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Cowboy Versus Samurai tackles thorny racial issues

But does it with humor and heart

By **Ed Huyck** Wednesday, Nov 17 2010 Comments (2) A A A

At the center of **Michael Golamco's** *Cowboy Versus Samurai* is a thorny question: What role should race play in matters of the heart? Here we have a **Cyrano de Bergerac**-inspired love triangle, except this time it isn't a protruding nose that is the impediment but the ancestry of one of the characters. This Mu Performing Arts revival finds a winning combination of humor and heart that keeps the social and cultural politics as an intriguing undercurrent.

Only two Asian Americans live in Breakneck, **Wyoming**: **Travis**, an English teacher who fled Los Angeles for the peace and quiet of rural America, and **Chester**, a militant young man who grew up in the town and is desperate to escape. The turmoil? A third Asian American, science teacher **Veronica**, moves into town.



Kurt Kwan and Sun Mee Chomet are two sides of a Cyrano-inspired love triangle

Travis and Veronica hit it off, but any romance is stymied by her preference in men: She likes them white. Enter good-hearted-but-dim townie—and Travis's friend—Del, who does catch her eye.

Details
COWBOY VERSUS SAMURAI
Mu Performing Arts, at the Dowling Studio, Guthrie Theater, Through Nov. 28.
612.377.2224

For the most part, Golamco understands that drama and comedy are better ways to explore these issues onstage than a straight-up lecture. In the first few moments of the play, it feels as if a lecture may be coming our way, but it turns out that the monologue directed to the audience is actually a letter written to Veronica, signed by Del but written by Travis.

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These letters serve not only as the engine of the story but bring us deeper into Travis's confusion. It's as if these anonymous missives are the only way he can really speak to Veronica, though they have plenty of interests in common and their shared Korean-American culture to help as shorthand. In reality, it isn't Veronica's taste in men that keeps them apart, but Travis's own insecurities.

- More About**
- Chester
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The relationships among the central trio make the story go, and the performers are more than up to the task. None of the characters is perfect, and the actors seem to relish finding the comedy—and pathos—in those flaws. Central here is **Kurt Kwan's** measured take on Travis. His character remains sensible in the face of chaos (see Chester, below), but that even-handedness comes at a price. For all his warmth, something seems dead inside, and Kwan keeps the pain, sometimes just the briefest hint, right below the surface.

Sun Mee Chomet plays with similar divisions as Veronica. She has left New York for a clean break in relationships, and her outward cheerfulness hides plenty of pain of her own. Meanwhile, **John Catron's** Del is all surface, a well-meaning young man who is inexperienced in love, and who discovers that it takes more than nice letters to woo the woman of his dreams.

All of this makes the play sound a lot heavier than it is. There's plenty of humor here, with jokes made at the expense of all four characters, from Del's less-than-sterling intellect (he refers to himself as a "dumb" more than once—that's right, as a noun) to Chester's oft-misguided militancy in doing things like boycotting the only local grocery store because it doesn't carry tofu.

Chester is often played as a fool, a naive young man who doesn't know his specific Asian heritage. Isolated in Wyoming, Chester has crafted his own heritage, built on comic books and kung fu movies, especially those of **Bruce Lee**, whom he has deified. **Sherwin Resurreccion** plays it as he should—as if he believes every bizarre pronouncement his character makes.

Through the play, Chester tries on different Asian identities. Those incidences are played mainly for laughs (he sneaks around as a ninja in one scene), but they also help to illustrate the character's anger at his isolation and, like everyone else, loneliness. After all, this is a play set amid the big, wide-open spaces of the American West. More than that, with only four characters, the desperate need for companions, friendship, and love are made all the sharper. **Director Randy Reyes** plays this well, offering only occasional moments of close contact, whether intimacy or anger, into the spaces that usually divide the characters.

Ultimately, that's what *Cowboy Versus Samurai* is about. From the solitary iconic characters of the title to evocations of **Clint Eastwood's** Man With No Name to the anonymity of feelings expressed through letters signed by a person other than the writer, these are single people longing to find a community, even if that village has a population of only two.

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