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Photo: Seth Rozin

Korean-American Teenagers Plot Revenge in a Bangkok Hotel Room

by Kristi Yeung

[Theatre Philadelphia](#) and [thINKingDANCE](#) continue our partnership, begun in 2018, bringing coverage and new perspectives to Philadelphia's vibrant theatre scene.

A recording of talking teenage girls plays before [InterAct Theatre Company's](#) production of *Man of God*. The audio, however, is indistinct against the audience's pre-show chatter. The ensuing dark comedy, written by [Anna Moench](#) and directed by [Maura Krause](#), calls attention to the way young women's voices can get buried beneath louder, more powerful ones. After discovering a camera in their hotel bathroom during a mission trip to Bangkok, four teenage girls clash over whether to speak up or stay silent as they rage through feelings of fear, anger, distrust, disgust, and strength.

The entirety of the play takes place in a generic hotel room that is quickly personalized when the girls overturn their belongings in search of cameras at the play's beginning (scenic design by You-Shin Chen). Feeling unsafe in a foreign city known for sex tourism and suspicious of their pastor who has suddenly disappeared, the girls imagine themselves *femmes fatales* taking matters into their own hands in a series of comically twisted daydreams.

Acutely attuned to the idiosyncrasies of teenagers, Moench puts into conflict four unique characters. Jen ([Annie Fang](#)) is studious but uses academic drive to hide insecurities about physical appearance. Initially sweet and sheltered, Samantha ([Kimie Muroya](#)) unleashes vengeful urges after experiencing betrayal. Devout Kyung-Hwa, played with restrained ferocity by [Clariss Park](#), exudes girlish optimism while quietly coping with childhood trauma. [Stephanie Kyung Sun Walters's](#) Mimi is explosive, boasting the strongest version of herself and forgetting to consider others' feelings.

In a vindictive fantasy reminiscent of a crime film, Jen lectures her perpetrator on catcalling, but he responds with a gut-punching insult. She is ugly, and he wasn't trying to look at *her*. Each episode of imagined confrontation shows the characters relishing in power but also exposes the personal and external obstacles that make speaking against sexual violations difficult or impossible in real life.

Between their visions of revenge, the girls fret over things like makeup, curse words, and Instagram followers. At first, the digressions are humorous. But soon, these frivolous topics become central to discussions about image rights, privacy, consent, and what it means to be a person of faith or a "man of God." Moving between hilarious jokes and disturbing revelations, the production is a reminder of the joys and horrors of youth. I realized the naivety of teenage voices is not reason for dismissal but reason to listen more carefully.

In the play's program, InterAct's producing artistic director [Seth Rozin](#) writes he is "pretty sure that American audiences have not seen a play that has centered these characters or these voices." I believe him. This is only the third production of *Man of God* in the country and the first outside California. It is also InterAct's first production with an all-Asian cast since 1995.

Works featuring Asian-American characters who are dynamic and deeply human are rare. [Works featuring Asian-American actors in these roles are even rarer.](#) *Man of God* is both. It also carefully represents elements of Asian and Asian-American culture in its props, costume, and sound design, by Cass Meehan, Asaki Kuruma, and Melissa Dunphy, respectively. I particularly appreciated the gallon-sized Ziploc bags of beauty products hoarded from Korea, Samantha's shoes neatly ordered near the far wall by the door, and the soundtrack of chart-topping [K-Pop](#) hits.

However, seemingly insensitive reactions from fellow audience members interrupted my experience of the show. Although *Man of God* is a comedy, there is a difference between laughing at a joke, laughing at a joke that points to an unsettling truth, and laughing inappropriately. A promiscuous teenager slapping a rebellious tattoo can be funny. A young victim of sexual assault uncomfortably approaching a predator cannot. I am proud to live in a city where the voices of young Asian-American women are given space and attention in theater but hope audiences can take them as seriously.

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[Man of God](#), InterAct Theatre Company, Proscenium Theatre at The Drake, January 24-February 16.

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February 7, 2020