

Stepmom smitten with stepson in 'X'

From the Greeks to Neil Simon, the love triangle has remained one of the sturdiest devices in drama. Playwright Judy Soo Hoo explores the humor and pathos of that familiar triptych in "Solve for X," a Lodestone Theatre Ensemble production at the Grove Theater Center in Burbank.

Hoo's evocative drama about a young stepmother's clandestine obsession for her handsome stepson owes an obvious spiritual debt to Racine's "Phaedra." However, the play's heights of Racinian poeticism are too frequently undermined by a reiterative plot, which belabors the romantic dynamic between its star-crossed lovers without explaining the compelling reasons for their attraction.

At the apex of the story is Hannah (Elaine Kao), a beautiful young math teacher swept into marriage by the charismatic but much older Theo (vigorously effective Kelvin Han Yee). A baron of bottled tea drinks, Theo spends most of his time empire building in the Pacific Rim, leaving the bored Hannah to find comfort in the arms of his only son, Henry (Roger Fan). When Theo is reported lost in a plane crash, Hannah sees her opportunity to formalize her long-standing affair with Henry. But Henry's natural repugnance against such an "unnatural" marriage, coupled with Theo's sudden return, seem likely to dash Hannah's hopes.

Playing multiple roles, Emily Liu and Kipp Shiotani function as a sort of informal Greek chorus, commenting on the action and providing pungent comic relief. Yet Henry's essential callowness never evolves into a fully rounded adult sensibility, so Hannah's obdurate pursuit of him seems capricious and unmotivated — more wheedling than wooing. Despite that, "X" is both sophisticated and humane, always watchable and frequently moving. Director Jeff Liu elicits sensitive performances from his handsome cast, particularly Kao, whose captivating blend of delicacy and forcefulness ameliorates Hannah's caprices and makes her genuinely poignant.

— F. KATHLEEN FOLEY

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