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'Sampaguita,' the sweet smell of theatrical creativity

Hernan Hormillosa, Jul 04, 2007



NEW YORK — Some good things just come one's own way unexpectedly. One such blessing is 'Sampaguita,' a play written by Marisa Marquez, West Coast-bred Filipino American playwright and actress.

The story centers on Joshua Timms, a humor writer (played by veteran off-Broadway actor Robb Hurst) who has lost the energy and will to live due to grief. He is depressed and feeling hopeless as a result of his wife Emily's tragic death to lupus, a fatal autoimmune deficiency disease suffered by at least 1.5 million Americans.

Joshua's life gets complicated when he meets Christalin. This provinciana suddenly knocks on his trash-filled Manhattan apartment. Little did he know that his patronizing mother-in-law has played the matchmaker by inviting then mail-order bride into Joshua's life. A titanic clash of cultures ensues between naïve provinciana Christalin and urbane New Yorker Joshua.

The former is meek to the point of timidity and no match verbally to the sophisticated New Yorker. Until Christalin's pure heart ever so slowly but surely creeps into Joshua's soul and conquers the wily but psychologically washed-out widower.

If you watched Travel Channel's Bizarre Foods with Andrew Zimmern, you can easily appreciate Joshua's aversion toward weird Philippine delicacy balut, a boiled duck embryo, said to be an aphrodisiac and guaranteed to jumpstart tired knees and the sleeping libido.

Christalin is an apt name for a Christ-like other-centered but very fragile person of a typical rural-born Filipina who often falls victim to a mail-order abusive husband-predator. To his credit, Joshua maintains his integrity in the face of severe melancholy, and recognizes the essence of Christalin's spirit. It is just a matter of time before he succumbs to the gentleness of Christalin's martyr-like character. No man can resist such a charm.

Marquez is adept in playing both Emily and Christalin's roles. If you were born in the U.S.A., you would probably relate well to Emily. I found her depiction of Christalin to be deeply moving, showing her vulnerability as well as her strength.

The flashing back and forth of the two female characters, using the transient dimming of set lights as cues to the audience, is a smart, cost-efficient technique by Director Will Warren. The set is minimalist in design and depicts a micro look at the life of a struggling big-city artist. Robb Hurst essays his role with ease.

The overall quality of the play approaches excellence, considering the obvious production budget constraints. Marisa's professionalism augurs well towards future success. My only regret is more theatergoers need to discover the gem in Marisa's opus. This hidden treasure of wisdom needs to be discovered by Broadway regulars. Like all good literary works, 'Sampaguita' aims to transcend cultural, superficial stereotypes and delve into the inner world of all human beings.

At the end of the day, people have the same dreams, struggles, frustrations, and pains, albeit manifested in a million different nuances. I came out of the performance realizing that one cannot build walls between two human hearts honest enough to verbalize their frailties and purity of intentions. When this happens, the Divine intervenes and re-creates two new lives in one love.

'Sampaguita' had a two-week limited engagement in 45th Street Theatre, between 8th and 9th Avenues in New York. Californians will have an opportunity to watch at a later date. Click on www.myspace.com/marisamarquez or theatermania.com for more details.

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