

**Mo'olelo Performing Arts  
Company**

Presents

**COWBOY  
VERSUS  
SAMURAI**

**STUDY GUIDE**

Written and Compiled By:

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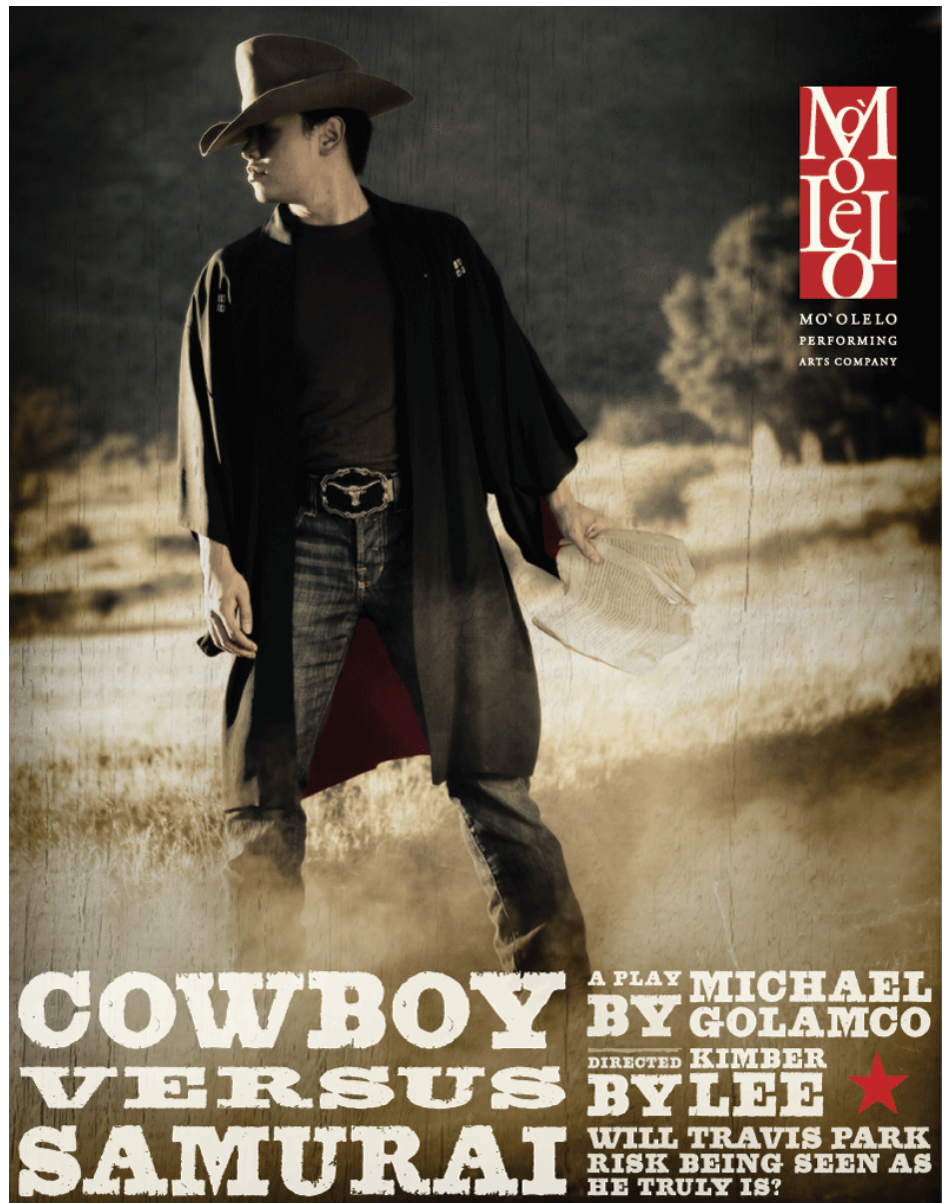
High School Matinees co-presented by:

Young Audiences San Diego



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**PLAY SYNOPSIS:**

*Cowboy Versus Samurai* is a contemporary Asian American re-telling of *Cyrano De Bergerac*, a classic French play by Edmond Rostand. Los Angeles writer Michael Golamco sets his story in the small dusty community of Breakneck, Wyoming, where Travis Park is the high school English teacher and the only Korean American man in town. When beautiful Asian American science teacher Veronica Lee moves to Breakneck, Travis immediately falls for her; as does his handsome “cowboy” friend Del. Fearing that she only dates white men, Travis hides his feelings and agrees to write love letters for Del, who has caught Veronica's eye but can't find the words to woo her. The deception does not last, and as Veronica moves closer to the truth behind the letters, Travis is forced to choose between love and fear. The timeless themes of Rostand's *Cyrano* resonate with special meaning in Golamco's artful re-imagining, inviting us all to look into the mirror and explore the limitations we put on ourselves.

The world premiere of *Cowboy Versus Samurai* was produced by the National Asian American Theater Company (NAATCO) in New York City in November 2005. *Cowboy* was also selected by the Tribeca Film Institute for the All Access Open Stage Program, and is available in print in Smith and Kraus's *New Playwrights: The Best Plays of 2006* and *The Best Stage Scenes of 2006*.

## Playwright Spotlight

Interview with playwright Michael Golamco (*Cowboy Versus Samurai*)

By Kimber Lee (Director, *Cowboy Versus Samurai*)



### About Michael Golamco

Michael Golamco is a critically acclaimed young Asian American playwright and screenwriter focused on great storytelling for all Americans. As a playwright, Michael has presented work at such diverse places as The Jazz at Lincoln Center, The Joseph Papp Public Theater, and the Smithsonian Institution, as well as at universities across the United States. His plays have been produced at NAATCO (New York City), Mu Performing Arts (Minneapolis), SiS Productions (Seattle), and Propergander (Los Angeles). “The Achievers”, his first independent feature film (co-written and directed by Abraham Lim) is currently touring film festivals around the country. His short film “Dragon of Love” (directed by Doan La, produced by Hieu Ho), was selected as Best Short Film at the [Hawaii International Film Festival](#) and was a finalist in [NBC Universal’s Comedy Shortcuts](#).

Michael was selected as a Tribeca Film Institute All Access Open Stage Playwright for 2004 and an All Access Screenwriter for Tribeca Film Festival 2006. He was also a Top 50 Project Greenlight screenwriter, and was a top 15 finalist for the ABC/Disney Writing Fellowship.

**KL: When did you decide to become a playwright? Why?**

MG: I sort of fell into it. I always loved writing and storytelling, and in college I joined up with LCC, an Asian American theater company that was just starting up. We were a bunch of friends that loved the same sorts of things – laughter, performing. We put on shows for free, packing a 350-seat auditorium every quarter. It was pretty great. And all the material was original, so we did a lot of writing.

**KL: How did you learn playwriting? Did you take classes, read books?**

MG: I never took classes or read any books really; I just read a lot of plays. Studied what I liked. Also, when I was writing for LCC, the stuff we put on was make it or break it – either it worked on stage or it didn’t work. And if it didn’t work, you knew it really quickly. Learning by doing works very well if you continually get the chance to try things out and you know that failure is always an option.

**KL: When did you start work on this play? How long did it take you to write this play and see it fully produced?**

MG: I started working on it around 2003; it took a few months to outline and a few weeks to write. I spend most of my time outlining (planning and figuring out the structure of a story), then write the thing as quickly as possible. Then I spend lots of time editing what I have. The first production was in New York in 2005, so it took about two years from start to stage.

**KL: After a theatre company has chosen to produce the play and before its opening night at the theatre, how do rehearsals affect the play?**

MG: When you’re producing a play for the first time you see the material get shaped a great deal by rehearsals. You discover new things or you see things that you want to make more salient. Sometimes you see connections all of a sudden that you want to make clearer. It’s kind of neat how the mind works – the seeds for these connections are often planted subconsciously in the work, and once you go into rehearsals and the story is out there, out loud, you see them sprout and you get a lot of “ah ha!” moments.

