

# CALENDAR

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■ **Theater review:** Sandra Tsing Loh's and Alec Mapa's life and career experiences are the stuff of true wit in a Taper, Too production. It's clear they're . . .

## Taking Life by Its Tales

By DON SHIRLEY  
TIMES STAFF WRITER

**W**hen Sandra Tsing Loh was a temp at a Van Nuys insurance office, the women were required to wear pantyhose—even if they were wearing pants.

Alec Mapa's temp travails included a stint at a Century City office where he shredded documents—and cried—all day. And this was *after* he starred in "M. Butterfly" at the Wilshire Theatre and on Broadway.

Loh and Mapa can swap temp-job horror stories with the best of them. Both are in their 30s, so they share a generational



Photos by ROBERT DURELL / Los Angeles Times

perspective. But that's not to say that "Tw at the Too," a pair of monologues at the Taper, Too, is redundant.

In "Depth Becomes Her," Loh narrates and enacts a series of short stories about L.A. life, taken from her book "Depth Takes a Holiday." Mapa tells a more standard autobiographical tale in "I Remember Mapa," set in San Francisco and New York, as well as L.A., with moments that verge on stand-up comedy. Their differences keep the entire package interesting.

Directed by Chay Yew for the Taper Forum's Asian Theatre Workshop.

Please see THEATER, 1



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"Two at the Too" is an extremely accessible and entertaining evening with two seemingly natural-born wits.

As a Buzz columnist and a veteran of L.A.'s performance scene, Loh has slyly mocked ethnic-specific performance opportunities like the Asian Theatre Workshop in her essays, even confessing to having emphasized the Chinese half of her heritage in order to improve her grantsmanship prowess.

Still, she hasn't changed her act for this Asian-specific presentation. In fact, there is less Chinese-specific material here than in her 1995 solo show, "Aliens in America."

Besides temp jobs, Loh tells of fantasies of what her 20s should

have been like, as well as stories of a pit bull in a swimming pool, odd trick-or-treaters, commitment-impaired dates, homeless people as "turnstiles" at intersections, deceptively ethnic-looking restaurants, a supposedly inspirational assembly at Venice High School, an adult screenwriting class in Hollywood, an assignment from Cosmopolitan to interview "L.A.'s party girls," and her eccentric, hitchhiking Chinese father.

Lest anyone accuse her of glossing over L.A.'s serious problems, she relates an account of a robbery and assault, but she nonetheless concludes with a mostly upbeat view of life in never-boring L.A.

Her performance skills have improved. Her intensity, as she drives home some particularly rich irony, is more commanding than ever.

Mapa tells stories of being a short, gay, tap-dancing kid, a jeal-

ous understudy and bit player in "M. Butterfly" before he finally got to go on in the lead, a man who lost most of his earnings from "Butterfly," a son heartbroken by his mother's death, a California Pizza Kitchen waiter, a down-and-out TV junkie who finally came back to life when he was cast in Yew's "A Language of Their Own."

He falls back on a few stereotypes ("men are pigs," gays are incompetent at schoolyard sports). But he successfully quips his way out of self-pity, and his ability to hold a stage is undeniable.

The design is fairly lavish, especially for Mapa's act, in which a rack of costumes stands on one side but goes completely untouched.

■ "Two at the Too," Taper, Too, 2580 E. Cahuenga Blvd., Hollywood. Thursdays-Sundays, 8 p.m. Ends April 20. \$15. (213) 628-2772. Running time: 2 hours, 35 minutes.

## LEGIT REVIEW

## Two at the Too

(Taper, Too, Los Angeles;  
99 seats; \$15 top)

Mark Taper Forum Asian Theatre Workshop presents two one-act performances written and performed by Sandra Tsing Loh and Alec Mapa. Directed by Clay Yew. Set, Akeime Mitterlehner; lighting, Geoff Korf; sound, Nathan Wong, John Ugarte; production coordinator, Sharon Morrissette; dramaturgs, Yew, D.J. Hopkins. Opened April 4, 1996; reviewed April 6, runs through April 20. Running time: 2 hours, 30 min.

