

SAN FRANCISCO

by Richard Connema

Interesting Production of *Love in American Times*

By Richard Connema
6/16/2011

Philip Kan Gotanda's *Love in American Times* recently had its world premiere at the San Jose Repertory Theatre. This two-hour and 20-minute comedy seemed to be a work in progress but it contained clever dialogue and splendid acting under director Rick Lombardo's taut supervision.

The two-act play is about a May-December relationship between 70-year-old powerhouse Jack Heller and 33-year-old sexy Asian Scarlett Mori-Yang. The very long, pre-arranged "date" that takes place in an upscale restaurant/bar in New York seems more like a meeting of a corporate board, with articles of incorporation and a pre-nuptial thrown into the mix. Both characters have intractable egos and each tries to outdo the other in this battle of wills. You get the idea that Jack Heller is randy for the attractive Scarlett while she is very greedy in their future "marriage." The first scene ran approximately 50 minutes could stand some cutting. Also, to break the long scene from becoming just a two-person confrontation, the playwright inserted a "Cheese Master" to bring in some stinky cheese that the two eat, along with some Korean kimchee, and a very angry Mr. Stein breaks into the bar to accuse Jack of killing his father.



J. Michael Flynn and Linda Park

The comedy seems like two separate shows. The first act is a war of words between the two powerhouses while the second act is like a very sophisticated Noel Coward or Terence Rattigan play. The splendid ensemble work could be lengthened since it involves some very interesting characters on Jack Heller's luxurious yacht on the high seas. There is Edward, the spoiled son of Jack; his British born wife, Lyonee; Sophie, the flaky daughter of the powerful man; and Abby, the controlling society matron and icy ex-wife of Jack. These people seem like characters from other 1940s urbane comedies. There are a lot of droll little one-liners about life in the fast lane to keep the audience interested in the characters.

J. Michael Flynn gave a commanding performance as the wealthy powerhouse Jack Heller. He was successful in being a blustering distortion and also showed humanity and a sympathetic side in the second act. Scarlett Mori-Yang (who portrayed communications office Hoshi Sato in the TV series "Star Trek: Enterprise") was excellent as the determined Scarlett. Both gave commanding performances in the confrontations that included evasive posturing and dialogue of business-like unification. Rosina Reynolds gave a uniquely eye-catching performance as the controlling ex-wife of the dynamo man.

Craig Marker was excellent as the incompetent elitist son of Jack. The second-act confrontation with the father was galvanizing. Arwen Anderson gave an enthusiastic performance as the flaky daughter who upset her father by having a romance with an African American who is not seen on stage. She looked and acted like she was just out of rehab.

Gabriel Marin got a chance to shine in the first act as the comic Cheese Master and gave a good, emotional performance as Mr. Stein. His playing "Russian roulette" with Jack was fervently accomplished. Zarah Mahler was vibrant as Lyonee, sporting a first class British accent. She reminded me of a character from the musical *The Boy Friend* and I almost expected her to break out in song.

Rick Lombardo's direction was sharp, especially in the speeches of the "up market" ensemble actors in the second act. Robin Sanford Roberts designed a fantastic barroom set and a stunning yacht set in the second act with some very realistic projections, thanks also to lighting and media designer David Lee Cuthbert. The costumes for ladies and men by Cathleen Edwards in the second act were stunning.

Love in American Times is a clever and well thought out comedy that could stand some serious cutting of at least 20 minutes. The comedy played at the San Jose Repertory Theatre through June 5th. Coming up next is their 2011 Summer Series featuring Charles Ross's *One Man Star Wars Trilogy* opening July 14 and running through July 17th. For tickets call 408-367-7255 or visit www.sjrep.com.

Photo: Kevin Berne