

This review appeared in the Huffington Post on December 12, 2014

Adrift, Bothered, and Bewildered

By George Haymont

Crowded Fire Theater Company recently presented the world premiere of Christopher Chen's new play, *The Late Wedding*. Directed by Marissa Wolf (with excellent sound design by Cliff Caruthers), Chen's fanciful play was inspired by the writing of Italo Calvino — in particular his novels *Invisible Cities* (1972) and *If on a winter's night a traveler* (1979). Chen describes *The Late Wedding* as a "fluid play" (meaning that there can be anywhere from 3-16 actors playing a host of characters and couples). In the playwright's mind, several actors might even cycle through a single character. Gender, sexuality, and race can (and should) be endlessly interpreted and reinterpreted from one production to another (or even within a single production).

As the evening begins, Kathryn Zdan appears as a narrator who explains what the audience can expect of the play — and of their own experiences during the evening. The basic premise is that the audience will be taken on an anthropological tour of imagined tribes and their marital customs.

A series of strangely intertwined interludes or vignettes, *The Late Wedding* starts to careen off balance as its curious exploration of distance, distraction, and inattention in today's heavily Internet-influenced relationships is interrupted by a playwright's random notes to himself ("Reactivate Netflix account!").

The audience first encounters two men from the Bakaan tribe (played by Lawrence Radecker and Michael Anthony Torres) whose relationship thrives on the language of nostalgia. As they recall the details of their numerous vacations in the Calaman Islands — and try to recreate the emotions that they felt during those vacations — their behavior resembles that of long-time couples who use old photo albums and slide shows to reawaken long dormant passions and moments of satisfaction in their relationship.

Attention then shifts to a couple (portrayed by Kathryn Zdan and Lauren Spencer) whose culture insists that the best part of marriage is the anticipation of the wedding day. After the ceremony, the newlyweds split up and go their separate ways (communicating primarily by text messages, long distance phone calls, and email). In fact, they may never see each other again (when one finally gets around to thinking about visiting her spouse, she learns that her partner died years ago).

A third couple (played by Michele Leavy and Ogie Zulueta) lives in a constant state of time warp, where a person could be alive today but, if he awakens tomorrow, his memory of what was today would be of a day that was dead (meaning that, like his memory, he might be dead as well). Or something like that. As the show's director, Marissa Wolf notes:

"Chen channels our society's collective unconscious with dizzying urgency. He is peeling back layer after layer of cultural practices and rituals, revealing a raw, pulsing interior of longing and hope. Implicit in his examination of structure and human consciousness is the very real portrait of a world in which all people, gay or straight, have the right to marry."

While I have great admiration for Chen's skill as a writer, I'm not always able to follow where he's going in some of his plays. *The Late Wedding* is frequently funny, disturbing, and poignant, but can also be confusing and lack focus. I would, however, urge people to see Chen's play for the opportunity to experience the stunning unit set designed by Melpomene Katakalos (who, together with Nina Ball, is one of the Bay area's most underappreciated talents).