

Maggie Lee's 'Tumbleweed Zephyr' an Illuminating Steampunk Play

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Posted in [Arts](#), Volume 42 No. 15



Left to right: Madison Jade Jones, Linnea Ingalls, and Kevin Lin star in *The Tumbleweed Zephyr*. •
Courtesy Photo

The steampunk city of New Providence comes to life again in a new play by Maggie Lee, entitled *Tumbleweed Zephyr*, named for the train that will take brothers Atticus and Kai out toward the Western Territories.

Playwright Lee previously explored the world of New Providence in her play *The Clockwork Professor* in 2013, and she joins up again with **Pork Filled Productions** (PFP) and director Amy Poisson to present this new work.

According to Lee, the connection between her two plays is loose. "This play is set about 10 years after the first play," she said. "While it takes place in the same steampunk world, it is not a direct sequel, so you definitely don't need to see one in order to enjoy the other."

And yet, *The Clockwork Professor* was the original inspiration for this new play. "There are these exposition lines near the beginning of *The Clockwork Professor*

where the main characters talk very briefly about these two young brothers, and how one kid lost his foot working as child labor in an umbrella factory,” Lee explained. “It didn’t really have anything to do with the main plot, but just was there to add some detail about the city of New Providence and its corrupt government.”

As time passed, these small details began to loom larger in Lee’s imagination. “Somehow I got curious about those brothers, Atticus and Kai, and what happened to them after they grew up,” she said. “I also have always loved trains, so I decided to put the two brothers on a train headed west and see what might happen to them!”

PFP Executive Director Roger Tang was ready to take that journey, as well. “What interests us is that this is untraditional Asian American theatre,” he said. “It’s not about identity, it’s not about generation clashes or immigration stories.”

Tang says PFP is eager to create these new opportunities for playwrights. “It’s an open secret that Asian American writers get pigeon-holed into the ethnic slot at mainstream theatre,” he said. “That means writing about identity or placement in the Oppression Olympics with Black, Hispanic, and Native Americans.”

But Tang says PFP strives for more. “Asian American artists want to be not just in control of their own narrative, but we want to determine what that narrative is,” he said. “We want the chance to create our own Jim Kirks and Han Solos, to be larger than life as well.”

The show’s actors have sought to embody these personas, as well. “I love characters with an interesting history, a backbone, and combat skills,” said *Tumbleweed Zephyr* actor Stephanie Kim-Bryan. “I rarely encounter female roles giving the opportunity to showcase all three.”

Likewise, actor Tadd Morgan considers this show a special opportunity. “I saw *The Clockwork Professor* in 2013. I was very curious to see a steampunk fantasy realized on the stage, and I was blown away!” he said. “As soon as I saw the audition notice for *Zephyr*, I jumped at the opportunity.”

Both director Tang and playwright Lee agree that director Amy Poisson has supported this expanded vision, as well. “What we appreciate about her is that she pushes her designers, actors, and her producers to be the best that we can be,” Tang said. “There’s a standard of excellence she sets for us, a means of testing ourselves to be superior that not all theatres demand of artists.”

Lee also appreciates Poisson’s inclusiveness. “Amy Poisson is really wonderful about honoring the growth and development of new plays, and she is very

considerate about keeping the playwright involved as part of the rehearsal process,” Lee said. “So it has been a great experience for me to be able to connect with the actors as the play is coming to life, and to be able to make adjustments to the script as I hear it out loud.”

Hearing the script has been illuminating for the actors, as well. For actor Troy Lund, who plays Hoban, the first table reading of *Tumbleweed Zephyr* was eye-opening. “Hearing it come to life for the first time with all of the other actors was a great experience!” he said.

The other actors agree that the collaborative process in rehearsal has proven energizing. “Each actor is as thrilled to be there as the next!” said actor Linnea Ingalls, who plays Claire. “We come from all different backgrounds, and the chemistry is nearly electric in the rehearsal room.”

Teamwork on and offstage is key. “The entirety of the play will take place on an actual train carriage,” said Kevin Lin, who plays Atticus. “It has been a challenge to work out who is where, rehearsing on a flat floor, when in reality, some of us will actually be ten feet in the air once we’re on the set.”

They report that the action must be tightly coordinated. “There are a lot of physical and technical challenges to this show,” said actor Kim-Bryan. “As rehearsals continue, realizing how much is wildly surprising. There’s a LOT of action happening in a small setting.”

Timing, as well as space, will be crucial, said actor Lin: “We recently realized that there will be doors that will have to open and close at certain times in order to have everything make sense!”

Playwright Lee also underscores the necessity of tight collaboration of all involved during production. “I am wearing two hats on this show, as the playwright and a producer,” she said. “I would say that being a producer is about ten times harder than being a playwright. There’s just so much internal work that goes into producing a show that the audience never sees!”

Because of this, Lee lauds the PFP producers. “Having the right producing team can really make all the difference,” she said. “We all share the same attitude toward theatre in that we want to create great plays with multicultural casts ... but mostly, we want everyone to have fun doing it!”

‘Tumbleweed Zephyr’ runs from August 14 to 29 at 12th Avenue Arts, 1640 Twelfth Avenue, Seattle. For more information, visit <http://porkfilled.com/wp/>.