

YM II: Birth of the Yellow Menace

STIR-FRIDAY NIGHT!

I want to keep race out of this," implores native-born senatorial candidate Steve Kanamatsu, a character in Stir-Friday Night's latest revue *YM II: Birth of the Yellow Menace*. But the reporters won't let up: "How long did it take you to perfect your American accent?"

Kanamatsu is at first circumspect, as befits an Asian-American and politician. But the press corps' relentless interrogation of his American-ness finally causes him to snap. "All right! I'm Japanese! How's this: My father shot down Bob Dole!"

A viable Asian American senatorial candidate from Chicago is at present a farfetched notion. But running in a single-issue race when that single issue—in this case, race—isn't of your choosing, it remains a true-to-life feeling not just for Asian Americans but for anyone powerless to reset the political agenda.

"Comedy is universal," explains ensemble leader Quincy Wong, "a mainstream audience should be able to relate to humor by and about Asian Americans—if we do it right." And they are doing it right, at last—*YM II* fulfills the potential only hinted at during Stir-Friday Night's runs last year at George Street Cafe and TurnAround Theater. The dancing and singing interludes (and the "amateur hour" atmosphere they lent) are gone. The group, composed of Daisy Castro, Wayne Eji, Ken Hamada, Jennifer Liu, Ron Mok, Seema Sueko, Joe Yau, and Wong, has toughened its writ-

ing, sharpened its timing, and gotten damned funny overall.

YM II is peppered with yellow esoterica; references to Russell Wong (actor) and the National Association of Asian American Professionals (yuppie network), for example, might baffle non-Asian Americans. But the show just as often focuses on easily recognizable icons, and sends them up wickedly.

David Carradine in *Kung Fu* becomes Cricket, a white drifter in the Chinese countryside, overcoming human conflict with the ancient wisdom of hair-trigger violence. Bruce Lee in *Enter the Dragon* becomes legendary funnyman Stan Moy, a master of the lethal *Way of the Twelve Insults* who is caught between warring comedy academies in Hong Kong.

In classic Chicago improv tradition, Cricket and Moy meet up with senator-elect Kanamatsu in the show's apocalyptic climax. "We spent our first year doing random sketch comedy—we needed the challenge of writing a real show, with recurring characters and interwoven subplots," Wong says. Various ensemble members trained in improv with Second City, ImprovOlympic, and I BLINK. In its loose-feeling intricacy *YM II* recalls those companies' best work.

Wong, a 42-year-old "ABC" (American-born Chinese), is the only member of Stir-Friday Night working full-time in show business. He's also currently appearing in *Three Non-Blondes*, a serio-comic group monologue show touring colleges around the



Stir-Friday Night! players (in ascending order)
Seema Sueko, Jennifer Liu, Jennifer Banzon, Daisy Castro, Ken Hamada, Joe Yau, Ron Mok, Wayne Eji, and Quincy Wong.

Midwest. In between, he squeezes in stand-up comedy gigs at nightclubs across the country.

Wong acknowledges that Asian Americans face an uphill struggle to become agents—rather than objects—of comedy. Last year, comedienne Margaret Cho's network sitcom *All-American Girl* was cancelled after half of a season, despite finishing in the middle of the pack, ahead even of several renewed series. But for the very idea of Asian American funniness, it was a high-profile flop. "Unfortunately it wasn't very good," Wong says. "But I don't think it set all of us back. I can see one of the new networks especially FOX, UPN, WB, trying out an Asian American show soon."

"Pop culture is where Asian Americans become politically conscious," says Wong. "For me, becoming a performer made me confront the stereotypes. I'm from Skokie, but sometimes I have to fake a Chinese accent to get a part. In this show we use accents to make our own points about stereotypes." In 1989 Wong and others from Chicago's compact Asian American cultural scene improved the number and quality of their opportunities by forming Angel Island Theatre Company, which has staged classics from the Asian American canon and commissioned, original works. Wong sees *Stir-Friday Night!* as serving a similar role, as a supportive space for the development of Asian American talent, and as an expression of a vibrant Asian American cultural scene that's often overlooked in Chicago and in coastal-centric Asian America.

To *Stir-Friday Night!*'s credit, *YM II* is plenty political, but hardly correct. "Political correctness is the death of comedy," Wong says, "you can't please everyone. You have to be offensive to attack offensiveness, like in the *Choco-Chinks* skit." He's referring to a commercial for an "inscrutably delicious" snack treat "from the folks who brought you Cheese Nips," starring Super-Coolie Guy, a giant hat on legs. Indeed, those offended by even subverted stereotypes should steer clear of *YM II*, with its wisecracking rickshaw jockeys, bumbling ninja warriors, game show-playing Buddhas, moralizing Pakistani cabdrivers, and white-bashing yellow nationalists. The latter did give Wong brief pause. "At first I was a little concerned about the 'round-eye' jokes," he admits. "But in context, they're funny."

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