how racial stereotypes apply to them. Similar to *Cyrano*'s famous speech in which he insults himself in a far more grand manner than anyone else is capable of, this scene drives

home the fact that such negative perceptions have become internalized.



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The play is ultimately as much about friendship as it is about love. The relationships between Travis and his buddies Chester and Del are just as important to the story as his connection to Veronica. These men make sacrifices and come to one another's aid when called upon -- and, sometimes, when not called upon.

De la Fuente is terrific as Travis, at once confident and insecure. Lee is a hoot as Chester, making the character's increasingly wacky attempts to find his identity endearing and, in an odd way, believable. Davis has an easy charm and swagger appropriate to his character; the role as written could easily become flat or stereotypical, but the actor plays it with a goofy amiability. Moon is fine in the majority of her scenes, though her efforts seem forced when she's called upon to display heightened emotion. Lloyd Suh directs the

action with a sure hand and is ably supported by his design team: Sarah Lambert (set), Stephen Petrelli, (lighting), Robert Murphy (sound), and Elly van Horne (costumes). All of these artists have done a fine job on a presumably very limited budget.

*Cowboy v. Samurai* is presented by the National Asian American Theatre Company (NAATCO), which built its reputation by offering Western classics and contemporary works with all-Asian American casts. (My favorite was a production of William Finn's *Falsettoland*.) NAATCO has only recently begun producing new plays, and this show marks a bold new direction for the company as it plans to stage more adaptations of classic texts penned by Asian American playwrights.



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