

Review: 'Love in American Times' at San Jose Rep

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Jack Heller is a fat-cat CEO on the hunt for a trophy wife.

In between hostile takeovers, this Gordon Gekko type favors chugging single-malt, hunting and, oh yes, playing Russian roulette in posh Manhattan eateries.

Quite the charmer, the 70-year-old bigwig sets his sights on a meeting a sweet young thing. Enter a matchmaker who arranges a meeting with a comely young Asian woman named Scarlett. That's the setup for Philip Kan Gotanda's puzzling new romantic comedy "Love in American Times," which aims to make us see past the externals of the love story, like race and class, but quickly loses its way on the road to a happy ending in its world premiere at San Jose Repertory Theatre.

Gotanda ("After the War," "The Wind Cries Mary") is a deft writer who lights the play with tart banter, zingy pop culture references and tantalizing subtext, but he never digs deep enough into the characters to make their journey the least bit believable. While his previous works shined with a sensitivity to the intricacies of culture and eccentricity, "Love" deals in outrageous people leading bizarre lives.

Despite taut pacing by director Rick Lombardo and some nimble performances, "Love in American Times" suffers from an identity crisis. Chock-full of innuendo and kimchee, the playful first scene seems poised to explode ethnic stereotypes, but instead we are left with the notion that he's randy, she's greedy and that's why they're made for each other.

The wild and woolly plot goes from playing footsie on the first date to bitter paternity battles without giving us a chance to figure out who these people really are and what makes them tick. We never understand why someone like Scarlett (Linda Park of "Star Trek" fame) couldn't find a husband without turning to a matchmaker, for instance, or what prompts Jack (J. Michael Flynn) to nail down all the fine points of his next pre-nup before his first divorce is even finalized.

All world premieres are essentially works in progress on some level, but "Love" still feels more like a really juicy brainstorming session than a polished narrative. Not to give too much away, but Gotanda gooses the action with everything from gunfire and coffins to sharks, oh my. At one point, high seas pirates even seem to come into play, not that you would bat an eyelash if they did. Because you never really know where "Love" is headed.

Unfortunately, after the flirtatious repartee of the play's beginning, the balance of power tilts so that the action revolves around Jack, his pain and his past, and it's as if Scarlett were just another high-end indulgence in his Fortune 500 lifestyle. As a result, it's hard to figure out how we are supposed to feel about this May-December couple.



Love in American Times 3: (l to r) Jack (J. Michael Flynn) is captivated by Scarlett's (Linda Park) astute observation skills in San Jose Rep's world premiere of Love in American Times. (Kevin Berne Images 2010 / San Jose Repertory Theatre)

The matchmaker, the ominous Mrs. Green (Rosina Reynolds), keeps popping up on the sidelines as if she had insights about the characters to deliver, but instead she recaps what little we already know about the swaggering Jack and the ambitious Scarlett.

Indeed both characters continually refer to themselves in the third person which makes them seem more like brands than people. Their psychology is never as compelling as their witty little one-liners about life in the fast lane, a place where deep pockets and personal assistants cushion every bump in the road.

Flynn does a bang-up job finding the motivation for Jack's bluster and bravado. And Park imbues Scarlett with a formidable sense of integrity, no small feat considering that she's a Stanford MBA whose business plan seems to be marrying rich.

Still, Gotanda promises to get beyond the stereotype of the older white man with the status symbol young Asian wife but only seems to trade in the cliches. Jack's family, from his ice-queen society matron ex-wife (Reynolds again) to his perpetually-in-rehab princess daughter (a lovely turn by Arwen Anderson) and his ineffectual snob of a son (Craig Marker), seem like they belong in an old money soap opera.

To be sure, there's some pleasure to be had in watching the uber-rich trot about the globe sipping Opus One and bickering about how unfulfilled they are. Poor dears.

As it happens, it's on a yacht somewhere in the Caribbean that the play has its most tender moment. Jack and his spaced-out daughter reminisce about singing with the Stones (yes, they are that rich) and for a minute you believe that he may care about someone or something other than himself. And that's a real surprise.

'Love in American Times'

by Philip Kan Gotanda

Through: June 5

Where: San Jose Rep, 101 Paseo de San Antonio, San Jose

Running time: 2 hours 30 minutes, one intermission

Tickets: \$17.50-\$79, 408-367-7255, www.sjrep.com