**KL: Why did you choose “Samurai” for the title of the play, since most of the Asian American characters are Korean?**

MG: I think that the samurai is the quintessential counterpart to the American cowboy – romanticized and glorified, but not all completely real. I think as Asian Americans we’re all tied together by certain labels and ideas, some of them our own and some thrust upon us. Chester, who personifies this confused, vague sort of Asian America, is latching on to that romanticized title. He calls himself a samurai, but he’s really just a dorky kid with a lot of problems.

**KL: The characters in the play present a variety of perspectives on race, identity, and love, and are frequently in conflict. Did you need to sympathize with each character in order to write for them?**

MG: Absolutely. There’s no moustache-twirling evil antagonist in the play – everyone is just basically a good person trying to do the right thing and survive. Everyone has their own attractions and beliefs. I think that’s what we all are, when it comes down to it.

**KL: What do you want the audience to talk about in the car ride home from the theatre after seeing the show?**

MG: “That was funny.” Entertainment and accessibility is paramount. Maybe later, when folks are lying in bed staring at the ceiling, I would like them to ask themselves what limitations they’ve placed upon themselves. “Why don’t I date [this group of people]?” “Why *do I only exclusively* date [this group of people]?” “Why don’t I like broccoli?” That’s a deep question, and one that we don’t really like to think about. But consciously or not, we do set those limits. We grow when we break them.

## SOURCE MATERIAL FOR *COWBOY VERSUS SAMURAI*

### Did You Know...?

French dramatist Edmond Rostand wrote *Cyrano de Bergerac* in 1897. The play is very loosely based on the real life Cyrano, a 17<sup>th</sup> century nobleman known for his swordsmanship, poetry, and large nose.

## *Cyrano de Bergerac*

By Edmond Rostand

### PLAY SYNOPSIS: A Love Triangle

Cyrano, a master swordsman, soldier, and poet, is in love with his cousin Roxane. Plagued by looks he thinks are ridiculous, he is afraid to profess his love. Roxane reveals her attraction to the handsome Christian, a young cadet in Cyrano's regiment, and makes Cyrano promise to protect Christian from harm. Cyrano soon learns that Christian is likewise

smitten with Roxane. Christian tells Cyrano of his inability to speak intelligently around women, and bemoans his chances in wooing Roxane. Believing that Roxane could never love him, Cyrano decides to help Christian by writing love letters in Christian's name.

The powerful De Guiche is also in love with Roxane and plans to marry her, but she outwits him and cleverly arranges to marry Christian first. Enraged, De Guiche sends both Christian and Cyrano off to battle. While on the battlefield, Cyrano writes letters to Roxane twice daily, passionately professing his love under Christian's name. Christian realizes Cyrano's true feelings, and encourages him to tell Roxane the truth. But before Cyrano can talk to her, Christian is killed in battle; and in the face of Roxane's grief, Cyrano feels duty-bound keeps his love a secret.

The final scene takes place fifteen years later, in a convent where Roxane still mourns Christian's death. Cyrano has left his bed to keep his weekly visit with Roxane, although he has been mortally injured by his enemies, who dropped a log on his head as he walked down a street. As Cyrano dies, he recites from memory a letter penned under Christian's name, and Roxane finally realizes that her true love has always been Cyrano.



### QUICK FACTS

#### The "Real" Cyrano

**Full Name:**

Cyrano Hercule Savinien de Bergerac

**Born:**

March 6, 1619 in Paris

**Died:**

July 28, 1655

**Occupation:**

Playwright and soldier

**Best Known For:**

Large nose, writing, dying after being hit on the head by a log

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#### Edmond Rostand

**Full Name:**

Edmond Eugene Alexis Rostand

**Born:**

April 1, 1868 in Marseille

**Died:**

December 2, 1918

**Occupation:**

Playwright and lawyer

**Best Known For:**

His play *Cyrano de Bergerac*, and *Les Romanesques*, which has been adapted as the popular musical comedy *The Fantasticks*.



