The Romance of Magno Rubio

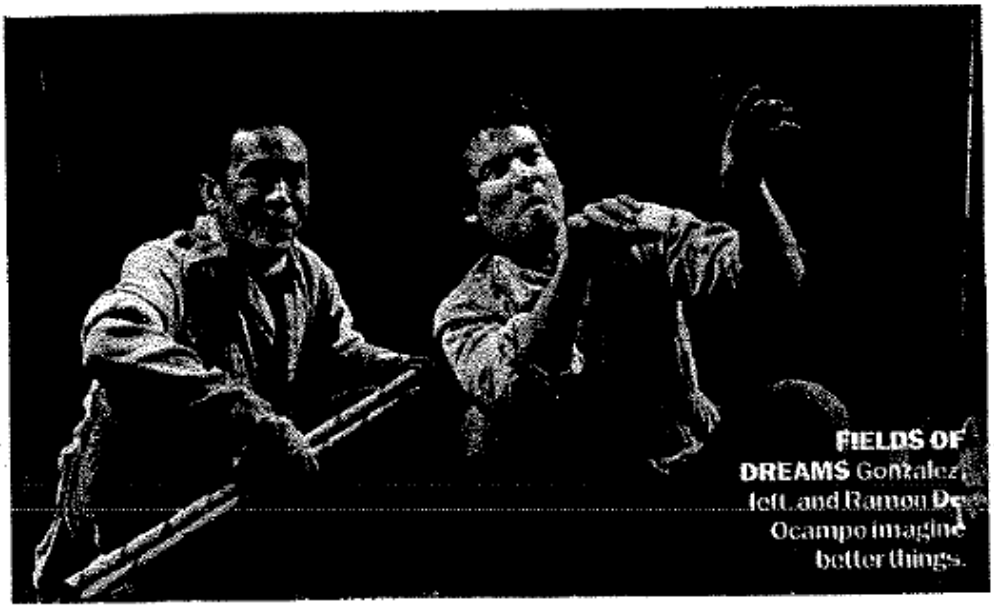
★★★★★½

Culture Project (see Off Broadway). By Lonnie Carter. Dir. Loy Arcenas. With ensemble cast. 1hr 30mins. No intermission.

Magno Rubio, small and swarthy, cuts an unimposing figure even among his fellow Filipino migrant workers, cooped up in a shabby bunkhouse in 1930s California. A hardworking simpleton, he seems sweetly dried up, like *The Grapes of Wrath* in the sun, and his companions treat him like a mascot. ("Magno Rubio four foot six inches tall," they taunt him semiaffectionately. "Magno Rubio dark as a coconut ball.") But Magno has been swapping letters with the greedy Clarabelle, an Arkansas girl who is everything he is not—big, pretty, white, American—and whom he believes he will one day meet and marry. His foolish love gives meaning to his lonely drudgery: Every 20 ears of corn he shucks means another penny he can send to her.

Inventively adapted from a short story by Carlos Bulosan, Lonnie Carter's *The Romance of Magno Rubio* has enormous theatrical appeal. As directed by Loy Arcenas for Ma-Yi Theatre Company and performed by a remarkable cast (led by the excellent Jojo Gonzalez as Magno), the show is fleet-footed and exciting; it includes several lively musical numbers and a comic slow-motion fight. Carter's writing, peppered with Tagalog and mostly written in spry rhyming couplets, draws dramatic energy from specific Filipino history and cultural traditions. But Magno's folklorish story has bittersweet universal themes; for *Clarabelle,* we are free to read *America* or *God.* (As someone asks: "What quality of soul sustains a man to have such faith in someone he's not seen?") Magno is, in his own meek way, an American hero: The little guy who can't catch a break, but never will be broken.

—*Adam Feldman*



FIELDS OF DREAMS Gonzalez, left, and Ramon De Ocampo imagine better things.