The solo shows of Sandra Tsing Loh and Alec Mapa are sharing a bill in "Two at the Too," and the pairing does a disservice to both. Loh is an immensely funny prose stylist whose columns for Buzz magazine were a touchstone for a certain L.A. demographic — the smart, twentysomething strugglers forging their way from the fringes toward the center of Hollywood (or Hollywood-adjacent) success. But performing her material onstage, she remains a prose stylist — only not, somehow, so immensely funny. Mapa, by contrast, is a born performer whose talents — an effulgent charm, a sharp way with a well-shaped anecdote and acting ability of real depth and variety — are spectacularly well suited to the demanding requirements of this theatrical form. His show measures up to the best of the genre, while hers falls into too many of its traps.

Loh's "Depth Becomes Her" (a dud title) opens the evening, and ranges over territory familiar to her fans: from the trials of being among the "dating-impaired" to the dissonance between her ambitions — to be madly successful in a certain literary-artistic world whose nexus is the Holy Land of New York — and her reality, an apartment in Van Nuys filled with mildly smart, cheap Ikea furnishings, and a series of mortifying temp jobs.

There are more than a few nuggets of rich, oddball humor here — an office job whose only rule was "no beer at your desk before 4 p.m.," the 405 described as the "River Styx of disappointment" — but the material seems to have limped lackadaisically from the page to the stage: Too much of it sounds like narration.

Nor is Loh a distinguished actress, and too much of the show is pitched at an overemphatic level that shows her effort. She's in way over her head when she goes for real emotion, in an out-of-left-field segment in which she re-enacts being sexually violated by an intruder. Her performance's problems probably wouldn't be so apparent if it weren't followed by Mapa's superior one. His show is called "I Remember Mapa," but the title is the only misstep here.

It follows a fairly familiar autobiographical course, and none of his subjects is entirely new: He talks of the trials of growing up gay ("I was such a sissy, I used to kick my own ass at recess"), of his struggles as an Asian-American actor (understudying B.D. Wong in "M. Butterfly," he felt like "the Asian Lainie Kazan"), of the death of his mother. But there's hardly a moment that isn't fresh, infused with the kind of small, resonant truth that only real experience can afford, or a flamboyant humor trained with jewel-cutting precision. Speaking of his desperate adolescence, he says, "I had a wicked sense of humor and no self-confidence. In other words, I was Rhoda."

As a performer Mapa has an easy, intimate rapport with his audience, chiding them for turning on him when the rare joke falls flat, or dishing about a certain surprise Oscar-winner with infectious glee. He's a marvelous mimic — his take on Juanita Hall, the African-American actress cast as Asian in "Flower Drum Song," is priceless.

Mapa's primary subjects are gay culture, the Asian-American experience and the tough life of an actor, but he's such a magnetic performer that his show will appeal to audiences well outside any of the corresponding niches. It could, and should, stand on its own.

Recalling the joy he felt facing his first standing ovation on Broadway, Mapa says quietly, "It was the first time in my life I didn't feel like a freak." It's a wonderful, moving moment that speaks volumes about the powerful impulses that lie behind the actor's art. The irony, of course, is that he is a freak — there's nothing normal about a talent this large.

—Charles Isherwood



# Theatre Reviews

## TWO AT THE TOO\*

**Produced by Christopher Lora for Mark Taper Forum's Asian Theatre Workshop at Taper, Too, located in the John Anson Ford Amphitheatre, 2580 Cahuenga Blvd. East, Los Angeles; (213) 628-2772. Opened April 3; plays Thurs.-Sun., 8; closes April 20.**

A double bill of solo works may sound like a contradiction in terms, but "Two at the Too" adds up to a winning combination at the Taper, Too. Consisting of the world premieres of Sandra Tsing Loh's *Depth Becomes Her* and Alec Mapa's *I Remember Mapa*, this evening of deep reflections will not be soon forgotten by those lucky enough to experience them in this inviting venue.

Both shows have been workshopped under the Taper's auspices before, and the preparation has certainly paid off. Both have also been directed by Chay Yew, himself a playwright, who will surely be in demand by many solo artists after this dual achievement. He has helped each performer spin gold out of their personal takes on L.A., N.Y. and the biz.

One of the most exciting aspects of the pairing is that the two shows are starkly different in form and presentation. Writer/performer Loh comes out swinging in *Depth Becomes Her*, taking shots at targets including dating, screenwriting, IKEA and the Valley, and hitting all with deadly accuracy. Her observational pieces are subtitled and divided by short musical interludes, perfect pauses that allow the audience to ingest one glorious gulp before taking another swig of her unique brand of comedy.

