



Review: Theater Mu's 'Cowboy Versus Samurai' tickles the funny bone

'Cowboy Versus Samurai' uses light touch to examine skin color, self-perception, romance
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Special to the Pioneer Press
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Enlightenment in the theater doesn't have to come at the end of an aesthetic billy club. It's possible to laugh and learn at the same time, a nifty and altogether enjoyable trick turned by Theater Mu's current production of "Cowboy Versus Samurai" on the Guthrie Theater's Dowling Stage.

Michael Golamco's comedy examines notions of skin color, self-perception and romance in a similar vein to the Mixed Blood Theatre production of "Yellowman," which played this same stage in 2006. Instead of a gut-punch, though, the Mu production offers a rib-tickle in a story of the only two Asian guys in a Wyoming town of 1,000 whose lives get a goose when a new Korean-American biology teacher comes to town.

Veronica is everything a man — Asian or otherwise — could want: She's smart, strong, beautiful and just quirky enough to be interesting. Trouble is, she only dates white guys. And so, rather than romancing her himself, Travis decides to assist his studly-but-dim buddy, Del, by writing love letters for him.

It's a plot ripped right out of "Cyrano de Bergerac," and while playwright Golamco adds plenty of value, his script — filled with sharply drawn characters and biting humor; generously dosed with racial insight — is good but not great. The situations are overly convenient and Golamco doesn't exactly stretch when it comes to his predictable resolution.

Three-fourths of the Mu ensemble are veterans of the company's 2006 production of "Cowboy

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Versus Samurai," and under the direction of new helmsman Randy Reyes the script gets the best possible treatment. As an actor, Reyes is especially known for his comic talents, and he's successfully transfused some of his instincts into Sherwin Resurreccion, who plays Chester, the more militant of the two Asian guys.

The fact that the adopted Chester has no idea what part of the world he comes from doesn't prevent him from fulminating over the "refusal" of the tiny town's grocery to carry tofu, and other perceived racist offenses; and Resurreccion's twitchy, antic, Bruce Lee-worshipping Chester is a grade-A character without devolving into caricature.

Resurreccion's mania is balanced nicely by the calm of Kurt Kwan, who plays Travis with a disarming, aw-shucks charm and a wry, somewhat weary acceptance of the slights of being a yellow guy in a small, white town. The dumb cowpoke Del might not be the coldest beer in the fridge, but John Catron's portrayal, complete with rolling cowboy gait, neither

apologizes for nor wallows in for Del's intellectual deficiencies. Instead, he plays the character as a solid, salt-of-the-earth, good-hearted guy.

The role of Veronica is in some ways the most challenging. Her racial and emotional conundrums are most at the surface; but the role, written by a male playwright, isn't fully thought through. But cast newcomer Sun Mee Chomet is up to the challenge and manages to fill in some of the script's blanks, playing the role with a confident, appealing blend of vinegar and vulnerability.

Her performance adds a crucial flavor to "Cowboy Versus Samurai," which offers a couple hours of entertainment that runs from sweet to sour and bitter to bright. It's well worth seeing.

What: "Cowboy Versus Samurai," presented by Theater Mu

When: Through Nov. 28

Where: Guthrie Theater (Dowling Lab), 818 Second St., Mpls.

Tickets: \$30 - \$18

Information: 612-377-2224 or guthrietheater.org

Capsule: None of the lassoes or swords promised in the title, but lots of thought-provoking fun

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