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San Diego Arts

'Cowboy vs. Samurai' at Tenth Avenue Theatre

Mo'olelo lassos humor, humanity
 By Jennifer Chung
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Giving a new twist to an old story, Michael Golamco reworked Edmond Rostand's *Cyrano de Bergerac* into a play where race, rather than a voluminous nose, is the stumbling block to love. It's a natural transition in Golamco's romantic comedy "Cowboy Versus Samurai," which explores culture, stereotypes and self-hatred with sharp wit and frequent wisdom.



Paul Morgan Stetler plays cowboys and samurais.
 Photo: Nick Abadilla

Mo'olelo Performing Arts, known for producing intense dramas about social issues, gets the play's humor just right with a terrific cast that coaxes grace and sincerity out of the everyday flaws, misconceptions and endearing quirks of these likeable characters.

In Golamco's version, the *Cyrano* character is Korean-American Travis, a high school English teacher in Breakneck, Wyoming, where the horses outnumber the people, and the number of ethnic restaurants -- one -- almost outnumbers the Asian residents. The culture clash is palpable. The only other Asian in town is his friend Chester, president of the Breakneck Asian American Alliance. He's on a one-man crusade to get tofu stocked in the local market, and fighting for other such matters of great social and political import.

The play opens as the "two-donkey town" is about to get a jenny. Veronica is former city slicker looking to get lost in Cowpoke USA while she takes a break from a string of regrettable relationships. She's also a smart, sassy and gorgeous Korean-American biology teacher. Travis is not without his own baggage; he's a Los Angeles transplant running from a bad breakup.

Travis and Veronica hit it off, natch, and he falls instantly for her. But when he finds out she only dates white guys, he backs off and even helps his inarticulate, dim-witted Caucasian friend Del woo her through poetic letters full of touching anecdotes.

With the classic *Cyrano* triangle set up, Golamco gets busy exploring larger issues of race relations and identity: assimilation, extremist views on racial purity and internalized stereotypes. In one pointed scene, Chester and Veronica square off in a verbal tit for tat about the stereotypes they've laid not on each other, but themselves: Do you think I'm effeminate? Do you think I'm a sucky-sucky, love-you-long-time leg spreader? Do you think that I'm ashamed of myself?

The playwright smartly doesn't provide answers to the larger questions of race relations, but does provide some perspective.

The humor in "Cowboy" runs from satirical and witty to the heavy handed, but this ensemble finds a good balance.

Eric 'Pogi' Sumangil is hilarious as Chester, a character on the edge of caricature. Sumangil even manages to bring a good amount of charm and depth to the rash but mostly harmless "anarchist militant psychopath." Chester's political dogma and wacky revolutionary schemes hide his confusion and isolation -- his adoptive white parents neglected to find out his country of origin, and leaving him to try on the trappings of various Asian cultures hoping one will provide the right fit.



Eric 'Pogi' Sumangil as "anarchist militant psycho-path" Chester prays to Bruce Lee.
 Photo: Nick Abadilla

As Veronica, Zandi de Jesus is both tough yet vulnerable, full of self-doubt but making a good show of it. Paul Morgan Stetler plays the doltish yet genial Del, but doesn't quite have the physical presence, the hunky cowboy-ness, that the part calls for.

At the center of the show is Volt Francisco, well cast in the role of Travis. Franciscoskillfully delineates the character's duality and struggles -- between self-assuredness and self-consciousness, reserve and assertiveness, cowboy and samurai -- with subtle nuances.

Director Kimber Lee aids the nimble dialogue along by keeping the pacing steady, with smooth transitions between the many scenes, assisted by Jason Beiber's lighting. David F. Weiner's multiple-locale set includes screens projecting lovely skyscape images, which, along with Jeremy Siebert's sound design, evoke the wind-swept, desolate landscape.

"CowboyVersus Samurai" shouldn't be pigeonholed as an Asian play or a work about race -- it is much more a story about friendship, love and belonging. These are things that each of the characters, and all of us as humans, struggle with. See this charming Mo'olelo production before it rides off into the sunset.

Dates : Weds.-Sun., through Dec. 16
Organization : Mo'olelo Performing Arts Company
Phone : (619) 342-7395
Production Type : Play
Region : Downtown
URL : <http://www.moolelo.net>
Venue : Eveoke Dance Theater, 930 10th Ave, San Diego

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