



# Banana Boys peels back surface from stereotypes

BANANA BOYS -- Firehall Arts Centre, 280 E. Cordova to March 17

BY THE VANCOUVER SUN MARCH 2, 2007

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Tickets \$24/\$18, call 604-689-0691

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It's typical of a gwai lo like me that I recently referred to CBC as standing for "Chinese-born Canadian."

Wrong, white ghost. CBC stands for Canadian-born Chinese, which is a whole other kettle of fish. In Banana Boys, five young men born in Canada of Chinese descent deal with all the many stupidities spewed by whiteys like me -- and more than a few generated from within their own ranks.

The play by Leon Aureus, from a novel by Terry Woo, has an odd structure that actually suits its purposes. More a meditation on life and death than a forward-flowing narrative drama, Banana Boys bops back and forth through a series of scenes, mixing time and place so smoothly that there's no point in looking for a logical chronology.

Instead, we're absorbed into the lives of five guys trying to study, with wildly different degrees of success, at the University of Waterloo. Mike's in medicine only because his mom demands it (he'd rather be a writer), Luke can't commit to college when the late-night rave scene beckons, Shel is an engineer who's hopelessly in love with romance and Dave has some serious issues with reverse racism, as he beats up any white guy who looks twice at him.

At the centre of this testosterone storm stands Rick, whose death is foretold in the first five minutes. Banana Boys then peels itself around Rick's rollercoaster ride from business-student brat with all the bells and whistles of success to booze-and-pills bozo bent on destruction.

The talented cast is obviously having a lot of fun playing in and out of stereotypes. The strong ensemble of Victor Mariano (Rick), Parnelli Parnes (Shel), Vincent Tong (Luke), Rick Tae (Dave) and Simon Hayama (Mike) enacts a tightly choreographed romp that's equal parts angry confrontation and laugh-out-loud silliness.

On the silly scale, they apply Venn diagrams to trying to figure out why Asian guys get the short end of the stick when it comes to dating women of any race. And Mike's frequent nightmares have him either facing bizarre operations or his mother (Parnes in an immense fat suit) and her demand that he choose an

honourable profession.

Banana Boys taught me as much about prejudices within the Asian community as those I harbour simply by growing up as a member of the dominant culture. That the play did so without preaching is a tribute both to the clever script and the fast-paced way director Jack Paterson unleashes these guys.

Michael Scriven's precise lighting is appropriate for the many sharp shifts in the story. Derek Butt's set isn't as successful, mixing plastic sheets and the representation of city bricks with piping that alludes to bamboo in a rather ugly way.

Like the play's clumsy closing, which smacks just a little too much of a too-easy tie-up of the story, it's a minor flaw in an otherwise engaging experience.

Sun Theatre Critic

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