Where Loh leans toward the intellectual, actor Alec Mapa pours on the emotional. His offering, *I Remember Mapa*, is a memory play of sorts, reliving his early rise to fame as Song Liling in the Broadway and touring productions of *M. Butterfly*. But what is truly enlightening is how the spirited showman survived the aftermath of his sudden success, when the offers stopped coming and his career ground to a halt. Mapa inspirationally relates how he overcame family crisis and personal setbacks in order to arrive at an inner peace and a strengthened belief in himself.

The performance pieces are neatly staged by Yew on Akeime Mitterlehner's spare but savvy set, neatly framed by Myung Hee Cho's abstract background drop. Geoff Korf provides the ambient lighting and the helpful slide projections are by Christopher Komuro. Nathan Wang and John Ugarte collaborated on the clever compositions and sound design, and Sharon Morrisette served as production coordinator.

"Two at the Too" not only makes for an exciting evening but is an excellent example of one-person shows at their best.

\*Critic's Choice

— Elias Stimac



OF THE WEEK



CRAIG SCHWARTZ

of Shor's best staged bits, Marzilli plays Joseph's argumentative Reflection in a mirror. Marzilli also shines as both Titorelli, a flamboyant painter who has inside influence with the court, and as the nebbishy court Usher. Company of Angels, 2106 Hyperion Ave., Silver Lake; Fri.-Sat., 8 p.m.; Sun., 5 p.m.; thru May 24. (213) 466-1767. (Sandra Ross)

**TWO AT THE TOO** In an evening of raucous, self-deprecating humor skillfully directed by Chay Yew, Sandra Tsing Loh and Alec Mapa present their very personal performance pieces. With sarcasm and wit in *Depth Becomes Her*, Loh reminisces about her lost 20s, spent in California, and her yearning to relive them in New York with a Marlo Thomas/*That Girl* kind of abandon. Her mock disdain for life in Van Nuys — with its convenient grocery stores and terrible dating scene — is hilariously on target. She's followed by an impassioned Mapa, who opens his *Remember Mapa* with an enthusiastic tap dance to a politically incorrect ditty. He gleefully recalls his days in the NYC club scene and bitterly examines his understudy role on Broadway in *M. Butterfly* — a role he eventually assumed and took on a national tour. Also, Mapa sorrowfully remembers the worst six months of his life when his boyfriend left him, his mother died and his accountant absconded with most of his money. It wasn't until years later, after temp jobs from hell and waiting tables at a chain restaurant, that Mapa's sense of humor returned. Although some of this humor might be lost in translation, Mapa's flamboyant delivery and outrageous stories are side-splitting, even when heart-wrenching. Taper, Too at the John Anson Ford Theater, 2580 Cahuenga Blvd. East, Hollywood; Thurs.-Sun., 8 p.m.; thru April 20. (213) 628-2772. (Jeanne M. Allgood)

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Escapes From the Zoo, Peggy Judy's Love Train, ...  
Together, The Reunification Hotel, The Rose Tattoo, ...  
Lives, Spurt of Blood, Steaming, There Once Was a Girl From Pawtucket, ...  
Happiness, Valley Song, Vince, Waiting for Studio 54, The Wedding Dress, The  
Winter's Tale, Yesterday Came Too Soon, Zapatistas.

**VOICE OF THE PRAIRIE** John Olive's portrait of early 20th-century America focuses on

never tire. Bertolt  
Brecht and Kurt Weill's 1928  
updating of John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera* was  
wildly popular in its day — until, that is,

**CHANGE ROOM** The caliber of the  
Change Room elevates Nagle

place that she's allowed her emotionally stunted  
to visit. Violet la



Sandra Tsing Loh's 'Depth Becomes Her,' a tour of the seamy underbelly of the real Los Angeles, premieres at the Mark Taper Forum Asian Theatre Workshop at Taper Too

## Comedian over her head with life

By Linda Rose

What was the daughter of a scientist doing playing a piano concert on the Harbor Freeway? Sandra Tsing Loh was initiating a career as a performance artist and writer, whose solo shows would take her from Santa Monica to New York City and whose writing would appear in her regular column in Buzz magazine and now in her many books.

