

REVIEWS

MAPA MIA! at the Ivy Substation



Reviewed by Wenzel Jones

This mounting of Alec Mapa's two one-man pieces, *I Remember Mapa* and *Drama!*, is theatrical gold. They're being performed in rep, so it's worth researching the performance schedule and attending one of the weekend marathons to catch them both. Though such an undertaking might smack of being too much of a good thing, in this instance it's simply an embarrassment of riches.

As a solo performer, few are equal to Mapa. He's utterly engaging, with an unstoppable energy that dazzles. This works nicely with the restrained direction of Chay Yew, who gives the piece texture and elegance. Melissa Ficociello's set is equally spare—a red floor backed by an onstage panel—and serves the piece well. The sound and lights (John Zalewski and Rand Ryan, respectively) have a fluid, almost subliminal quality and appear to grow naturally from the piece. While the costume demands are not heavy, Candice Cain has chosen two very nice looks for the performer: a subdued black outfit for *I Remember Mapa* (which covers Mapa's career and coming out) and a more casual, boyish look for *Drama!* (which centers on Mapa's retreat to the nurturing medium of the high school drama club).

Mapa's skill with character and caricature is masterful. Whether it's his grandmother or the kids in school or Bette Davis, each is clearly defined and well integrated into the tales he tells. To imply that this is simply a performer talking about his life is a disservice, though. His career, which went from the lead in Broadway's *M Butterfly* to a temp job shredding a roomful of documents, is certainly interesting, as is his upbringing in San Francisco in a Filipino family. But Mapa transcends simple storytelling and achieves much more with these works. The pieces are very funny, chock full of anecdotes about people we know and people we come to know, but it's not just comedy, either. The connection he makes with the audience is so intimate that we feel as if his whole amazing life has been lived to bring himself and us to this moment. It's a special kind of magic.

We're now at the part of the review where I would normally get to quote the more memorable passages, but the material is so good I hate to lift anything out of context. I will say, however, that many readers of this fine publication might save themselves a great deal of time, money, and grief by at least attending *I Remember Mapa* for the primer on auditioning. He may be the only person in town offering up unadorned truth when it



A life less ordinary: Alec Mapa in *Mapa Mia!*

comes to performing.

"Mapa Mia!," presented by Center Theatre Group's Taper, Too at the Ivy Substation, 9070 Venice Blvd., Culver City. Tues.-Fri. 8 p.m., Sat. 6 & 9 p.m., Sun. 5 & 8 p.m. Jan. 21-Feb. 9. \$15-20. (213) 628-2772.

LOOKING OVER THE PRESIDENT'S SHOULDER



at the Pasadena Playhouse

Reviewed by Var Smith

The grandson of a freed slave, Alonzo Fields served four U.S. presidents—as chief butler in the White House. During his 22 years of service—from the Great Depression through the New Deal, Pearl Harbor, and the Korean War—he coordinated teas that hosted 400 guests, or stood mute in his tux pretending not to hear candid conversations between monarchs and heads of state. Winston Churchill impishly pleaded of him, "I hope you'll come to my defense if I'm ever accused of being a teetotaler." Fields saw history from the inside. His story has been thoughtfully and dramatically told by playwright/director James Still; it stars John Henry Redwood in a one-man tour de force.

More than just learning about the habits and idiosyncrasies of presidents Hoover, Roosevelt, Truman, and Eisenhower, and their First Ladies, we find ourselves caring more about Fields, who never aspired to be a domestic. He planned on becoming an opera singer, but the Depression got in his way. Through a

twist of fate—he had met and was remembered fondly by Mrs. Hoover—his plans to pursue his dreams of an artistic life were exchanged for coordinating White House suppers and managing a gossiping staff of servants. He learned that, although some of the politicians thought they were free of prejudice and racism, sometimes their private views and practices proved otherwise.

Redwood is gentle, warm, and powerful as Fields, holding the stage for two hours, becoming the characters Fields served. All is accomplished with great affection and honesty. Each president is represented by a chair, including a wheelchair for Roosevelt. They are positioned in a beautifully designed rotunda-like set by Russell Metheny, atmospherically lit by Darren McCroom.

