

'I Remember MAPA'

Actor/comedian
Alec Mapa crafts
a one-man show
that's always
entertaining,
never
self-indulgent

By Chad Jones
STAFF WRITER

ALEC MAPA DELIVERS the kind of one-man show that audiences dream of. He's funny, appealing and full of energy. He touches on emotional subjects without becoming maudlin, and he illuminates his own life experience without ever appearing self-indulgent. "I Remember Mapa," the cleverly titled show that kicked off the Asian American Theater Company's 25th anniversary season late last week at San Francisco's Magic Theatre, could have been another lugubrious monologue. But Mapa's lively story about growing up in San Francisco as a gay, first-generation Filipino American who dreamed of starring in a Broadway show is as irresistible as the star himself.

After a razzle-dazzle opening in which Mapa, tongue firmly in cheek, tap dances while singing, "Back in Nagasaki where the fellas chew tabacc-y and the women wicky-wacky-woo," the actor embarks on the tale of his rise to stardom, his fall from grace and his resurrection.

This 33-year-old actor has realized his dreams, suffered a nervous breakdown and lived to tell about both experiences. And the most amazing thing is this: He never lost his sense of humor. Mapa was even a stand-up comedian for a while in New York, so this show is sort of a variation on a theme — stand-up drama.

"I originally wanted this show to be one of those ethnic biographical things," Mapa says early on in the 85-minute play. "You know, one of those shows where the

TICKETS

- > Alec Mapa's "I Remember Mapa"
- > Presented by the Asian American Theater Company
- > Through April 12
- > Magic Theatre, Fort Mason Center, Building D, Marina Boulevard at Buchanan Street, San Francisco
- > 8:30 p.m. Thursdays through Saturdays, 3 p.m. and 7 p.m. Sundays
- > \$16-\$21
- > (415) 433-7827
- > ★★★1/2 (one-man wonder)

ethnic people in the audience go, 'Right on!' and all the white people say, 'Himm. I had no idea.' " But, Mapa concedes, he doesn't know enough about his Filipino roots to do justice to such a theater piece. "All I know about Filipinos is that they eat rice with everything. What do I know? I was born here!"

Mapa's big break came when he was cast as the understudy to the lead in David Henry Hwang's international hit "M. Butterfly." Mapa eventually took over the role on Broadway, then spent a year touring the country as Song Liling, the real-life Chinese opera singer and spy who, dressed as a woman, carried on an

Please see **Mapa**, CUE-4

Mapa: First solo act a welcome return

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affair with a British diplomat for 20 years without ever revealing that he was a man.

"I remember reading the script before I auditioned," Mapa says. "And I thought, big deal. I'm from San Francisco. This kind of thing happens on the bus."

The actor won raves wherever the show played, including San Francisco, and he was sure the role was his ticket to stardom. Not so.

"I'm hell to cast," Mapa acknowledges. "I'm too weird, too queer, too ethnic." When "M. Butterfly" finally closed, no jobs were forthcoming.

To further complicate things, the friend to whom Mapa had entrusted his financial matters had absconded with more than half the actor's earnings. What the lousy friend didn't take, the IRS did.

Then, within the same six-month period, Mapa's mother, whom he calls his best friend, died of a stroke following a cerebral aneurysm.

Mapa chose to deal with his grief and despair by spending all his time in front of the TV or in bed. When his power was cut off, he realized he had to do something. After working as an office temp, he ended up as a waiter at a chain restaurant in Encino. When patrons recognized him as the star of "M. Butterfly," he says he wanted to die. "I wasn't even a dignified has-been."

But the resilient actor bounced back. When he had nothing left to lose, auditions started going better and work started happening again.

He has since appeared on TV's "NYPD Blue," "Seinfeld," "Melrose Place" and in the hit New York play "A Language of

Their Own."

Another form of therapy has been this show, which was a hit at the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles.

Impeccably directed by playwright Chay Yew, "I Remember Mapa" is vibrant, irreverent and tightly constructed. In between details of his personal history, Mapa jokes about racism, homophobia and stereotypes.

"Growing up, I didn't have many positive role models," Mapa says, "except Mr. Sulu on 'Star Trek.' He not only got to wear that fabulous mustard-colored velour top, but he also helped break Asian stereotypes. He was a very good driver."

Full of outright belly laughs as well as poignant humor, "I Remember Mapa" is a treat. Mapa's first solo outing in his hometown is a welcome return indeed.

Gay hilarity reigns in 'I Remember Mapa'

By JOE ADCOCK
PI THEATER CRITIC

This guy is hilarious! And a good tap-dancer. And a good actor. He doesn't just do goofy. He also does sexy and poignant and desperate.

But! Read this proviso carefully: Alec Mapa's one-man show, "I Remember Mapa," the current Northwest Asian American Theatre production, is rich in gay humor. And another thing: It is bursting with ethnic jests. There are even jokes at the expense of political correctness.

"Mapa" is part stand-up routine and part comedy drama. The stand-up aspect is a blaze of witticisms and funny faces, funny walks and funny accents. The comedy drama follows a "how I got to be me" format.

