

## The much odder Odd Couple

### Asian-Canadian cast acts between the dots

**Lynn Mitges**

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The Odd Couple has been performed thousands of times -- but never like this.

When the play opens tomorrow it will not only feature a mostly Asian-Canadian cast, but also Mandarin subtitles.

Throwing in subtitles sounds simple enough, but Vancouver Asian Canadian Theatre, or VACT as it is known, discovered that the setup at Vancouver Opera, which regularly uses the subtitles effect, costs about \$10,000. So that was out. Joyce Lam, VACT's artistic producer, says they decided to go with something considerably cheaper and which does the job: PowerPoint, a laptop and a projector.

The undertaking wasn't without its challenges. Lam says that they first had to get permission from playwright Neil Simon to translate the play, to which he agreed, but only if they in turn agreed to relinquish the translation afterward and not use it again.

Then there was the text itself.

"Neil Simon's plays are really quick," says Lam. "There will be five things going on in less than 30 seconds, so we were wondering if we could keep up with the Mandarin subtitles at the same time they're speaking English. We had 90 pages of English into Mandarin, every single frame on one line in our PowerPoint presentation, so there are 1,800 slides."

Simon's plays are rich in pop-culture comments, not necessarily ones that the audience will relate to.

"The play makes references to Mary Poppins and Lou Gehrig. So we said Mary Poppins is a children's nanny and Lou Gehrig was a baseball player who got sick. So we had to make those kind of adjustments to the script. The translator had to do it so the joke won't be missed in Mandarin."

For director Raugi Yu, what threw him first were the series of little dots that peppered the script.

"At first glance you think, 'Wow, that's a lot of ellipses -- what are we supposed to do with that?'"

Once Yu immersed himself in the play, he got the ebb and flow that is trademark Simon.

And the ellipses?

"You're supposed to play them," he says with a laugh. "Something's going on when he has those dot-dot-dots. Sometimes it's the characters talking to themselves, sometimes the character has a thought in the middle of the existing thought, and sometimes it's an action from someone else interrupting that

thought. So I have to decipher what I think is going on with the help of the actors and make the best comedic choice and, more importantly, the most honest choice. It's tricky sometimes."

The cast includes Japanese, Korean, Filipino and Caucasians -- all of them coming to rehearsals at 6 p.m. after working their day jobs. "That's commitment," says Yu.

The effect should be one of inclusion, say both Lam and Yu. It's an opportunity for Asian-Canadians who otherwise couldn't enjoy theatre to experience the live event.

"My mother, who has never come to any of my shows, is coming to this one because she can read the subtitles," says Lam. "Asian people are very family oriented so they would like to bring the whole extended family."

What is a first for VACT may set the stage for future productions that can open up a whole new world for Asians who'd like to try acting.

Yu, who has acted for about 13 years, most recently on jPod, teaches and gives workshop, sometimes through VACT.

"Hopefully this will inspire younger Asian people who never thought that the performing arts was a possible venue for them to make a living in," he says.

Yu says he's often asked if it's more difficult for Asian actors to get work.

"I tell them, yeah, of course it's hard. But it's no harder than being 5'6", blond and blue-eyed. That's a really tough place to be.

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On stage

The Odd Couple

Where and when: Tomorrow to July 27 at Richmond Cultural Centre, 7700 Minoru Blvd., Rmd.; Aug. 13-21 at Roundhouse Performance Centre, Pacific at Dave

Tickets: \$23 in advance at 778-885-1973 or \$25 at the door

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