

Pork-Filled Players Go Steampunk With ‘The Clockwork Professor’

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Photo caption: Narea Kang (Matilda James), Brad Walker (Professor Pemberton) and Randall Brammer (Lawrence Howell) star in “The Clockwork Professor.”

Photo credit: Roger Tang.

Steampunk: a nostalgic look back at the 19th century, when Western society was dreaming of a technologically-advanced world.

Through a wide array of novels, costumes, social events and Seattle’s Steamcon, the international steampunk convention, those with an interest in the cultural phenomenon’s melding of history and science can explore their interests more deeply. And now, local sketch comedy group Pork Filled Players is getting into the act.

Through their related project, Pork Filled Productions (PFP), the Pork Filled artists are stepping into the realm of full-length plays with Maggie Lee’s play, “The Clockwork Professor.”

“What interests me about steampunk is that it’s a variant of science fiction, one of my favorite forms of fiction since I was growing up,” says PFP producer Roger Tang. “There’s a great big community feeling about steampunk, in that there seems to be more of an emphasis of meeting and getting together.”

Getting together in the same space is also the basis of live theater, so theater and steampunk share that basic commonality.

“Part of the communal feeling is that steampunk folks tend to cultivate a flair for the mannered and the theatrical,” Tang says. “They create characters, backstory and a whole system of social interaction, which seems to be a perfect blend of theatre of science fiction.”

PPF is working to build audiences from the steampunk community, as well as those outside it.

“We’ve reached out to the local steampunk community,” Tang says. “We are also reaching out to the Seattle Steamrats, Seattle’s steampunk community, which meets regularly and contains a lot of the executive community of Steamcon.”

But many may find this an introductory learning experience.

“We’re not limiting this to steampunk aficionados. No previous knowledge is necessary!” Tang says. “You should be able to pick up on both the story and the fun, even if you don’t know your H. G. Wells from your James Kirk. We’re also making it easy for folks who are curious about the genre to learn more, by having some primers about steampunk built into the lobby display.”

Playwright Maggie Lee also describes how “The Clockwork Professor” will be accessible to Asian-American and other audience members.

“As an Asian American female writer, there are certain expectations about what you are supposed to write about — namely, race and female identity issues,” Lee says. “I have never been terribly inspired by either of these themes, and it was creatively stifling to think that was all I was supposed to be interested in.”

Instead, Lee says that the science fiction adventure genre has always been one of her favorites. “I started out with the character of Professor Pemberton — he’s this sort of accidental hero, a quiet intellectual who gets swept up into an adventure — and built the story around him and his secrets,” Lee says. “The steampunk genre came quite naturally to the story since my main character is an inventor.”

This genre inspired Lee in creating the wider world of the play.

“There’s the steampunk core that is usually based in late 19th century steam-powered technology, but then there’s a lot of freedom to create whatever you want on top of that,” Lee adds. “It was really fun for me to build this whole new world

with an alternate history and culture — and even new language. The city of New Providence is almost a character within itself.” Lee found that completing the play brought her back full circle.

“In the end, I was surprised to discover that one of the major themes of the play turned out to be identity, and how much your past dictates who you decide to be,” Lee says. “So while the play isn’t specifically about being Asian American and female, I feel that it naturally came full circle to the question of identity, but framed in the steampunk genre and told in my own way.”

Both Tang and Lee emphasize that they received a great deal of support in creating this piece — from the Sex In Seattle (SIS) Writers Group who heard initial drafts of the dramaturg, Dan Rector, who assisted Lee in the script development process — to the artists involved in the full production.

“This was my first time being able to consult with a dramaturg, and working with Dan has helped to make huge improvements to the script,” notes Lee.

This collaborative and communal process is reflected in the show itself, say the artists. “While this is a play based in a steampunk science fiction world, at the core it is a very human story that everyone can relate to,” Lee says.

“I feel that science fiction stories can sometimes get caught up in the whiz-bang gadgets and in-jokes for the fan boys (and gals), and while we do have some very cool whiz-bang gadgets, the heart of ‘The Clockwork Professor’ is still very much in the characters and their journey together.”

“The Clockwork Professor” runs July 12 – August 3, at Theatre Off Jackson, 409 Seventh Avenue South in Seattle’s Chinatown-International District. More at www.porkfilled.com.