

Broadway hit takes odd Asian twist

Richmond Cultural Centre stages *The Odd Couple* remake

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Neil Simon's 1965 Broadway hit, *The Odd Couple*, about two mismatched, middle-aged white men is about to hit the Richmond stage — but with an Asian twist.

Actors Ron Yamauchi and Jimmy Yi are set to explode into comedic repertoire on the Richmond Cultural Centre's stage, in a remake of the classic play. Yi is Felix Ungar, a fastidious, neat freak newswriter who is kicked out of his home by his wife and moves in with Oscar Madison (Yamauchi), a slovenly sportswriter.

The *News* sat down with both actors and director, Raugi Yu, to talk about bringing a fresh Asian twist to this beloved play and subsequent hit television series.

Yu was immediately taken by the idea of tackling *The Odd Couple*, as a director.

"It was such a beloved TV show, which I remember so well," says Yu. "The challenge is that we had to stay true to the 1960s script and a lot of the jokes are set in 1965, so they are a little dated.

"Plus, the actors have to get the New York accents."

Another directorial test is that the play was written in three acts with set changes. That isn't happening here because there is no curtain.

"Everything happens with musical cues," explains Yu. "We see Felix cleaning

the apartment in less than two minutes and then we have the poker game ... it's a lot of fun."

Yu is pleased with what they have achieved in terms of keeping honest to the characters and keeping them rooted in reality.

As far as the challenge of selling the idea of Asian actors playing Oscar and Felix, Yu says: "The actors aren't trying to be Caucasian, rather we focus on the story of the *Odd Couple* ... their issues are universal. It's about two men helping each other out during hard times. Through the pain and honesty, there's lots of laughter."

Actor Yamauchi, who is also a journalist and a litigation hearings officer, is still in awe that he snared such a plumb role.

"I auditioned on a lark and got the role," he says with a grin. "The last three months have been a lesson in accelerated acting. I'm so far out of my comfort zone that the fear is also the rush."

As Oscar, Yamauchi gets to rant and rave and spout out: "wonderful speeches of invectives."

"He (Oscar) is one very ill-tempered man who's been pushed to his limits," he quips. "To prepare, I read the script over and over again. I don't want to do a half-baked imitation."

He adds that once the audience gets past the "radical idea that Asian actors are portraying Oscar and Felix," they can then enjoy the comedic ride.

"I'm hoping the audi-



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Ron Yamauchi, (left) playing Oscar, director Raugi Yu, and Jimmy Yi, playing Felix, feature in the Vancouver Asian Canadian Theatre (VACT) presentation of the classic Neil Simon play, *The Odd Couple*.

ence can immediately push through that we are Asian and enjoy Neil Simon's world."

Yi is also a huge Neil Simon fan.

"He's my favourite playwright and I love his characters," Yi says, who just wrapped up *Anything Goes* at the Metro Theatre.

Because Yi has been performing musical theatre for the past three years, his toughest task is to do justice to "this magnificently developed character."

"However, I'm growing as an actor," says Yi. "I rented a bunch of Neil Simon plays and YouTube'd some of the shows as well as watching the early '60s movie version."

He took on the awesome responsibility of tackling a role: "brilliantly portrayed by Jack Lemmon (in the 1968 highly successful movie version) because I wanted to grow as an actor."

"I approach Felix as someone who is kind and set in his ways. He's very neurotic and he always seems to be put into situations where he's fighting change."

Yi says he relates to Felix's awkwardness and vulnerability towards women.

"In one scene Felix has a double-date with one of the sexy Pidgeon sisters and he's shy and awkward ... It's one of my favourite scenes in the whole play."

Meanwhile, both actors admit they have been living and breathing *The Odd Couple* for weeks.

"Felix is very physically different from me and his physical movements are more uptight than me," says Yi. "Then there's the fact that he's always cleaning on stage and I'm not very neat ... that's been a challenge."

For Yamauchi, it's getting the Bronx accent right that makes him sweat, and oh yeah: "There's the risk that I won't get a laugh or I'll ruin the play, and that's what has me rehearsing all the time."

This is a production put on by the Vancouver Asian Canadian Theatre (VACT). The theatre troupe is in

its ninth year as Western Canada's only theatre group staging cultural stories on the modern Asian experience in North America.

In a first, VACT will include Chinese subtitles at all *The Odd Couple* performances.

The Odd Couple opens July 17 to the 27 at the Richmond Cultural Centre, 7700 Minoru Blvd. There are matinees at 2 p.m. and all evening performances at 8 p.m. (Thursdays to Saturdays evenings; Sundays matinees only). Tickets are available through www.vact.ca, by phoning 778-885-1973 or at the door (cash only). For more information, visit www.vact.ca.