Edmond Rostand

### *About the Play*

Rostand's play opened on December 27 of 1897 to enormous critical and commercial success. "With this play," wrote the critics, "Rostand has opened the door to the twentieth century." The timeless themes played out by Cyrano, Christian, and Roxane have moved audiences in over 14,000 known productions, and so far, four operas and eight movies have been based on the play. The text of the play has also been translated from the original French to many other languages, and is credited with introducing the word "**panache**" into the English language.

## RE-IMAGINING *CYRANO*: A New Context for an Old Story

Many elements provide the *context* for a play, such as the setting or location, time period, historical events, and “back story” or *exposition*. Knowing the context of the play allows the audience to make connections and understand the story on a



deeper level.

In *Cowboy Versus Samurai*, Michael Golamco transplanted Edmond Rostand’s love triangle to present-day Wyoming and made the main characters Asian Americans. This new context provides a very different social, historical and racial context for the story, and allows the audience to experience the themes of *Cyrano* through different perspectives. During the play, this context is explored by the character of Chester, who talks about the history of Asians in America and

about the building of the transcontinental railroad and the Golden Spike.

### QUICK FACTS:

#### Chinese Workers & The 1<sup>st</sup> Transcontinental Railroad

##### 1842-52

- A series of floods and crop failures in southern China lead to poverty and threat of famine among peasant farmers.

##### 1848

- Gold discovered in California. Chinese miners begin to arrive.

##### 1850

- California imposes Foreign Miner's Tax and enforces it mainly against Chinese miners, who were often forced to pay more than once.

##### 1852

- First group of 195 Chinese contract laborers land in Hawaii.  
- Over 20,000 Chinese enter California.

##### 1863

- January 8: Newly-elected California governor Leland Stanford shovels the first load of dirt at the Central Pacific groundbreaking ceremony in Sacramento.

##### 1865

- Central Pacific Railroad Co. recruits Chinese workers for the transcontinental railroad.  
- Central Pacific crews begin the slow job of hand-drilling 12 tunnels through the Sierra Nevada, averaging a few inches through the rock a day. By year's end approximately 6,000 Chinese men will work in and around the tunnels. They will constitute up to 80% of the workforce throughout the project.

##### 1867

- June 25: Summit work in the Sierras grinds to a halt as 2000 Chinese workers strike for better wages and shorter hours. Railroad officials cut off food, supplies, and communication to the Chinese camps. One week later, the men go back to work at the same wage.

##### 1869

- Completion of first transcontinental railroad. Telegraph operators transmitting to both coasts transmit the blows of the hammer as they fall on **The Golden Spike**. The nation listens as west and east come together in undivided union.

##### 1882

- The *Chinese Exclusion Act* suspends U.S. immigration of laborers for ten years.

### FOR DISCUSSION

How does the history of Asian Americans affect your understanding of this play?

Does it influence the way you see each of the characters?

Why or why not?

Do you agree with Chester’s perspective?

Why or why not?

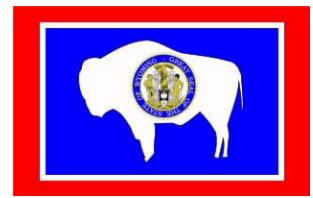
The Golden Spike, or

The Last Spike – what does it represent?

Why do people use such symbols? What purpose does it serve?

How is the story of the First Transcontinental Railroad told in history books? What is highlighted?

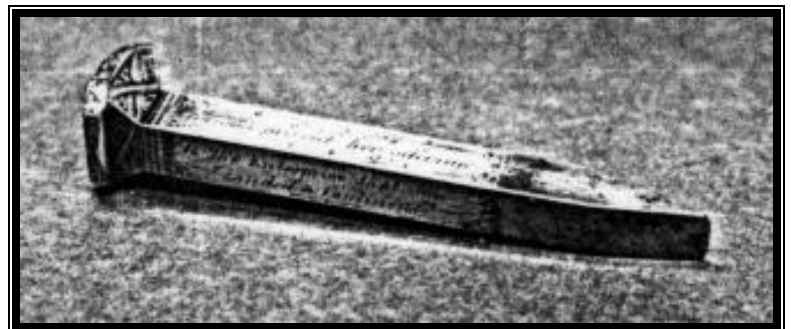
What motivated the railroad owners? What motivated the government? What motivated the Chinese laborers?



