

Theater Review

Story of 4 immigrants a rousing musical

Wow. This show has a shot at becoming a great American musical for decades to come.

That would be “The Four Immigrants: An American Musical Manga.” Its world premiere opened over the weekend at Lucie Stern Theater in Palo Alto, presented by TheatreWorks.

The musical is based on a manga comic book, self-published in San Francisco in 1931 by a Japanese artist.



John Angell Grant

The comic book recounts the adventures the artist and three friends had in California between 1904 and 1924.

Manga is a Japanese art form that predates the American graphic novels of today.

The Palo Alto show’s composer, Min Kahng, stumbled on the manga comic book in 2012 when he was looking through the graphic novels section of a used bookstore in Berkeley. He brought the idea of its musical adaptation to a TheatreWorks retreat in 2014, and the show has developed from there.

Emotional rollercoaster

Director Leslie Martinson and the company have created a standout production, staged with a bouncy Chaplin-esque, vaudeville feel. As it progresses, the musical gets more and more complex, turning into a heart-pounding emotional rollercoaster.



ARRIVING — From left, Frank (Phil Wong), Henry (James Seol), Fred (Sean Fenton) and Charlie (Hansel Tan) arrive in San Francisco in Min Kahng’s “The Four Immigrants: An American Musical Manga” presented by TheatreWorks Silicon Valley at the Lucie Stern Theatre in Palo Alto. Photo by Kevin Berne.

Artist Henry Yoshitaka Kiyama, the author and illustrator of the 1931 comic book, disembarked with his friends in San Francisco in 1904.

At the musical’s start, four young men sail for San Francisco from Japan, their hearts filled with excitement. One wants to be a farmer, another an artist, another a political organizer, and another, well, he seems sort of dumb.

They are excited by the land of democracy and freedom. They hope to strike it rich, and meet a lot of women.

Some things work out for them, and others don’t. They all get jobs as

houseboys, but soon get fired. One gets mugged and loses his clothes. The 1906 earthquake shakes things up. Racist vigilantes fight their citizenship.

Generally, in the face of adversity, the four friends remain optimistic. One achieves millionaire status. The artist goes painting in the San Mateo hills at the Japanese Cemetery.

“Four Immigrants” has a good story with interesting twists and turns. It resonates with today’s immigration issue.

The music is strong, much of it humorous. A wistful memory “Furusato” (“Hometown”) is especially powerful.

There are excellent performances from eight actors. Four Asian American men play the immigrants. Four Asian American women play a wide range of other roles.

Feels like vaudeville

Dottie Lester-White’s ingenious high-stepping choreography channels the vaudeville spirit. Costume designer Noah Marin has mixed a flapper look in the women, with the men’s vaudeville suits.

There are a few glitches. The show’s opening feels naively Mickey-and-Judy. Near the end, a review of its story by one character verges on didacticism.

Elsewhere there are times when the men’s stories progress in lockstep. When their stories are separated, the production is stronger. But these are small fixes for what is otherwise a powerful voyage.

I lost myself in “Four Immigrants,” as its emotional rollercoaster took increasingly bigger dips, and the time flew by. This show will be around for a long time.

For tickets to “The Four Immigrants: An American Musical Manga,” visit theatreworks.org, or call (650) 463-1960.

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