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## ***Great Leap* at InterAct Theatre: Brisk and smart, with strong acting, direction, and sets**

Thirty years ago, during the unrest following the deadly government crackdown on protesters in China's Tiananmen Square, one man stood defiantly facing oncoming tanks near the square. That shockingly brave and still unidentified man seems to have been the inspiration for Lauren Yee's *The Great Leap* at InterAct Theatre Company, a story about how cultures create personalities.

Everyone, Yee shows us, is both an individual and a product of that person's upbringing. The familiar sports-as-war metaphor is cleverly and convincingly used in this play about basketball and politics, whose title suggests both athletic talent and the terrifying "great leap forward" of the late 1950s and early '60s.

The play begins in 1971, when Saul (Scott Greer), the loud, foul-mouthed coach of the University of San Francisco basketball team, is invited for a "friendship game" to teach Wen Chang (Justin Jain), a quiet, timid Chinese coach, how the game is played in the U.S.

These two fine actors make sympathetic and complicated human beings of their stereotyped characters, which is a good and necessary thing because the play is really the story of the two coaches, the people who stand on the sidelines. Political stunts like this friendship game were at the time called "ping-pong diplomacy," and we also see funny misunderstandings over literal translations.

We then fast-forward to 1989, when a rematch has been planned. Manfred Lum (the excellent Richard Chan), a motor-mouthed, rebellious high school kid who is a phenom of free-throws, talks his way onto the USF team. We won't realize that there is a hidden reason for his desperation to go to Beijing until the reveal near the end of Act 2. His neighbor Connie (Bi Jean Ngo) is more a plot device than a necessary character.

Melpomene Katakalos designed the remarkable set, which actually looks like a gym (a small one, granted). There's a room high above looking down at us in, presumably, Tiananmen Square — casting us, briefly, as the protesters.

Seth Rozin's brisk direction is as smart as this smart play.