Her current show, "Depth Becomes Her," a tour of the seamy underbelly of the real Los Angeles — including the land of adult education screenwriting courses, temping in Van Nuys, romancing the "dating-impaired," the hazards of IKEA furniture and dinner alone with Trader Joe — premieres at the Mark Taper Forum Asian Theatre Workshop at Taper Too, along with "I Remember Mapa" by Alec Mapa, the award-winning actor and comedian.

Mapa, heralded for his performance as the lead in "M. Butterfly" a few years back, journeys through the entertainment industry's venues, from smoky cabarets to Broadway and TV sound stages, as an outsider experiencing a decidedly insider's industry.

Loh's freeway debut led to her participation in the Fringe Festival for several years until she realized she not only wasn't making any money, she was actually losing money staging these events.

"So I got into journalism for a while," said Loh, whose column for Buzz was about the San Fernando Valley. "It was about the second act of people's lives. They move out here in their 20s, live in Hollywood, and try to do everything overnight. When they reach 30, they realize their daydreams which were supposed to happen haven't happened yet."

"They know, in the meantime, they need to move someplace that has a garage. They need a little more space, so they move to the Valley and figure out what to do next. I covered everything from dating to bargain club memberships," said Loh. Many of the monologues from "Depth Becomes Her" are drawn from her Buzz columns and also appear in her book "Depth Takes a Holiday: Essays from Lesser Los Angeles" (Riverhead Books).



SANDRA TSING LOH looks at life in her show "Depth Becomes Her" at the Taper Too.

"In this new show, the director, Chay Yew, is just brilliant and fearless in trying to bring out things I've never done before. He's really pushing me, who relied on my wits, to get me through everything at the expense of emotional depth to blow past that. He'll say, 'No, no. What do you feel?' And I realized, 'Wow! There's a lot of anger underneath that's scary.'"

"The show is about the whole emotional rollercoaster experience of living in L.A. So that after seeing the piece you go, 'Gosh, now that I've seen that piece, I hate L.A. more than ever before, but I also love L.A. more than ever before,'" she said.

"I've always done some kind of performance art. I was a pianist, so At My Place in Santa Monica, I did a sort of Victor Borge kind of act," referring to the celebrated Danish comedian who combined piano playing with comedy. "I then segued into autobiographical monologues, which came into vogue about four years ago. The traditional form for a part-Asian person like me was to do an ethnic biography, a sort of story about my mixed-race family."

Her show "Aliens in America," which she did in New York, was about her Chinese-German family. "Actually, I'm much more Ger-

### PREVIEW

**What:** "Two at the Too" — Sandra Tsing Loh's "Depth Becomes Her" and Alec Mapa's "I Remember Mapa" — presented by the Mark Taper Forum Asian Theatre Workshop.

**Where:** Taper, Too, 2580 Canuenga Blvd. East, Hollywood

**When:** Preview Thursday, at 8 p.m. Opens April 4, Closes April 20. Show times: Thursdays-Sundays at 3 p.m.

**How much:** \$15

**Info:** Tickets available through the Center Theatre Group box office (located at the Armanson Theatre) or by calling CTG Audience Services at (213) 628-2772.

man than Chinese in background. German was our first language. Our grandmother, who was from Germany, would visit us every Christmas and sing 'Oh Tannenbaum.' She only spoke to us in German, so I felt closer to a lot of my German culture than Chinese," she explained.

"But, as an artist, especially a multi-cultural artist, a German heritage is not going to get you any grant money. Multi-culturalism seemed to be defined as only

Latino, Asian, or African-American. However, I never made any secret of it either. By the time I got the grant money, I got to do one story about my Chinese father, one about my German mother, and one about me, a bumbling Southern California teen-ager.

"As a kid, I never dreamed I would go into performing. My plan was to be a scientist like my father. I got a B.S. in Physics at Caltech, which I never used. As years went by, and my performance art moved inside the theater onto a traditional stage with a traditional sound system, I started doing more monologues and stories. I do the unreliable narrator type of thing. You don't know where this person is going to take me — sort of 'Woody Allenish' — 'where are they going with this,' but you're enjoying the ride," she said.

Loh has also performed at the U.S. Comedy Arts festival in Aspen, the HBO new Writer's Project, and on NPR's "Morning Edition" and "This American Life." "If You Lived Here, You'd Be Home by Now," a novel about L.A., will also be published by Riverhead. Her solo show, "Bad Sex with Bud Kemp," is in development with Second Stage Theatre.