Fields leaves his post at the beginning of the Eisenhower administration. Across the street in Lafayette Park, he reminisces about his years in the beautiful "old house." He regrets that his 12-hour days left no time for his music. Through tears, he realizes that he indeed lived an artistic life by providing art and grace to his service. There is an unexpected and highly theatrical conclusion to the play when we see an example of his artistry descend from the heavens, an image that stays with us. Historically interesting and entertaining, *Looking Over the President's Shoulder* leaves us grateful that nobody connected with this production was hindered by pesky confidentiality agreements.

"Looking Over the President's Shoulder," presented by and at the Pasadena Playhouse, 39 S.

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LEGIT REVIEWS

Mapa Mia!

(Ivy Substation, Culver City;
99 seats, \$20 top)

Center Theater Group/Music Center of Los Angeles' Mark Taper Forum presents two one-act plays, written and performed by Alec Mapa. Directed by Chay Yew. Sets, Melissa Ficociello, lights, Rand Ryan; sound, John Zalewski; costumes, Candice Cain. Opened, reviewed Jan. 23, 2003; closes Feb. 16. Running time: 2 HOURS.

By JULIO MARTINEZ

Kicking off the Center Theater Group's Taper, Too 2003 season of new and experimental theater are two one-person plays, scripted and performed by thesp Alec Mapa (UPN's "Half and Half"), under the umbrella title "Mapa Mia!" Each work chronicles a different aspect of the coming-of-age of the effervescent, height-challenged Filipino American, who realized early in life that he would much rather tap-dance than throw a ball. Mapa is an excellent comic and his colorful anecdotes have been honed to great effect by director Chay Yew. However, there really is not enough material to warrant two one-hour monologues. Mapa's reminiscences would have stronger legs if amalgamated into one concise narrative that enveloped both the personal and professional histories of this talented performer.

The opening tale, "I Remember Mapa," follows the improbable showbiz career of a 5-foot-4-inch gay Filipino from San Francisco. Mapa recalls part of his frustration, growing up in a decidedly homophobic family environment, was that he had no Asian role models to emulate except Mr. Sulu on TV's "Star Trek" and Hop Sing on "Bonanza."

Mapa then launches into a hilarious riff on performances as Asian characters by such decidedly non-Asian actors as African-American Juanita Hall ("Flower Drum Song") and Puerto Rican Rita Moreno ("The King and I").

As he energetically chronicles the highs and lows of his life in showbiz, Mapa effectively utilizes the sparse but elegant setting of Melissa Ficociello, seamlessly underscored by the evocative lights of Rand Ryan and the sounds of John Zalewski.

Along the way, he relates his brief career as an undersized and overwhelmed waiter in a New York gay bar, his initial forays as a standup comedian, a bizarre TV gig opposite Marisa Tomei and his big break in 1989 as the understudy to B.D. Wong in the Broadway production of "M. Butterfly." (He later starred in the national touring company.)

The emotional highlight of "I

Remember Mapa" comes when the actor realizes that despite his overwhelming praise by the L.A. press for his legit debut in "Butterfly," his career was back to square one because "TV and film people don't give a shit."

Mapa is endearing as he relates his post-production depression that had him "watching TV hours a day and going out on bad auditions."

He was reduced to becoming the "worst waiter in the history of California Pizza Kitchen" before his career and sanity were resurrected by landing a leading role in the New York Shakespeare Festival/Public Theater production of "A Language of Their Own."

The second half of the evening, "Drama," focuses more on his angst-filled youth, trying to figure out how he fit in the alien, heterosexual world around him.

Though Mapa never ceases to present an entertaining onstage persona, this meandering reminiscence does not possess the clarity of thought of its predecessor. The best moments from "Drama" could easily be incorporated into a more fleshed-out version of "I Remember Mapa."

