

The Idiolect

The language or speech pattern of one individual at a particular period of life

Trophy Lives

By Sam Hurwitt
June 2, 2011

THEATER REVIEW: SAN JOSE

Show #47: [Love in American Times](#), San Jose Repertory Theatre, May 18.



J. Michael Flynn and Linda Park in *Love in American Times*. Photo by Kevin Berne.

When people see a very wealthy, much older man married to a very attractive, much younger woman, they figure they know what's up: He's just with her because she's hot, and she's just with him for the money, whatever he spends on her and whatever she stands to inherit when he dies. It looks less like a romance than a mutually beneficial transaction. [Philip Kan Gotanda](#)'s new play at San Jose Rep, *Love in American Times*, doesn't necessarily undermine that perception, but it explores the phenomenon in a fascinating way.

The well-crafted first act is one extended blind date between Scarlett Mori-Yang, an attractive young woman who runs an arts education nonprofit, and Jack Heller, an extremely rich and powerful mogul of some kind. They've been set up by an all-knowing matchmaker who hasn't told either one anything about the other but is sure each is exactly what the other is looking for.

The stylish production by newish artistic director Rick Lombardo is set in the back room of an ultra-modern bar designed by Robert Sanford Roberts, with stylized faux deer heads on the purple walls.

Through a maze of empty picture frames, a singer (Zarah Mahler) can be glimpsed in what's presumably the bar's main room, singing a lounge version of "Mack the Knife." (Sound designer Tamara Roberts's compositions are on the schmaltzy side.) Jack and Scarlett are the only customers in the back room, and really they're all we need.

J. Michael Flynn has a great mix of casual confidence, amused indulgence and don't-give-a-shit boorishness as Jack, a Southern accented Caucasian good ol' boy made good, who makes sweeping ethnic generalizations without seeming to mean anything by them. Scarlett, a young American of Japanese and Korean descent, seems more amused than offended by it. Sharply played by [Linda Park](#), a San Jose hometown gal best known for the *Star Trek* series *Enterprise*, Scarlett is wary and a bit standoffish. At the same time she's refreshingly forthright about how she finds wealth and power attractive in itself—whether or not someone's an asshole, she says. He's 70, she's 33, but they seem equally self-confident and formidable in their respective power. (Both also have a curious habit of referring to themselves in the third person.)

It's a first date as negotiation—as all first dates are to a certain extent, but this one is much more up-front than most, with two people accustomed to tough negotiations. Gotanda's dialogue is particularly crisp, eloquent and often funny in this extended exchange. (It's a long date.) They make a number of amusing side bets for large donations to her organization. "I want a stunningly beautiful woman. Does that bother you?" Jack says. "I want a stunningly wealthy man. Does that bother you?" Scarlett counters.

This first act might as well be a two-person play, but in fact there's a cast of seven hanging around. Other people come and go, but they're just window dressing—assistants, bartenders, sommeliers and cheese masters who keep a respectful distance and never assert themselves as characters. The one real exception is Gabriel Marin as a guy who angrily confronts Jack about ruining his father in business, while his wife (Mahler) tries to calm him down. Here too the guy himself isn't really important; the point is to illustrate how Jack responds when challenged. Rosina Reynolds pops up in mysteriously spotlit flashback monologues as the stern, English-accented matchmaker Mrs. Green, imperiously confronting each of them about who they are and what they want.

The second act, in which Scarlett meets Jack's family is much less focused. It introduces a whole bunch of new characters, as if mostly to give the rest of the cast something to do. They're enjoyable as performances, but the characters aren't developed enough to really care about or understand why they've been introduced.

One of Jack's demands in the first act, which didn't make much sense, was that he always spends Christmas with his family—meaning his ex-wife and their adult children—and Scarlett isn't allowed to be there. The second act is Christmas on Jack's yacht, somewhere sunny, where bitter ex-wife Abby (Reynolds) is clearly the one in charge. Jack's stuffy son Edward (Craig Marker) keeps wanting to talk business, afraid that Scarlett is going to take over the company and endanger his birth-given role in it, and he's right to be worried. Mahler exchanges catty daggers with Abby as Edward's territorial English wife Lyonee. Arwen Anderson is a hilarious standout as Jack's dizzy, childlike daughter, a recovering addict prone to bursting into karaoke. And this time it's Marin's turn to fade into the background as Hector, the one-man yacht crew.

This is the section that challenges the assumption that Jack and Scarlett's relationship is purely transactional, not just for the audience but in their own minds as well, but it's unconvincing—not

because there's anything wrong with the premise nor that these two characters aren't deep enough to support it, but because the way it plays out is pure soap opera. It feels less like a second act flowing naturally from the first than like the ill-conceived, meet-the-stepfamily sequel to a sharp, incisive romantic comedy.

Love in American Times plays through June 5 at San Jose Repertory Theatre, 101 Paseo de San Antonio, San Jose. <http://sjrep.com>