### QUICK FACTS:

#### Wyoming

- Wyoming is the least populous U.S. state.
- The largest ancestry groups in Wyoming are: German (25.9%), English (15.9%), Irish (13.3%),
- State Capital: Cheyenne
- Most populous city in Wyoming: Cheyenne (Population 55,731)
- Principal industries include ranching, mining, farming, sugar beet and bean processing, and tourism.



## THEMES IN *COWBOY VERSUS SAMURAI*: “Who defines you?”

1. How do the characters in the play set limits on themselves? How do we each do this in our own lives?
2. What are stereotypes? In *Cowboy*, who deals with stereotypes? How?
3. Are there “standards of beauty” in America? What are they?
4. Do standards of beauty differ from race to race? Is there one all-encompassing “American” standard? Who sets these standards?
5. Are physical looks really important? In the end, Veronica tells Travis he should have signed the letters with his own name. Should Travis have been more confident and expressed his feelings for her himself?
6. In what ways does this play represent love? Who loves in this play and how do they express it?
7. Why does Travis agree to write letters for Del? What benefit does he receive from doing this?
8. Do you believe that Del really loved Veronica or was it simple attraction? Why or why not? What is the difference between love and attraction?
9. What is the difference between how Travis views himself and how he is viewed by others? Which has more influence on his actions? Which is more important to you?
10. Would you describe *Cowboy Versus Samurai* as a commentary on or dialogue with *Cyrano de Bergerac*?
11. In what ways are the two plays similar? In what ways are they different?
12. Of those similarities, which aspects do you relate to?

### From Michael Golamco:

“I wanted to do a *Cyrano* story and make it modern. The challenge is that *Cyrano* has been done to death – every sitcom has to have a *Cyrano* episode. Someone’s hiding in the bushes coaching their pal, etc.. So I wanted to do something fresh with it. Make it about race, which is still such a prevalent thing on our minds in America. Just when you think that the subject of race is gone, it pops back up again. It is seething underneath the surface, and that’s a dangerous place for it to be because it’s internalized. It’s unspoken. We can’t discuss it, come to terms with it.

That’s the great thing that you get from marrying the *Cyrano* idea to the conflict of race: It turns the mirror upon the beholder, asks us, ‘Well, how do we hold *ourselves* back because of our own racial ideas?’ What’s underneath the surface?”

## GLOSSARY OF THEATRE TERMS

**antagonist.** A person, a situation, or the protagonist's own inner conflict in opposition to his or her goals.

**blocking.** The planning and working out of the movements of actors on stage.

**character.** The personality or part an actor recreates.

**conflict.** The opposition of persons or forces giving rise to dramatic action in a play.

**context.** The interrelated conditions in which a play exists or occurs.

**crisis.** A decisive point in the plot of a play on which the outcome of the remaining actions depends.

**dialogue.** The conversation between actors on stage.

**directing.** The art and technique of bringing the elements of theatre together to make a play.

**director.** The person who oversees the entire process of staging a production.

**dramatic structure.** The special literary style in which plays are written.

**monologue.** A long speech by a single character.

**motivation.** A character's reason for doing or saying things in a play.

**objective.** A character's goal or intention.

**pacing.** The tempo of an entire theatrical performance.

**playwright.** A person who writes plays.

**props (properties).** Items carried on stage by an actor; small items on the set used by the actors.

**subtext.** Information that is implied by a character but not stated by a character in dialogue, including actions and thoughts.

# PERFORMANCE GUIDE

## The Script

The performance that you see onstage is the culmination of many months of preparation, and throughout of the **pre-production** work, the blueprint for any decision is the text on the page. If you read the printed text of *Cowboy Versus Samurai*, you would notice the **stage directions**, which are the words the playwright uses to convey specific ideas for movement, lighting, sound, and setting. During the performance, notice how the Mo`olelo Artistic Team carried out these ideas.

