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Brad Richason

Twin Cities Performance Art Examiner


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# Review: Cowboy Versus Samurai a thought-provoking sparring of race and romance

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This Examiner Rates **Cowboy Versus Samurai**:





Cowboy Versus Samurai  
Photo: Michal Daniel

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Prejudice, as generally understood, implies the negative stereotyping of an entire group of people based upon egregiously baseless presumptions of supposed moral defects. Such bigotry is made even viler when the slurs diminish a victim's self-esteem severely enough to accept an unrealized existence. Fighting ingrained prejudices stands as the grounding challenge of the insightful and witty *Cowboy Versus Samurai*, the latest production from [Mu Performing Arts](#), now running at the [Guthrie Theater's](#) Dowling Studio.

Set in the small town of Breakneck, Wyoming, *Cowboy Versus Samurai* finds Korean American Travis in a monotonous routine of teaching English at the local elementary school, counseling his aimless friend Del, and humoring the professed racial militancy of Chester, the only other citizen of Asian descent. Travis' stale existence is forever dashed, however, by the arrival of the beautiful Veronica Lee. Like Travis, Veronica is Korean American, but their shared ethnicity has no romantic sway against Veronica's history of dating white men. When Del professes an interest in Veronica, Travis pulls a Cyrano de Bergerac, expressing his affection in love letters used by his friend to woo the woman of his dreams.

While explorations of racial self-identity are seldom presented as boisterous comedies, playwright Michael Golamco derives playful humor from the romantic mishaps. Cleverly depicting racial quandaries as a barrier to love, Golamco gives Travis' heartsick longing a universal appeal. The wedge between Travis and Veronica isn't driven by outside forces, but rather on their own inner doubts. And Golamco's flair for witty banter keeps the production energized, aided by Randy Reyes' lively direction and a uniformly charismatic cast.

In the lead role of Travis, Kurt Kwan evinces a humble everyman quality that strives to stay levelheaded even under emotional upheaval. For a striking portrayal of lovesick pain, look no further than Kwan's face as Veronica gushes over "Del's" letters. With Sun Mee Chomet in the role of Veronica, it's all too easy to empathize with Travis. Chomet imbues Veronica with a swaggering strength that refuses to follow socially approved standards. Only in quieter moments, as when Veronica commiserates with Travis over past loves gone wrong, does Chomet poignantly expose her character's wounded heart.

Further enhancing the production, the supporting roles of Del and Chester are drawn with no less complexity. Del seems to initially fit the cliché of luntheaded but good-natured townie, but John Catron allows an emotional depth that subverts simple comic relief. Far from being cavalier in his deception, Canton brings out the frustration and guilt of not being the man described in his letters. Likewise, Sherwin Resurreccion transforms the role of Chester from a Bruce Lee worshipping revolutionary to someone whose alienation stems from being a lifelong outsider. Resurreccion's unexpectedly nuanced portrayal provides one of the production's most stunning moments when Chester and Veronica verbally joust over racially charged accusations.

The windswept isolation of the Wyoming plains is brought to dusty life with a Western derived set design by Joseph Stanley. Further complimenting the remote location is Wu Chen Khoo's subtly evocative lighting; a versatile display that proves equally effective at depicting the vast barrenness of the land or the warm intimacy of two vulnerable human beings. Throughout it all, Mike Hallenbeck's original music, a tuneful blend of Western compositions with Asian variants, completes the sense of a slightly askew familiarity.

Less successful attempts to convey the implications of racial identity often play like a well-intended but laborious student essay. By placing such thought-provoking insights into a humorous and engaging narrative, however, *Cowboy Versus Samurai* eloquently argues that romance transcends race.

*Cowboy Versus Samurai* runs through November 28th.

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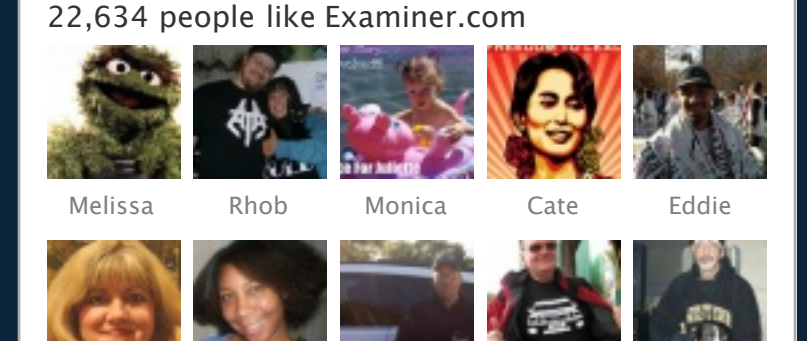
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