

Cowboy explores interracial dating

Despite script challenges and uneven performances, comedy will appeal to people in dating mode

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COWBOY VERSUS SAMURAI

At the Firehall Arts Centre until Aug. 3 Tickets:
604-689-0926

If Cowboy Versus Samurai finds its audience--and it certainly found an enthusiastic, almost rowdy one on opening night--it will survive relocation from The Roundhouse Community Centre to the more costly Firehall Arts Centre. With city workers on strike, the Vancouver Asian Canadian Theatre association had to make an eleventh hour decision to cancel or pack up their props and move. Fortunately, the Firehall has an established reputation for presenting plays with a multicultural theme (ie. Mom, Dad, I'm Living With a White Girl) so an audience may be ready-made.

Written by Asian-American Michael Golamco and first produced in 2005, Cowboy Versus Samurai will appeal mainly to young people of dating age but especially those involved in or considering involvement in an inter-racial relationship.



CREDIT:

A romantic comedy that borrows shamelessly from Cyrano de Bergerac, Cowboy Versus Samurai-featuring Marc Arboleda (l-r), Ryan Swanson and Lissa Neptuno-succeeds in spite of itself thanks to an interesting twist and an unpredictable conclusion.

The back pages of the Georgia Straight illustrate some highly suspect, stereotypical preferences with ads like "Hunky white male looking for petite, submissive Asian female" or "Passive, tiny Chinese princess seeks white Prince Charming." In Golamco's play, however, there's nothing kinky about the dating preferences of the characters. If Korean-American Veronica (Lissa Neptuno), a new teacher in the one-horse town of Breakneck, Wyoming, wants to date white guys only, that's her prerogative. And if Travis (Marc Arboleda), the only other Korean-American in Breakneck, wants to date Asian-American women exclusively, he ought to be free to do that. What's important is that these biases don't go unexamined.

Cowboy Versus Samurai is a romantic comedy borrowing shamelessly from Cyrano de Bergerac. Del (Ryan Swanson) is a slow-talking country boy with the hots for Veronica, newly arrived from New York City. After his friend Travis discovers that Veronica only dates white guys and that he is, therefore, out of the picture, Del persuades Travis to help him out by writing letters to Veronica. The subterfuge works all too well.

Up to all sorts of hijinks is Chester (Minh Ly) who was rescued as an orphan with no documents regarding his parentage. Ridiculously desperate to be Chinese, Japanese, Korean or Vietnamese--something more specific than simply, generically Asian--he tries on all the identities, including a Bruce Lee disciple and a Ninja warrior.

Josette Jorge's direction is crisp and fast-paced, and the fantasy sequences are theatrical and sharply delineated. Live music performed on an old upright by Anna Busch and on guitar and harmonica by Ben Stone add an old Western, saloon quality to the play.

Young, relatively inexperienced actors make for slightly uneven performances. But the opening night audience loved it all and laughed and hooted wildly.

I have some reservations about Golan's script. For such a hip young woman, Veronica seems too easily duped by poetic billets doux supposedly written by tongue-tied cowboy Del. She's smarter than that and ought to have seen through the deception. And for someone who maintains the moral high ground, she has no qualms, apparently, about snooping through both Travis's and Del's underwear and socks drawers to uncover their porn collections.

Another quibble is that the script is, at times, unnecessarily--and quite surprisingly--crude. A reference to Asian women fellating white men to remove their "jaundiced" complexions comes as a shock as does Chester's suggestion that if Travis plays his cards right with Veronica, "Who knows, you may end up banging her." I suppose Golan wanted to show that these characters are "with it" and sexually liberated but crudeness seems out of context in this otherwise funny play.

Almost in spite of itself, *Cowboy Versus Samurai* is a thoughtful exploration of the importance of figuring out and accepting who you are. An interesting twist and an unpredictable conclusion lift this play from the merely laugh-a-minute entertainment to a comedy with something meaningful to say.

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