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The Romance of Magno Rubio

(Culture Project; 140 seats; $50 top) A Ma-Yi Theater Company presentation of a play in one act by Lonnie Carter, based on a story by Carlos Bulosan, with additional text by Ralph B. Pena. Directed by Loy Arcenas.

Nick - Arthur T. Acuna
Prudencio - Bernardo Bernardo
Atoy, Clarabelle - Ramon De Ocampo
Magno Rubio - Jojo Gonzalez
Claro - Paolo Montalban

By MARILYN STASIO

Trust Ma-Yi Theater Company to make a classy contribution to the first National Asian American Theater Festival, playing through June 24 at various locations in four of New York's five boroughs. Under Loy Arcenas' tight-as-a-drumskin helming, the all-male ensemble rocks the house with this revival of "The Romance of Magno Rubio." The modern-day folk tale about the lovesick dreams of a Filipino-American farm worker won a 2003 Obie for scribe Lonnie Carter, who adapted the fable from a short story by Carlos Bulosan that exposed the plight of migrant laborers during the 1920s and '30s. Sadly, it feels timeless.

Bulosan's not-so-subtle metaphor of America the Bountiful as a hard-hearted bitch helped land the author on Sen. Joe McCarthy's hit list in the 1950s. But present-day furor over illegal immigration gives resonance to the play's blunt take on exploited farm laborers like Magno Rubio (JoJo Gonzalez) and his fellow workers in the California fields.

After being lured here by visions of good jobs, high wages and willing women, the men find themselves living in squalid conditions (well realized by meticulous production values) and worked like slaves. No wonder a poor schmuck like Rubio

answers a personal ad from an Arkansas farm girl named Clarabelle who holds out promises of marriage.
Savvier than Rubio (who, at 4 feet 6 inches and "dark as a coconut ball," is no young girl's idea of a great catch), the rest of the guys in this miserable bunk-hole alternately laugh at him and try to wise him up. Without falling into stereotype, each has a recognizable character and a clear part to play in the education of their gullible friend.
The infinitely wise Prudencio (Bernardo Bernardo) tries the compassionate approach. The educated Nick (Arthur T. Acuna) can't bring himself to burst Rubio's bubble and ends up writing his love letters. Atoy (Ramon De Ocampo), the camp clown, can't help mocking his naivete. Only tall, handsome, narcissistic Claro (Paolo Montalban) is cruel enough to take advantage of Rubio's blind faith in his Clarabelle -- and, by metaphorical extension, of his dumb trust in America's promises.
Without detaching himself from the well-orchestrated work of this ensemble, Gonzalez nonetheless straddles the story like a giant, gaining stature for the diminutive Rubio by respecting the limitations of his mind and playing the more generous dimensions of his heart. His face a well-creased map of faith, hope, love and disillusionment, Gonzalez gives Rubio full measures of the absurdity and dignity he deserves.
All the same, it can hardly be said that the destruction of Rubio's romantic ideals comes as a surprise. Or that anyone in this fable undergoes any significant character transformation. What keeps us involved (and, in the case of one enthusiastic preview audience, shouting with delight) is the skill with which helmer Arcenas has adapted traditional Filipino musical rhythms and storytelling traditions and flawlessly integrated their joyous aspects into an exceedingly grim tale.
No less than street-corner rap, the play's insistent musical beat (pounded out by sticks that double as martial arts weapons) and rhyming verses (adapted from the Filipino literary tradition of Balagtasan) draw the faithful into a community experience from which outsiders need not feel excluded.

Set, Arcenas; costumes, Clint Ramos; lighting, James Vermeulen; original music and sound, Fabian Obispo; movement, Kristin Jackson; production stage manager, Cristina Sison. Opened May 27, 2007. Reviewed May 24. Running time: 1 HOUR, 30 MIN.

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