## Set Design

Scenic designers work hard to create a physical space that brings the audience into the world of the play. Theatrical design techniques often involve the use of suggestion, or artistically crafted set pieces that communicate the sense of place through the audience's imagination rather than literal representation. Note the methods used by Set Designer David Weiner for this production: how did he convey Wyoming on stage?

## Lighting Design

Lights on a stage shape the space, give it dimension and immediacy. Even subtle shifts in lighting intensity or tone affect the action on stage: change the location, the mood, show time passing, underline important story moments. Note places in the script where the playwright has indicated a light shift. Watch for the way our Lighting Designer Jason Bieber incorporated these directions: especially notice the color of the lights and how it affects the feel of a scene or moment.

## Costume Design

The costumes the actors wear tell us who they are in the world of the play, and allow us to almost instantly know who these people are. We read their costumes like flags – stage costumes symbolize a character's personality and priorities. Jennifer Brawn Gittings created these costumes to highlight certain aspects of the story. What do you notice about who these characters are just by looking at their clothes?

## Sound Design

Every sound you hear, from before the curtain rises to the actors' last bow is the result of painstaking planning and design. Sound effects and music breathe life into the physical world created by set, lights and costumes, making that world a real place no matter how fantastical. Notice the different types of sound that Sound Designer Jeremy Siebert used throughout the play: music, ambient sound, sound effects.

## QUICK FACTS ABOUT THE PRODUCTION:

- The actors, director, and stage manager rehearsed this play 34 hours per week for five weeks
- Production Staff includes: 5 designers, four actors, one director, one stage manager, 3 interns, two producers, 35 volunteers, and one production photographer
- Veronica's science props are plastic models of dog and cat skeletons from a veterinary clinic in Bothell, Washington
- The platforms used in the scenic design were recycled from the La Jolla Playhouse
- All of the paint used in set construction is environmentally-friendly and non-toxic
- *Cowboy Versus Samurai* has been produced in New York, Minneapolis, Seattle, San Francisco, Vancouver, Canada, and now, San Diego
- Michael Golanco created an outline of the play, then wrote the script in two weeks
- The world premiere was in New York City in 2005, about two years after Golanco first began writing
- Mo`olelo began planning for this production in November 2006
- Mo`olelo's production poster features the actor playing Travis Park, and was shot on a ranch near Julian

## THEATRE ETIQUETTE AND CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT

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Please remind students of theatre etiquette:

- 1) Turn off all cell phones, pagers, watch alarms, and other noisemakers when in the theater.
- 2) No foods, drinks, or gum chewing during the performance.
- 3) No recording devices of any kind, video or audio, allowed in the theater.
- 4) Any backpacks, books, purses, lunch bags, ipods, etc. that the students bring to the theater will be stored in the lobby during the performance.
- 5) No talking during the performance as a courtesy to the actors and your fellow audience members.
- 6) Each performance is completely unique. As the audience, you can control the quality of the performance by the level of focus and respect you give the actors.

### About Mo`olelo Performing Arts Company

Mo`olelo means *story* in Hawaiian. Voted Best New Theater Company by the readers and editors of *San Diego Magazine*, Mo`olelo Performing Arts Company is dedicated to broadening the scope of San Diego theater by telling powerful stories that are as diverse as the islands of Hawaii. Our mission is to *create* new works based on research within various communities, *produce* lesser-known works by master and contemporary playwrights, and *educate* youth. Mo`olelo is committed to providing a living wage for local artists and works closely with Actors' Equity Association, the Union of Professional Actors and Stage Managers.

### The Artistic Team of *Cowboy Versus Samurai*

Director.....Kimber Lee\*  
Stage Manager.....Jennifer Wheeler\*  
Scenic Designer.....David F. Weiner  
Lighting Designer.....Jason Bieber  
Sound Designer.....Jeremy Siebert  
Costume Designer.....Jennifer Brawn Gittings

CAST  
Travis.....Volt Francisco\*  
Chester.....Eric 'Pogi' Sumangil\*  
Veronica.....Zandi De Jesus  
Del.....Paul Morgan Stetler\*

*\*Member of Actors' Equity Association, the Union of Professional Actors and Stage Managers in the United States.*