## Theater

## Life flutters on after 'M. Butterfly'

Alec Mapa looks back at his moment in the theatrical sun

By Robert Hurwitt  
EXAMINER THEATER CRITIC

ALEC MAPA wastes little time establishing the tensions between humor and pathos, and entertainment and commentary, that hold his one-man show together. Tapping up a storm, twirling and strutting and, at the same time, singing the rapid-patter, generic-stereotype lyrics of the old (1928) Harry Warren novelty tune "Nagasaki," he still finds time to insert a quick "Shocking!" with an aghast sidelong glance.

He greets the audience with a big, boyish grin and an exuberant "Hi!" — then holds the smile a beat too long as he blurts out the gesture's interpretation between gritted teeth: "Like me!" "OK, the song's really racist and politically incorrect," he says as he finishes the number, "but you must admit it's awfully catchy."

Neither political nor ethnic correctness is what "I Remember Mapa" is all about. "I wanted to do one of those really cool ethnic-bio shows," Mapa says, but admits he knows very little about his Filipino heritage except that it involves "eating rice with everything."



After Alec Mapa's star turn, he was broke, lonely and depressed.

"Mapa," which opened Thursday at the Magic Theatre, is more of a backstage bio crossed with a stand-up routine and seasoned with the double-outsider experience of a Filipino American "sis-sy." It's also a comeback story — hence the title — about Mapa's return to the stage after several years oblivion following his brief moment of stardom in "M. Butter-

fly."

Which makes it an appropriate belated opener for the Asian American Theater Company's 25th season. Produced in association with the Mark Taper Forum's Asian Theater Workshop, it's the first show AATC has put up in almost a year, since executive director Pamela Wu replaced artistic director Karen Amano in a much-publicized split (Wu now wears both hats as producing director). The season continues in late April with a rare revival of Frank Chin's seminal "The Chickencoop Chinaman" at Somar Cultural Center.

Mapa developed "Mapa" for the Mark Taper's alternative Taper, Too series last year, working with Asian Theater Workshop director and playwright ("Porcelain," "A Language of Their Own") Chay Yew. It's a sharp, funny, edgy and, at times, moving 75 minutes of solo performance that entertains well enough but doesn't quite commit to its more serious moments.

It begins — after a throwaway setup about getting permission to use the stage, and that song-and-dance routine — with Mapa's childhood in San Francisco. Working stand-up comedy-style, Mapa juxtaposes tales of his Filipino family and the terrors of being a sissy at school (dodgeball as "schoolyard Darwinism") with contemporary gay comedy materi-

al (looking over a tall date, he quips, "I like a man I can climb").

HIS LOVE of movie musicals leads into a clever routine about Juanita Hall's Southern-fried accent as a Chinese woman in "Flower Drum Song" and the odd casting of Rita Moreno in "The King and I" (Mapa's mimicry of Deborah Kerr is so precise you can almost see the hoop skirt). His ethnic-purity critique comes back to haunt him when he finds himself similarly faking a Vietnamese accent in his first professional gig.

Cast as B.D. Wong's understudy in the Broadway production of David Henry Hwang's "M. Butterfly," Mapa is brilliantly self-mocking in his jealous fury at missing out on the critical accolades and awards as he tries to pad his walk-on role. He's eloquent, too, in conveying the fulfillment that came when he

finally got to assume the role of the transvestite spy (as he did, spectacularly, in the touring production that played the Curran in 1991).

It's in his portrayal of the "Butterfly" aftermath that Mapa most obviously pulls his punches. With the end of the run, his lover left him and he discovered that his accountant had been stealing, leaving him broke, alone and unemployed. But Mapa simply tells us the circumstances, without engaging the crisis in any significant way.

HIS MUCH more forthcoming, and deeply moving, on the death of his mother, as Lisa Hashimoto's lights soften and close in around him in sympathy. But a TV-schedule account of his subsequent, long depression feels sketchy and his slow return to work is only partially filled in, despite some nice material on a temp job shredding docu-

ments and wailing all day long.

