



Multiracial Odd Couple mostly hits mark

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The Odd Couple

By Neil Simon. Directed by Raugi Yu. A Vancouver Asian Canadian Theatre production. At the Richmond Cultural Centre on Thursday, July 17. Continues at the Richmond Cultural Centre till July 27, then moves to the Roundhouse Performance Centre from August 13 to 21

If you think that you could do a decent job of playing Oscar Madison or Felix Unger in Neil Simon's *The Odd Couple*, you're probably wrong. It ain't easy.

Yes, most of us know the characters, either from the 1968 movie starring Walter Matthau and Jack Lemmon or from the sitcom that ran from 1970 to 1975 and featured Jack Klugman and Tony Randall. We know that Oscar is a divorced sportswriter and inveterate slob who decides to become roommates with his recently separated pal Felix, a lunatic neat freak.

Beneath the comic outlines, there is depth to these characters. The play is about deep love meeting unwillingness to change and yielding incompatibility. It's about divorce, but not about Felix and Oscar's estrangement from their wives; it's about their divorce from one another.

The relationship between the two men is archetypal; Simon revised it in 1985 for a female cast. The play's universality is nicely illustrated in this production from Vancouver Asian Canadian Theatre, which presents Asian actors in all but one of the roles. (White guy Seán Cummings plays Speed, one of the attendees at Oscar's weekly poker games.)

The play is also a good choice for VACT, because it will both please audiences and challenge the VACT artists, many of whom are in the process of developing professional careers.

The interpretation meets with mixed success. Ron Yamauchi (who is a Georgia Straight contributor) makes a charmingly affable Oscar and, in Oscar's second-act confrontations with Felix (Jimmy Yi), the two actors get a roll going. These actors establish the all-important baseline of credibility, but they don't fully reveal the strength of the affection between their two characters. It's not an easy thing for actors to grasp—there's not a lot of script to support it—but without it, the stakes aren't as high as they might be and the experience of the play isn't as moving.

The comedy could also be more focused. As clowns—and that's what they are, on one level—Oscar and Felix are dedicated to illogical ways of thinking. This is especially true of the dirt-obsessed Felix, but Yi misses the manic edge.

Playwright Simon is a master craftsman, but director Raugi Yu sometimes screws up his rhythms. At the top of the show, for instance, Simon drops us into the middle of a poker game. Yu ignores Simon's intention, having the characters enter one at a time instead and giving each a signature piece of music. It makes for a leaden beginning. Yu also allows too much verbal improvisation from his actors.

There's fun to be had there, though, especially in the second act, when the Pigeon sisters, two broadly drawn bimbos, arrive for dinner. As Gwendolyn Pigeon, Carmine Bernhardt provides some of the sharpest silliness and best laughs of the evening. Ed Fong, who plays Oscar's accountant Roy, is also nicely credible and absurd.

Hopefully, the combination of a competent mixed-race production, Mandarin surtitles, and an opening run in Richmond will bring more Asian Canadians to the theatre.

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