Mapa does evoke the wonder of his eventual coming to terms with his sexuality during his school years. One highlight is his chronicle of his fear-filled high school days, where he admittedly "smoked so much pot I couldn't even spell SAT."

He credits his salvation to the drama club, where he first realized he was not alone in the world.



CRAIG SCHWARTZ

Alec Mapa in "Drama!," one of two solo shows he performs.

THEATER

Life on stage

Alec Mapa on life and show biz in "Mapa Mia!" Page 8

THEATER REVIEW

Drama played out on stage — and in the actor's life

Alec Mapa relives the rocky path he's trodden as a gay thespian and teen in "I Remember Mapa" and "Drama!"

By DARYL H. MILLER
Times Staff Writer

The show business story is an enduring favorite in part because it's so universally understood. For what is life but a performance in which we're all looking for a little applause to know that we've done well and earned someone's approval?

Alec Mapa supplies a couple such tales in the solo shows "I Remember Mapa" and "Drama!" Presented in alternating repertory under the umbrella title "Mapa Mia!," they are the first of the Mark Taper Forum's Taper, Too program of developmental plays to be presented at the Ivy Substation in Culver City while the nearby Kirk Douglas Theatre is readied.

Simply yet imaginatively staged by Chay Yew, both shows tell the story of a gay Filipino American who grew up feeling like an outsider until he discovered the stage.

Presented in 1997 as part of the Taper's Asian Theatre Work-



CRAIG SCHWARTZ

OUT OF THE CLOSET:
Alec Mapa in "Drama!," one of his two autobiographical one-person comedies.

shop, "I Remember Mapa" focuses on Mapa's brush with fame as understudy and, later, lead in the 1988 Broadway phenomenon "M. Butterfly," in which he played, as he concisely puts it, the "Chinese transvestite spy." It is the stronger work, with more to say about life and show

business.

"Drama!," a new piece, looks back to high school days of yearning, experimentation and friends lost to AIDS. Though it's engaging enough, it recalls too many similar stories, from the gay monologue in "A Chorus Line" to David Drake's "The Night Larry Kramer Kissed Me."

In his late 30s and full of vinegar, Mapa all but shouts his lines in excitement and cracks jokes with antic wit, as though desperate for the audience's acceptance.

He sets up "Drama!" by first looking back at his work on the short-lived 2001 CBS sitcom "Some of My Best Friends." Entertainment reporters at the time wanted to know how he felt about playing a flamboyant gay character on national television. The role seemed stereotypical to some people, but Mapa found the character to be independent, empowered and, well, a lot like himself. "Ever since I was a little boy, I've been a great big girl," he dryly announces.

This carries him back to youthful fears of rejection by his Catholic family as well as the crowd at his ethnically diverse San Francisco high school. He found comfort first in classic movies and contemporary TV, which bred his show-business dreams. (A fantasy sequence en-

visions him in his own variety show, lip-syncing to "I've Got the Music in Me" while disco lights pulse.) He then found his "tribe," as he calls it, in that gay and lesbian support group otherwise known as drama club. Backed by friends and, ultimately, an accepting family, he faces his fears, embraces his identity and moves forward with pride.

In "I Remember Mapa," the actor finds positive reinforcement in the standing ovations that greet his work in "M. Butterfly," only to lose it again when the job ends and he can't find comparable employment. He waits tables at a restaurant where customers sometimes recognize him; he frantically pursues even the most humiliating acting jobs; he gets depressed. Sustaining him through this dark time is his mother's ever-determined admonition, "What's stopping you?"

'Mapa Mia!'

Where: Ivy Substation, 9070 Venice Blvd., Culver City

When: "I Remember Mapa" and "Drama!" alternate Tuesdays-Fridays, 8 p.m.; both shows Saturdays, 6 and 9 p.m., and Sundays, 5 and 8 p.m.

