THEATER REVIEW

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The loser gets the last laugh in "Magno Rubio'

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Here's to the losers.

To those with delusions of grandeur and deluges of heartbreak; to the Napoleon Dynamites, the Rabbit Angstroms and the Willie Lomans; to the washed-up, the bottomfeeders, the pathetic and disgusting; to those who aren't even underdogs, because nobody -- but nobody -- is rooting for them.

Here's to Magno Rubio (Jojo Gonzalez), the latest Great American Loser and the star of the Long Wharf Theater's "The Romance of Magno Rubio," directed by Loy Arcenas. Magno Rubio is a Filipino boy, 4 feet 6 inches tall, dark as a coconut, picking peas on a California hillside for 25 cents an hour and in love with a girl twice his size, as Lonnie Carter's play is fond of reminding us.

He's irresponsible enough to borrow $300 against his $2.50 a day salary without any plan to pay it back; he's crude enough to joke about "detonating" his "Filipino nuke" inside of the purported love of his life; he's flat-out disgusting enough that when he burns his clothes in the

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backyard, his comrades take to the hills.

So when he falls in love with Clarabelle, a 195-pound Midwestern blonde whom he reads about in a Lonely Hearts magazine, we ought to despise him. His "love" for her is based on a Napoleonic (the other one) complex that makes him want to mount the 5-foot-11-inch femme fatale ("played" bitingly by Narciso Lobo, whose double identity -- he is also Atoy, another migrant worker -- only enhances Clarabelle's patently transparent manipulation).

He misleads Clarabelle, getting college-educated Nick (Arthur Acuna) to write her love letters and neglecting to tell her he's Filipino (oh-so-white Clarabelle knows he's "brown" and brings every Hispanic stereotype in her formidable arsenal to bear on him, hilariously sent up in the Mariachi number "You're Not From … ").

For that matter, we ought to hate Nick. Surrogate narrator, vaguely paternal mentor and all-around omniscient guy, tender Nick somehow neglects to tell Magno what's patently obvious to the rest of us -- that Clarabelle is exploiting him for the tokens of affection he sends to her, usually via Western Union wire.

In fact, the play as a whole ought to make us squirm a little. The melancholy Tagalog songs become incantations by the end of the 90-minute play; the fenced-in, corrugated-tin chicken coop of a house becomes something of a shrine; and the plot itself becomes the stuff of legends. So pointedly earthy humor ought to seem a little out of place.

But it doesn't, and we don't. Instead, we sit hypnotized by this tall tale, unsure if Arcenas' troupe is going to break our hearts or warm them, but unable to avoid giving them to the grimy, lecherous, hunchback company.

The play is hypnotic because of the superb five-person cast, which gleefully appropriates every Filipino stereotype I've ever heard of (and a few more for good measure). In addition, the thoughtful choreography creates essentially a ballet set in hell, from the martial arts-like harvest sequence to a poignant, lonely waltz Magno shares with his chair, highlighted by the staffs each of the characters carries and the lean lines of the workers' silhouettes.

The rhyming, meter-driven script, rapped out with brio and conviction, has the same organic, driving force as a military arch, a slave spiritual or the tiny, contained hope of people in a lousy situation anywhere (and make no mistake, the play's characters are in a lousy situation; the litany of vegetables Magno plants for, literally, pennies in order to be able to afford an engagement ring will make you hesitate every time you enter a grocery store).

Or maybe it's just hypnotic because Magno's life is the ultimate car wreck, the kind you see coming from several lanes away but can't help watching, because something inside you knows that its misery and injustice and lack of personal hygiene will at least make for a terrific explosion.

For Magno's sake, but also for Nick's sake and the sakes of their fellow migrant workers and the sake of everyone with a little bit of romance in his soul, we can't help but pray for the loser. That he will, in fact, be later to win, as St. Dylan keeps promising, because the times, they need to be a-changin. Even though Magno Rubio weathers heartbreak with breathtaking equanimity, we're not sure we're quite so resilient.