

Fast Company Cast Cohesive in Play About Cons, Games, and Family

By [Roxanne Ray](#)

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H (Brad Walker), Francis (Kevin Lin), Blue (Sara Porkalob) and Mable (Mariko Kita). • Courtesy Photo

The con artist is a long-standing character in theatre and film, and now Pork Filled Productions brings us a whole family of these experts in Carla Ching's play **Fast Company**.

The Kwans in Ching's play are like many Chinese American families, with typically domestic tensions—but unlike others, their conflicts center on the dangers and satisfactions of the con game.

Playwright Carla Ching developed this play in response to a personal challenge. "Ensemble Studio Theatre (EST) in NY puts out a call every year for proposals on plays about science through their EST/Alfred P. Sloan Foundation commissioning

process to create plays that highlight science,” Ching said. “Game Theory was intriguing to me—the notion that you could study decision-making and get an edge on a competitor. I began to think about how to fold this into a play.”

Inspired by EST’s call for proposals, by her own family life in which games such as mah jong and poker were part of the fabric of family potlucks, and by the 2001 comedy film, *The Royal Tenenbaums*, Ching created a family in which the sons and daughter learned con skills from their parents and then took those skills a step further.

Pork Filled Productions producer Roger Tang is enthusiastic about presenting this play to Seattle audiences. “I’d been keeping an eye on Carla Ching’s work,” Tang said. “In particular, I was eyeing *Fast Company*, because it was different and fresh for Asian Americans.”

Once Tang read the full script, he said he was convinced that *Fast Company* would make a great follow-up to Pork Filled’s previous production of *The Clockwork Professor*. “It proved to be everything we wanted in our next script: fast, funny, stylish and ultra-contemporary,” Tang said. “It’s not an exaggeration to say we were beating down Carla’s door to do this.”

The particular subject matter of this play suited the Pork Filled producing team well. “Since all the of the producers are nerds and geeks in our own right, having a smart story that weaves in game theory, con artistry, and comic books was too good to pass up,” said May Nguyen, another Pork Filled Productions producer.

But Nguyen emphasized that the play is about more than games. “The richly defined characters sold us on *Fast Company*, too,” she said. “This is a play that gives Asian American actors full, dimensional characters they can really sink their teeth into. It’s an ensemble piece in the best sense. Everyone gets to shine in roles you do not typically see on stage.”

The actors agree. “I think theatre is at its greatest when extremely intelligent characters try to outwit each other,” said Kevin Lin, who plays the role of son Francis. “This will be one of the smallest casts I have ever performed with, and the fact that the play is about a family of con artists means that everyone will have to be on their toes.”

With the character of Francis, playwright Ching shows how the con need not be monolithic. “Francis is one of the most talented con artists in the game but he has given it up to pursue illusions and magic,” Lin said. “He takes great pride in this work and the play allows the audience to see some of Francis’s prowess.”

Francis's sister Blue, however, is headed in an entirely different direction. She has moved from plying "the Lure," in which a woman seduces a typically male target, to an entirely new game—but actor Sarah Porkalob has decided that her character Blue is not ashamed of her past. "The women in this play are incredibly strong," Porkalob said. "As a feminist, I am also drawn to stories of women who blur the lines between 'masculine' and 'feminine' gender roles."

Blue does just that. "Blue is a woman making the life she wants for herself," Porkalob said. "She is willing to make sacrifices because every step she takes, every word she says, is aimed toward the bigger goal, which is being the best. She is a young woman who knows what she wants."

And apparently, Blue learned from the best: her mother Mable, a complicated woman, according to actor Mariko Kita.

"Mable is kind of scary and hateful and wrong and has no business being a parent," Kita said. But this maternal figure still has depth. "I connect with Mable and I get her."

Kita understands that this could be a challenge for audience members, she said. "Mable could be portrayed and perceived as a caricature, monochromatic in her crustiness," Kita said. "My challenge is to bring dimension to this person so that you will get her too."

Bringing this grifter family together into a plausible drama onstage is director Amy Poisson, who has collaborated on the project with Ching. "I revised the play in consultation with Amy Poisson," Ching said, "based on her seeing the drafts from the productions at South Coast Rep and Ensemble Studio Theatre and we've tried to hone this one to be the best of both."

Ching's participation has continued into the rehearsal process. "As script questions or thoughts come up, they consult with me," she added. "I also get all the rehearsal reports, so I try to be as available as possible to re-write or troubleshoot as needed." And she's excited to travel to Seattle to see the production.

The cast also reported a sense of cohesion under Poisson's direction. When an actor had to be replaced due to a family emergency, the team pulled together, according to actor Porkalob. "I could feel that from my other castmates: that we would pull together, to make a new actor feel welcome and prepared in the best way that we could," she said.

“Our director has been incredibly supportive, and while we are not blood-related, that is what a true family does,” Porkalob added.

And that, at heart, is the web of domestic relationships that Ching seeks to explore in *Fast Company*. “It’s a play about cons, game theory, and magic, but it’s also a play about family, and how we try to pull one over on the ones we love most.”

Fast Company will be performed from November 1 to 22 at Theatre Off Jackson, 409 Seventh Avenue South, Seattle. For more information, visit porkfilled.com/prod.