Ends: Feb. 9

Price: \$20 apiece

Contact: (213) 628-2772

Running time: "I Remember Mapa," 1 hour; "Drama!," 1 hour, 15 minutes

POINTLESS



Though grappling with less traumatic material than in his hit one-man show, *I Remember Mapa*, Filipino-American theater star Alec Mapa's peek at his forlorn love life is delightful and filled with ironic profundities. He winkingly promises heterosexual men that the evening's stories will offer universal insights into love and loneliness, then dives into always funny, often lurid details of gay relationships and sexual encounters — including sex-clubs and "grope-bars." Finally, however, he keeps his promise, as his stories touch on an emotional plane that doesn't require experience of gay counterculture — merely a desire for the big LTR (long-term relationship). Mapa's extraordinary skill as a performer draws us in with a laugh-out-loud giddiness, then quickly shifts into the poignant without making us feel crudely manipulated. His consummate comic timing, with help from director Chay Yew, makes even his silliest standup-style jokes ring with impudent energy. His riffs on stars such as Tom Cruise and Prince Edward raise eyebrows and earn big laughs — but stop a hair or two shy of slander. Despite the theater's comedy-club ambiance, set designer Akeime Mitterlehner and lighting designer José López create a highly theatrical environment that underscores the work's delicate language. East West Players at David Henry Hwang Theater, 120 Judge John Aiso St., dwntwn.; Thurs.-Sun., 8 p.m.; thru Dec. 12. (213) 625-7000.

—Tom Provenzano

We also recommend: *Acme the Vampire Slayer*, *All Alone Together: Solos in Harmony II*, ... *And All Through the House* ... *The Balcony*, *Bash*, *Behind the Counter With Mussolini*, *Bitter Women*, *Break of Day*, *The Comic Ozzies*, *Crime Scene*, *Debt*, *Dralion*, *The Fantasticks*, *The Fever*, 5-21-87, *Glengarry Glen Ross*, *Graduation Day*, *The Greeks*, *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, *It Ain't Nothin' But the Blues*, *The J. Keith van Straaten Show*, *The John Patrick Shanley Festival*, *Late Nite Catechism*, *The Life and Adventures of Nicholas Nickleby*, *Light Up the Sky*, *Marry Me a Little*, *The Memorandum*, *Millennium House*, *Mr. Allen Mr. Allen*, *Noises Off*, *Nosferatu*, *Opening Night: The Improvised Musical*, *Otherwise Engaged*, *Reefer Madness!*, *Refugees*, *Relationships in the '90s*, *Resa Fantastiskt Mystisk*, *Scent of Rain*, *The Servant of Two Masters*, *Shooting Porn*, *The Sicilian Bachelor*, *Spike Heels*, *Sunday 2: Electric Boogaloo*, *The Swan*, *Talk About Money*, *Terminal*, *Theater Hell*, *Three*, *Twelfth Dog Night*, *Two Rooms*, *Violencia*, *Waterbrains/The Transformers*, *You Bet Your Honkey*, *You Can't Take It With You*.

Back Stage West, 12/9/99
Critics Pick

TO: Chay
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POINTLESS
at the David Henry
Hwang Theatre



Reviewed by Wenzel Jones

Build yourself a firecracker to a height of, oh, five-foot-not-very-much-more. Pack firmly. Ignite. Watch intently for the next hour. That is about as close as you will get to what it's like to watch Alec Mapa being Alec Mapa if you miss the criminally short run of his latest effort. And by criminally short, I mean that if you don't go this coming weekend you're out of luck.

Mapa neatly manages the trick of turning neurotic self-infatuation into a joyous celebration of everything human. His life can hardly be thought of as quotidian (so few of us, after all, will ever know what it's like to be the eponymous star of *M. Butterfly* on Broadway), but he's not here to dish and gossip, he's here to talk about that most universal of situations: the search for a great long-term relationship. His misadventures ring true—even his more exotic ones. I'd try to relate the B-list concubine story, but why hear it from me?

It's not all about finding a boyfriend, though. There is much to be learned about Filipino culture, especially the Southeast Asian version of Catholicism (eclectic) and grandmother's bedtime stories (terrifying, and not coincidentally tied to Filipino Catholicism). He's also quite

deft at expressing sentiments that, when voiced by the less articulate among us, sound perhaps a bit petty and unkind (i.e., is fame really such a terrible burden?).

