

My Cultural Landscape

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Cramming For Finals

Friday, May 20, 2011

In his recent article entitled [The League of Extraordinary Stereotypes](#), [Jeff Yang](#) pointed out that May is [Asian Pacific American Heritage Month](#). As part of his analysis of how Asians have been portrayed in [comic books](#) from 1942-1986, he describes the two [stereotypes](#) of Asian women (referred to by Wikipedia as the hypersexual [Dragon Lady](#) and the [China Doll](#)) in the following manner: "There is the [Lotus Blossom](#): The long-suffering wife, the left-behind lover; the [hostage](#), the victim, the betrayed and forgotten. She is patient in her doomed love and passive to her predestined fate -- which is to be abused, abased, exploited and ultimately, destroyed by the man she loves.

Where you have the Lotus, you must have her complement, the [Temptress](#)-- the exotic seductress, who uses her feminine wiles and sexual prowess to beguile and betray; the femme fatale as false of heart as she is lush of body, whose mocking laughter may well be the last thing you'll ever hear."

This month also saw the publication of [Wesley Yang's](#) essay, [Paper Tigers](#), in [New York Magazine](#). The article's subtitle asks: "What happens to all the Asian-American overachievers when the test-taking ends?"

Encapsulating the biggest fears and best fantasies expressed in these two articles is [Philip Kan Gotanda's](#) new play, [Love in American Times](#), which opened this week at the [San Jose Rep](#). I suspect, however, that the play's premiere had less to do with celebrating Asian Pacific American Heritage Month than with ending the company's 30th anniversary season with the world premiere of a new play by a celebrated American playwright who was born in [Stockton](#) and lives in the Bay area.

Love in American Times begins with a meeting arranged by a professional [matchmaker](#), the kind whose clientele sits at the top of the socioeconomic ladder. In the past, such matches might be made for [royalty](#) or the [scion](#) of a wealthy family. In Gotanda's play, the pre-arranged match is between two exceptionally bull-headed individuals.

Jack B. Heller ([J. Michael Flynn](#)) is a corporate titan who, at 70 years of age, is remarkably fit, frighteningly wealthy, socially clumsy, and brutally boorish. Although he and his estranged wife Abby ([Rosina Reynolds](#)) have lived apart for the past 15 years, he is now eager to get a divorce so he can marry a young trophy bride. Jack wants an extremely attractive Asian woman who will keep him sexually satisfied and put his needs above all others for the five years he expects to remain in good health.

Needless to say, Jack's son Edward ([Craig Marker](#)), who has been expecting to inherit the family's wealth, is less than thrilled with his father's plan. Jack's daughter, Sophie ([Arwen Anderson](#)), has made so many attempts to find herself through drugs, alcohol, music, and dark-skinned lovers of both genders that her innate sweetness has disappeared behind a cloud of [migraines](#), [hangovers](#), and [manic depressive](#) attacks.

Scarlett Mori-Yang ([Linda Park](#)) is a brilliant 33-year-old Asian beauty with a formidable intellect. Part [Korean](#) and part [Japanese](#), she chose to enter the [nonprofit](#) world (where she could quickly rise to a position of power and dominance) rather than struggling to make her way up the corporate ladder. Scarlett -- who wants to have children from a husband who is obscenely wealthy -- has done enough [fundraising](#) to become a tough negotiator who can hold her own against the "big boys." She knows what they want and doesn't hesitate to inform Jack that she won't fuck him until he marries her.



Jack Heller (J. Michael Flynn) and Scarlett Mori-Yang (Linda Park)
(Photo by: Kevin Berne)

Jack's sufficiently impressed with Scarlett to show her the [coffin](#) he built for himself as a secret place where he can go and scream until his eyes nearly pop out of his head as he tries to [exorcise his demons](#). Scarlett has her own ghosts to contend with.

As directed by [Rick Lombardo](#), the first act of Gotanda's play comes off like an intellectual wrestling match to see which of these two will triumph -- or if one will simply pick up his bargaining chips and go home alone. Act II takes place at [Christmastime](#) aboard Jack's [yacht](#).

Edward and his wife, Lyonee ([Zarah Mahler](#)), are trying to enjoy themselves while Abby badgers Sophie. The standard level of familial hostility seems to have abated temporarily until a [speedboat](#) approaches and Scarlett (who was supposed to be shopping with friends in [Buenos Aires](#)) climbs aboard.



Edward Heller (Craig Marker) and his wife Lyonee (Zarah Mahler)
(Photo by: Kevin Berne)

This was not supposed to happen. Part of their nuptial agreement (which was created with the cold-blooded precision of corporate attorneys) stated that Scarlett was to leave Jack alone with his family at Christmastime. But, to everyone's surprise, she's pregnant (Jack did not want any more children) and, in a way that surprises even Scarlett, in love with her husband.

With all its back-biting power plays and family intrigue, ***Love in American Times*** is never going to be a "feel-good" dramedy. Gotanda's script does a thorough job of insulting every possible ethnicity and traditional concept of

marriage. Jack and his family seem like fairly loathsome [country club Republicans](#) while Scarlett comes across as a micro-managing Dragon Lady who should definitely be feared. As the caustic Abby notes, "She got points when she sent the [helicopter](#) back."

Love in American Times raises sticky questions about what one wants from a partner, what one has the right to demand prior to entering into a relationship, and how one should expect to be treated after the initial blush of love wears thin. With sets by [Robin Sanford](#) and costumes by [Cathleen Edwards](#), Gotanda's play develops a curious momentum that keeps the audience wondering what will happen to Jack and Scarlett.

Linda Park and J. Michael Flynn give two powerful performances in the lead roles, ably supported by Craig Marker, Zarah Mahler, and Arwen Anderson. Rosina Reynolds does triple duty as Desiree (Jack's [sommelier](#)), his matchmaker (Mrs. Green), and his first wife. [Gabriel Marin](#) appears in a variety of small roles.



Rosina Reynolds as Jack's first wife, Abby (Photo by: Kevin Berne)

Love in American Times is a play whose characters end up swimming with sharks on their first date and, surprisingly, in the warm Caribbean waters near the play's finale. Performances continue through June 5 at San Jose Rep (you can [order tickets here](#)).