Theater: The Romance of Magno Rubio
by Rick Reed
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Playwright: Lonnie Carter with Loy Arcenas

At: Victory Gardens, 2257 N. Lincoln

Phone: (773) 871-3000; $30

Runs through: July 11

"Magno Rubio, Filipino boy/Magno Rubio, Fili-pinoy/Magno Rubio, four feet six inches tall/Mafino Rubio, dark as a coconut ball." So begins one of Victory Garden's most unusual offerings … and one of its best. Lonnie Carter, a playwright noted for his rhythms and verbal pyrotechnics, has crafted a compelling, eloquent, and warm story about a diminutive, mafino (which means "finely crafted") Filipino migrant farm worker in the 1930s. Part Cyrano, part Stomp, part Grapes of Wrath, The Romance of Magno Rubio still manages to be an absorbing, original evening of theater, finely honed, and astonishingly executed.

Based on a short story by the formerly blacklisted Filipino author Carlos Bulosan, who died in 1956, the play focuses on five Filipino migrant laborers in the farms of depression-era California. Magno Rubio has fallen in love through a personal ad with a statuesque blonde from Arkansas, Clarabelle. She is his heart. He is her meal ticket. Although he barely makes enough for a meal, Rubio still manages to send the gold-digging Clarabelle gifts of money and jewelry, digging himself deeper and deeper into debt. Everyone else in Rubio's circle can see he's being duped, but Rubio is an idealistic dreamer, and these dreams buoy up his hardscrabble, backbreaking days as a migrant farm worker. Barely literate, Rubio has to have his letters written by Nick, the elder in this little group of workers. Does this story have a happy ending? That's open to interpretation and whether your view of the world is one of optimism or pessimism. But the underlying message here is one of hope.

Editor Epifanio San Juan wrote in If You Want to Know What We Are: A Carlos Bulosan Reader that, "Bulosan's writings serve as militant witness to the protracted struggle of Filipinos on both sides of the Pacific to liberate themselves. They embody the truth of national and class oppression inflicted upon Filipinos and other nationalities in the United States." The quote illustrates the serious political overtones of the story that inspired the play, overtones that manage to still ring through, even though the play itself is a solid piece of entertainment: hilarious, poignant, and absorbing.

Much of Rubio's success is due to the competent, inspired work by director Loy Arcenas (in his Chicago directorial debut). Arcenas also designed the set, crafted from plywood,

corrugated metal, and thin wire stretched across the front, all of which underline the despair and lack of freedom these workers experienced. If Arcenas' set creates a bleak, but realistic vision, Carter's verse riffs do the opposite, lifting these fascinating characters above their grim circumstances. Blending iambic pentameter, hip-hop rhythms, and Filipino Tagalog dialect (supplied by Ralph B. Pena), the dialogue here virtually pops and sings (along with much of the percussion that crops up, jubilant, using almost anything that comes to hand).

But what really brings The Romance of Magno Rubio to life is the performance of Rodney To, who does rare and remarkable work: so remarkable, in fact, that it's difficult to believe he's anyone other than Rubio, even when he's not on stage.

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