Chay Yew's direction, in this instance, seems to be more a function of containment than an exercise in bringing forth the performance. He keeps a very natural flow to the production, with just enough slow spots to keep the frenetic energy from being wearing. José López creates some lovely lighting. The set by Akeime Mitterlehner is both elegant and fun: It's nothing more than a large picture frame surrounding a velvety red field, but close inspection reveals the fascinating texture of the frame to have been achieved through the use of wood blocks and all manner of cheesy plastic toys. If I've made this sound like niche theatre, I blame myself. I can't remember the last time I was part of an audience so diverse. And we were all laughing together.

"Pointless, a Stand Up Performance," presented by East West Players at the David Henry Hwang Theatre, 120 N. Judge John Aiso St., Little Tokyo, Dec. 2-12. (213) 625-7000.

Mapa's 'Pointless' Love Life

By DON SHIRLEY, Times Theater Writer

By naming his latest solo show "Pointless," Alec Mapa immediately lowers expectations. This strategy continues as soon as the show starts. "Life hasn't been that interesting lately," Mapa offers, tentatively.



Online dating, singles bars, failed relationships: Alec Mapa is looking for love. *WALLY SKALIJ / Los Angeles Times*

So why have we gathered at East West Players' David Henry Hwang Theater to listen to more than an hour of Mapa's autobiographical ramblings?

Because Mapa is a funny guy with a distinctive stage presence. His last solo, "I Remember Mapa," and a couple of award-winning performances in plays made that clear and created the expectations that Mapa initially tries to deflate.

Maybe it's his squarish features, including a mouth that appears to swallow half his face when he drops his jaw in mock shock. Or the feline grace with which he moves his diminutive frame. Or the irrepressible gleam in his eye. Whatever, Mapa easily commands a stage, and he effortlessly conveys the sense that we've just gotta hear the latest dispatches from his love life, pointless though they may be.

Mapa's affairs of the heart haven't been going well, he tells us. And like many stand-up comics before him, he knows that audiences love to commiserate with tales of romantic woe, if they're told with a sense of humor.

After reenacting seeing "Love! Valour! Compassion!" from a New York balcony, he says he wants his long-anticipated long-term relationship to be like the one in that play in which two men trimmed each other's ear hair, after years of being together.

Mapa's days as a "B-list concubine" for a nameless star of action films didn't meet that exacting standard. He then spent three years with a New Yorker who seemed right, but Mapa acknowledges that eventually his own performing schedule wrecked that relationship. A more recent fling with a San Franciscan was derailed last summer when the lover chose someone else. Mapa reads what he says are actual entries from his journal from just last June, regarding his own roiling angst with a sense of eye-rolling irony.

Some of the funniest moments of "Pointless" are Mapa's attempts to sample the dating scene online and then in a Silver Lake "grope

bar." Attempting to present himself as a 6-foot-3-inch Korean German business student while online, his cover was quickly blown.

A few wisecracks about celebrities wander away from the central subject, but then what does one expect in a show with this title? One of the best moments arises from Mapa's reading that the last royal wedding in England featured a dinner with a buffet line. Mapa takes the role of Queen Elizabeth at the buffet table.

On a more serious note, Mapa also ventures into his relationship with his father, a Filipino immigrant. It's no surprise that there were some barriers between the two generations, but the gap closed for at least one night through a touching encounter between the two when Mapa was in college.

This is not a landmark show. It's simply a chance to enjoy Mapa's gifts as a raconteur and wit. Chay Yew's direction keeps Mapa on the move, appropriate for a performer who describes himself as having "the attention span of a flashcube," but José Lopez's lighting and Akeime Mitterlehner's set are a little fancier than the occasion requires.

"Pointless," David Henry Hwang Theater, 120 Judge John Aiso St., Little Tokyo. Tonight and Sunday, Thursday-Dec. 12, 8 p.m. \$15. (213) 625-7000. Running time: 1 hour, 10 minutes.

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