

Weapons in Defense of Childhood

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Photo caption: From left to right, Jose Abaog, Sara L. Porkalob and Tim Smith-Stewart star in Seattle's premiere of "Edith Can Shoot Things and Hit Them." Photo courtesy of Seattle Public Theater.

Guns are everywhere these days: in the news, in the hands of children, and now, on stage at Seattle Public Theater (SPT) at the Bathhouse.

On March 28th, SPT held the Washington state premiere of A. Rey Pamatmat's play, "Edith Can Shoot Things and Hit Them." Director David Gassner saw the play during its 2011 premiere at the Humana Festival of New American Plays in Kentucky, and worked to bring the show to Seattle.

"It was one of two plays that stood out at that year's festival," Gassner says. "The play was funny, touching, engaging and thoughtful all at the same time."

Pamatmat's play tells the story of two siblings, 12-year-old Edith and 16-year-old Kenny, who are left to survive on their own after being abandoned by their widowed father. The story emerged out of Pamatmat's desire to tell a stripped-down story that evoked his childhood.

"I tend to write while I'm in [technical rehearsal] for a show," Pamatmat says. "I began writing 'Edith' during tech for my play 'Thunder Above, Deeps Below,' which is a sort of adventure story complete with fast-paced plotting, a large cast and special effects."

Pamatmat's idea for "Edith" came as a reaction to this intensive technical

preparation.

“While we were ‘tech’-ing one of the effects for the five millionth time, I decided that the next play I write would be a simpler, quieter piece,” he says. “I had always wanted to write about how I grew up — isolated on a non-working farm in rural Michigan — because as an adult, I’d begun to re-evaluate the experience.” Pamatmat wanted to express this re-evaluation in dramatic form.

“When I was younger, I hated everything about the circumstances under which I was raised, but now I realize that so many positive things resulted from my upbringing: independence, resilience and even the fact that I first started writing in order to entertain myself,” the Filipino-American playwright reflects. “As the play progressed, it became more and more dramatic the more isolated that Kenny and Edith were, and the idea that there would be no adults in the play sprung from that discovery.”

Gassner reports that the characters’ ages are one of the many challenges in directing Pamatmat’s play.



Porkalob depicts 12-year-old title character, Edith, who befriends Smith-Stewart’s character, Benji. Photo courtesy of Seattle Public Theater.

“Edith’ requires three young adult actors who can convincingly play kids,” he says. “A. Rey Pamatmat is clear in his script that the roles shouldn’t be played by real children, and the script’s language and themes are very adult in nature even while exploring issues of childhood.”

Casting the play was further complicated by other play specifications.

“The girl and one of the boys are Filipino, and Seattle has a reputation as a tough city in which to cast actors of color,” says Gassner, “but the turnout for our auditions was astounding. ... We have a vibrant Asian-American theater scene here (albeit flying a little under the radar), and as a result, there is enthusiasm, talent and abundant skill available,” he adds. “We cast the actors we thought were best for each of the roles, and as it turned out, the actors playing Edith and her brother Kenny, Sara L. Porkalob and Jose Abaoag, are both of Filipino descent.”

Yet another challenge has been the use of props. “The title of the play is all about 12-year-old Edith and her weapons,” says Gassner. “She has an air rifle and a toy bow and arrow, and she’s fiercely dedicated to protecting her home from real and imagined threats.”

As Pamatmat explains it: “I tend to write about personal empowerment. Sometimes this means there’s an outside force or person to butt up against, but sometimes my characters stand in their own way.”

Rehearsal time is spent manifesting the young characters’ struggles with empowerment in a bleak Midwest environment.

“We continue to spend a good bit of time and energy on gun safety — including a workshop conducted by Ian Johnston — to make sure we use these weapons in a safe and realistic way,” explains Gassner.

As “Edith” continues to be staged in local premieres around the country, Pamatmat continues his exploration of power and violence. Next up? A play about bullying and forgiveness called “And Right Now,” commissioned by South Coast Repertory Theatre.

“Edith Can Shoot Things and Hit Them” will run March 28-April 21 at Seattle Public Theatre on 7312 West Greenlake Drive in Seattle. To learn more, please visit www.seattlepublictheater.org/events-edith.html