Navigating post-war burdens with deftness in ‘Blues’

By MICHAEL ROSEN | SENIOR STAFF

It had certainly been a long, long time since Chet Monkawa actually felt lucky. At a lottery earlier that day, he and Earl Worthing — a resident from the San Francisco boarding house Monkawa runs — entered a raffle for a modern American phenomenon: a brand-new television. Miraculously, they had won, but not without some help. Because of their ethnicities — Monkawa being Japanese and Worthing being black — the raffle liaison refused to sell them a ticket. An Italian was able to act as their surrogate, and soon Monkawa, Worthing and the other half-dozen residents of the boarding house were excitedly crowded around the tiny little box, ready to watch the future unfold.

The year is 1948, and the second scene in the UC Berkeley Department of Theater, Dance and Performance Studies’ beautifully staged and impressively acted show “After The War Blues” — written by Philip Kan Gotanda and performed at Zellerbach Playhouse — makes it clear the United States is doing its best to move on from World War II and into a tantalizing tomorrow. It also shows the process isn’t going so smoothly. The scars from the war remain in the national consciousness. Monkawa, a second-generation Japanese American, faces discrimination daily. A visitor yells “Jap” in his face. Monkawa never really feels at home.

The difficulties of life as an outsider — which, to some extent, describes every resident of Monkawa’s boarding house — in postwar America comprise much of the first act of the show. Olga (Schuyler Girion), a first-generation Russian immigrant, struggles to find her place in a not-so-dreamy America. Mr. Oji (Tony Jin), a Japanese accountant, cannot find a woman that will take him seriously.

Eventually, Olga and Mr. Oji become good friends and help ameliorate each other’s problems. Jin and Girion’s shared scenes are some of the show’s lightest and funniest, but the underlying idea — that one finds contentedness not from America the country, but from those who live within it — is something the play wrestles with throughout the second act.
Jin and Girion are great as occasional comic relief, but the strongest performances in the show come from Intae Kim and Rodney Witherspoon, playing Monkawa and Worthing, respectively. Kim is the steady force of the show. He’s burdened with both the most stage time and the widest range of circumstances and handles the challenges with apparent ease. Worthing booms and grins, injecting energy and life into every scene he plays while also carrying a palpable sense of truth in his heavier scenes. You can feel the blues in each of their characters, even at their emotional highs.

The acting is strong, but what’s most impressive about “After The War Blues” is its visual elements. Throughout the show, the main plotline ceases, and a singular trumpet player is given a spotlight at the top of the enormous two-story set. Sometimes, he’s lit up in an eerie red light while a scat singer stands on the lower level, crooning hauntingly from below. The last scene before the end of the first act is the most noteworthy. It positions Monkawa center stage dancing with his lover, while two other residents flank the couple, pensivey staring out at the world wondering where to go next. The blocking and the lighting meld into one another, painting a wonderfully melancholic image before the lights rise up for intermission.

Wonderful melancholy permeates every aspect of the show, from the actions of the characters to the arrangement of the living room. The script and direction are meticulously crafted, and the cadre of student actors execute both to an admirable degree.

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After the War Blues, Department of Theater Dance and Performance Studies, Philip Kan Gotanda, Schuyler Girson, Tony Jin, Zellerbach Playhouse

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