Mapa was born in San Francisco. His parents are from the Philippines. Early on he assures the audience that this will not be one of those immigrant struggle stories about which people of color say, "Right on!" while white people say, "I never knew!"

Mapa visited his parents' "impoverished third world country" only to discover that all his relatives had chauffeurs. He continued to visit when he "wanted to enjoy maid service."

Meanwhile, at school in San Francisco, he could not catch a ball. At first he was a "sissy." Then he was a "big homo." Fortunately, he could make jokes at his own expense and thereby gain acceptance.

Theater studies at New York University and paying dues on the Manhattan auditions circuit eventually led to an understudy role in "M. Butterfly." Then stardom. Then disaster. Mapa was dumped by his boyfriend. An accountant "friend" embezzled his savings. The IRS was all over him. And his mother, his "best friend," died. He coped by watching lots of TV.

When his utilities were cut off for non-payment, Mapa took day jobs: shredding documents, serving tables. Desperate efforts to get back into acting were fruitless — because

THEATER REVIEW

■ **I Remember Mapa.** Written and performed by Alec Mapa. Northwest Asian American Theatre production at Theatre Off Jackson, 409 Seventh Ave. S. Through Feb. 20. Tickets \$9-\$50; 206-340-1049.

they were desperate. When auditions became something interesting in themselves, and not a means to an end, they led to ... jobs.

You may have seen Mapa on "Friends," "Law and Order," "NYPD Blue," "Roseanne" or "Melrose Place." Initiating the end of his bad-luck days, however, was a part in an off-Broadway production of "A Language of Their Own." Chay Yew's drama of gay relationships under stress.

"I Remember Mapa" was developed about three years ago in Los Angeles, at the Mark Taper Forum's Asian theater workshop. It since has played not only the gay Meccas, San Francisco and New York, but also San Antonio and Montreal.

Director Chay Yew makes sure the show doesn't turn into unalloyed stand-up. Mapa keeps on the move from the time he enters tap-dancing. The pace slows for poignant moments. For wacky moments, Mapa whips words and actions into a froth.

That title, "I Remember Mapa" is a play on John Van Druten's 1944 Broadway comedy, "I Remember Mama," which eventually was the basis for CBS's pioneering sit-com, "Mama." "Mama," of course, was Caucasians on parade. It ran from 1949 to '57, when most American media were entirely about white people.

Mapa doesn't have his own TV series, true. But the media world certainly has gotten a lot more diverse during his lifetime.

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PHOTO BY CRAIG SCHWARTZ

The best medicine: In Alec Mapa's solo show, laughter proves contagious.

Dark truths

Excellent performances anchor My Night with Reg and Alec Mapa's solo show.

By Brad Rosenstein

THEATER

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'I Remember Mapa.' Through April 12. Thurs.-Sat., 8:30 p.m.; Sun., 3 and 7 p.m., Magic Theater, Fort Mason Center, Bldg. D, Marina at Lagoon, S.F. \$16-\$21. (415) 440-5545.

'I Remember Mapa'

"Hello, I'm Lea Salonga," jokes Alec Mapa after the razzle-dazzle tap-dancing routine that opens his solo show, *I Remember Mapa*. But there's a lot more to the piece than the predictable struggles of a minority actor seeking success in the performing arts mainstream. For the next 90 minutes of this Asian American Theatre Company presentation, Mapa charts his trajectory from misfit queer Filipino American geek to Broadway star, from crushing failure to personal redemption.

Growing up in San Francisco as the quintessential schoolyard sissy, his most treasured possession the soundtrack to *That's Entertainment!*, Mapa quickly realized he was on a very different path. Unfurling both his gay identity and his acting talents while a student at NYU, Mapa hit the jackpot shortly after graduation with a role in *M. Butterfly*. But he was only understudying B.D. Wong as Song Liling, a once-in-a-lifetime part he fiercely coveted. Eventually Mapa got his shot, however, and went on to play the role for three years on Broadway and on the national tour, convinced his superstar future was assured.

Then the roof fell in. Within a six-month period the tour ended, Mapa got dumped by his boyfriend, his accountant absconded with his earnings, and his beloved mother died. Having become accustomed to instant success, Mapa found himself with no resources for survival. After a stint as a TV junkie he flunked audition after audition and eventually hit rock bottom waiting tables at the California Pizza Kitchen in Encino. Then slowly he began piecing his talent and his self-esteem back together.

Particularly for actors the story may be painfully familiar, but Mapa is an incandescent, hilarious performer whose cautionary tale transcends showbiz. His megawatt energy and chatty insights win you over immediately, and then the dark truths behind the humor break your heart. Mapa can dish on *Flower Drum Song* with a devastating impersonation of Juanita Hall and then lead you into his deeply moving relationship with his mother, whose unwavering belief in her son inspired him at his lowest ebb.

Director Chay Yew has masterfully given shape and rhythm to the piece, and he whirls Mapa around Akeime Mitterlehner's playful set, backed by an evocative abstract drop by Myung Hee Cho. Touching, engrossing, and often side-splittingly funny, this is exemplary solo theater, and Mapa is unquestionably a star. ■