

Exuberant *Banana Boys* battling stereotypes

THEATRE

BANANA BOYS

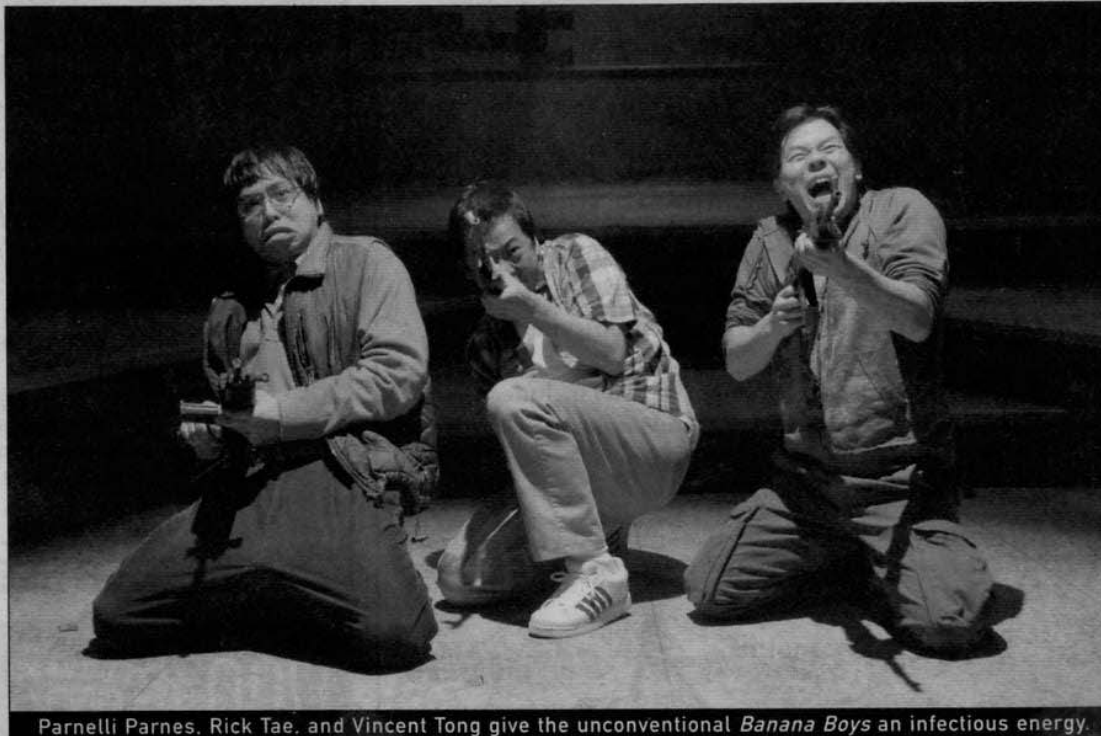
By Leon Aureus. Directed by Jack Paterson. A Firehall Arts Centre production. At the Firehall Arts Centre on Wednesday, February 28. Continues until March 17

There's a bunch of ideas in *Banana Boys* and not all of them make sense. But what the play lacks in coherence, this production more than makes up for in sheer exuberance.

Based on the novel by Terry Woo, Leon Aureus's script focuses on a group of Chinese Canadian guys in their 20s. We meet them in a series of solo scenes: Rick is a hotshot business consultant, Mike is a medical student, Dave is an angry computer nerd, Luke is an aspiring DJ, and Sheldon is a hopeless romantic engaged in a desperate relationship with his cellphone.

The play's ostensible centre is Rick, the group's unofficial leader. We begin at his funeral, then flash back to see glimpses of his success-seeking, drug-fuelled lifestyle and his inexplicable ability to time-travel. None of this makes a whole lot of sense, and Rick's heartless arrogance doesn't make him a terribly sympathetic character to begin with.

But *Banana Boys* is not a conventional narrative; Aureus instead takes a cabaretlike approach to the issues in the characters' lives. There's a battle sequence in which sexual stereotypes about Asian men explode like bombs around them; a game show in which Mike's mom appears as a sumo wrestler, beating him into choosing med school over his longed-for career as a writer; and an evangelical meeting addressing the racial slurs of the "pigmentally challenged". Director Jack Paterson and his superb ensemble dig into these multiple realities with virtu-



Parnelli Parnes, Rick Tae, and Vincent Tong give the unconventional *Banana Boys* an infectious energy.

sic relish: the pacing is seamless and the energy infectious.

And although this stylistic variety means less depth in character development, all the performers turn in very solid work. Vincent Tong communicates volumes in Luke's furious, exhausted rave dance; Rick Tae finds both comedy and despair in Dave's relentless anger; and Parnelli Parnes is puppy-dog lovable as the hapless Sheldon. Along with Victor Mariano (Rick) and Simon Hayama (Mike), they effortlessly trade off numerous secondary roles.

Banana Boys breaks new ground. It's rare to find theatre that focuses exclusively on the concerns of young Asian men, and rare for an identity play to be this much fun.

> KATHLEEN OLIVER