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The Odd-er Couple

Wed, July 16 2008

By Devon Moriarty

The Odd Couple

will get a little odder tonight in Richmond.

Playwright Neil Simon's comic masterpiece about two New York City divorcees — one a

slob, the other a neat freak — opens on stage at the Richmond Cultural Centre as an all-Asian production.

Producer Joyce Lam, director Raugi Yu and the cast of eight actors are confident the production will be a hit with Metro Vancouver audiences.

"Ultimately, I have directed the show so it will be about people not race, about the characters themselves not their nationality," says Yu, the 49-year-old director.

"A huge goal would be for the audience to not notice they are watching Asian actors."

Lam, who has a background in commerce at the University of B.C., has always wanted to stage an all-Asian production, although don't expect a whole lot of difference between the original Broadway play and the performance at the Richmond Centre.

"We were not allowed to change any words," Lam says. "Not even 'a' to 'the' or 'hi' to 'hey' ... although we have designed the set to resemble a typical Asian household. Along with Asian artwork on the walls, the characters munch on popular Asian snack food."

Yu and Lam are excited about bringing Asian

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actors into the lead roles of the legendary play.

"I have been, and still am, an actor for the past 12 years," says Yu.

"At the start, you are looking for work. And when you find it, you do it to your best ability. I think I would like to start telling stories my way. Directing is the only way you can do this."

The play will be staged in English, with Mandarin subtitles projected on a [big screen](#). The use of subtitles will undoubtedly grow the potential audience taking in the summer run of *The Odd Couple*.

The cast includes 41-year-old Japanese-Canadian actor Ron Yamauchi, who first heard about the unique production on Facebook.

"At first I thought that I was not qualified to play Oscar, although it turns out that I was," he says.

"The role sort of suits me."

Yamauchi, like Oscar, is a writer and admits to being sloppy at times.

The other half of the odd duo, the fastidious Felix, is played by Jimmy Yi, a 41-year-old Korean-Canadian. Yi started acting in [sketch comedy](#) while in college. He considers the all-Asian cast a refreshing experience.

"It is good to see Asians that are not being portrayed in the stereotypical role," he says, during a [chat](#) with the *Post*.

Simon's play also features a supporting cast of four lovable poker buddies.

Tom Chin, 49, is Chinese and plays Vinnie. Chin, whose father sings Chinese Opera, was influenced by the arts at a young age.

"I didn't like opera but I did like watching the actors communicate on stage."

Ed Fong, who plays poker buddy Ron, is also Chinese and got the acting bug in Grade 9 drama class.

"Ideally I would love to make enough to live as an actor," says the 30-something actor.

Jono Lee, 32, plays Murray the cop in the production. The Chinese Lee, who is a working actor, took two weeks this year to undergo intensive acting training at the Vancouver Academy of Dramatic Arts.

"There has been a lot of support directed towards the Asian theatre. Eventually I would love to land a recurring role on a television show."

The only cast member who is not Asian is Sean Cummings, 40, who plays Speed, the hot head of the bunch. "It is something that you completely forget about. When our photographs came out, I was like, which one is not like the other.

"Race is not an issue, you forget about it."

In a play with mostly male actors, there are two young women who live upstairs from Oscar and Felix, Cecily and Gwendolyn Pigeon.

Gwendolyn is played by Carmine Bernhardt, 27 who is half Japanese and half Scottish. Cecily is played by Lissa Neptuno who is in her mid-20s and of Filipino heritage.

Bernhardt, who just received her diploma in musical theatre, says: "My family is very excited. Very happy to see me on stage. So am I."

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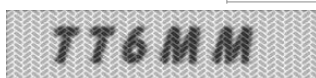
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