Yew gives "Mapa" a crisp, sharp focus on Akeime Mitterleher's simple red-couch set, against a vivid abstract backdrop by Myung Hee Cho. And Mapa himself provides plenty of charm and sharp comic timing. He's especially adept at undercutting a moment of self-pity or even genuine pathos with a quick, deft punch line. But in the end you're left wondering if that self-protective reflex has kept him from exploring his story as deeply as he could.

## THEATER REVIEW

## 'I Remember Mapa'

- WRITER, PERFORMER Alec Mapa
- DIRECTOR Chay Yew
- THEATER Asian American Theater Company, Magic Theatre, through April 12. (415) 440-5545

arts

## Remembering Mapa

BY BYRON AU YONG

"What if I never work again?" actor Alec Mapa asked himself a couple of years ago. Up until then, Mapa had appeared on Broadway and in the national touring production of David Henry Hwang's *M. Butterfly*. Moving to Los Angeles to further his career, Mapa found an industry lacking in imagination and a job waiting tables.

During this period of emotional and financial destitution, Mapa wondered how he would sustain himself as a performer. The answer: cabaret.

For seven years, he had forsaken the stand-up routines that placed him center stage in college. He booked a performance in New York six months in advance and spent the next six months trying to get out of it, but to no avail. The hour-long stand-up fascinated director/writer Chay Yew, who later helped develop and produce the show at the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles. The result is an anecdotal, shaggy-dog memoir, given the title *I Remember Mapa* by an ex-boyfriend.

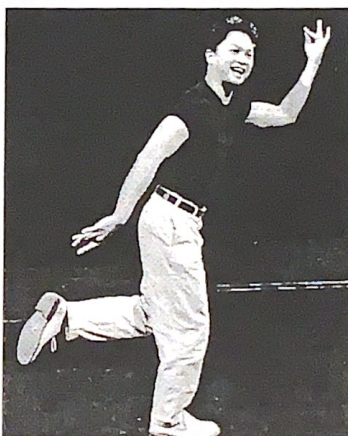
Now in its third year, the nationally acclaimed *I Remember Mapa* has played to sold-out houses in a variety of cities that include New York, San Francisco and San Antonio. The show

received the 1998 *L.A. Weekly* Award for Best Solo Performance and is published by Grove Press in the anthology *O Solo Homo: The New Queer Performance*, edited by Holly Hughes and David Roman. *I Remember Mapa* is finally in Seattle.

*I Remember Mapa* explores Mapa's discovery of his core values through anecdotes about the first 30 years of his life. What begins as a joyous, humorous song and dance becomes more surrendered and sophisticated by the end. "Having everything my way taught me nothing about survival," Mapa remarks half-way through the performance.

In the second half, Mapa finds ways to respond to crisis and learns that regardless of what happens, everything will be okay.

From touring around the country, Mapa has noticed that the majority of Americans believe abortion, homosexuality and Jesus to be pressing issues, hence the frequent appearance of these topics on the Presidential debates. Mapa, a gay, Filipino American actor, who grew up in San Francisco, works



Alec Mapa performs at NWAAT.

in New York and lives in Los Angeles comments in an interview, "We live in the ghetto. We live in these urban areas."

*I Remember Mapa* portrays aspects of this experience. For example, he shows how hip it is to be gay and Asian. "Queer Asian sexuality is

invisible. We have no sexual representation in gay media or in our own culture. After the performance, you walk away knowing that I get laid."

Even though Mapa's life is unique, non-gay, non-Asian audience members strongly relate to his performance. His personal anecdotes touch the core of being human. Mapa uses laughter to trigger honest feedback from the audience. "Once people recognize themselves in a gay, Asian person, I cease to be foreign," he said.

Although Mapa never set out to be political, his honesty, based on reality, encourages others to risk being themselves. He becomes infuriated when television shows set in Chicago, such as *ER*, omit the realistic portrayal of South Asian doctors or Filipino nurses. He decries "Suddenly Susan," for showing the city of San Francisco devoid of gay people or Asians. "Drama and comedy should include real life, otherwise the audience is missing out. We have been in this country for how long?"

Mapa, the award winning and - more importantly - now working actor, credits the solo shows of Whoopi Goldberg and Lily Tomlin as having an impact. "It is odd that I am called a pioneer, because my show is accessible, middle class and corny."

*I Remember Mapa* runs at the Northwest Asian American Theatre from Tuesday to Sunday through Feb. 20. For tickets and information, call (206) 340-1049. **ig**