

Women of ‘Waterfall’ Help to Tell Story of Struggle

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Kumiko (Lisa Helmi Johanson, center) in *Waterfall*. • Photo by Jim Cox

Waterfall's main character Noppon is surrounded by half a dozen female performers, and two of the most prominent are actors J. Elaine Marcos, who plays Nuan, and Lisa Helmi Johanson, who plays Kumiko.

Both characters are integral to the broad palette of *Waterfall*'s story. Nuan is a Thai servant to the Thai Ambassador to the United States, Chao Khun, during the 1930's, and Kumiko is a Japanese-American woman who overcomes discrimination to become an entrepreneur.

Both Marcos and Johanson are excited to be part of the [5th Avenue Theatre](#)'s *Waterfall* ensemble. "When I heard *Waterfall* was the new Maltby/Shire musical," said Marcos, "I thought, 'Who wouldn't want to collaborate with a creative team

like that?”

Johanson was likewise initially interested in the creative team. “That’s really all that it took to get me on board and I’ve been gratefully enjoying the ride!” she said.

While Marcos is Filipino-Canadian, rather than Thai like her character Nuan, she feels other connections to Nuan’s position in society. “She is traditional, proud, and very good at serving her Master although she is very reluctant about the modern changes that are happening in society,” Marcos said. “I can relate to trying to adapt to new ways of doing things.”

Primarily a specialist in comedy, Marcos sees the role of Nuan as an opportunity to deepen her experience as a performer. “When I read the part of Nuan, I thought I would be able to bring to life the humor of that character,” she said, “and at the same time stretch myself as an actor to also show my ‘dramatic’ side, which I haven’t had a chance to do yet.”

During this new exploration, Marcos engaged in extensive creative experimentation. “During the rehearsal process in New York and Pasadena, the way I played Nuan changed daily,” she said. “I am sure I made the creative staff wonder, ‘will she ever find the [expletive] character?’”

But Marcos didn’t let fear impede her. “I pretty much used all six weeks to discover how to say simple lines like, ‘I see,’” she said. “It wasn’t until our first performance in front of an audience that I figured it out.”

Marcos believes that the performer-audience interaction is key. “I had explored all these ways to play Nuan, but since the audience was the last piece to the live-theatre-puzzle, they informed me which choice was the strongest,” she said.

This experience brought her back to her root motivation as a performer. “It made me realize again why I love live theatre,” Marcos said. “I love the interaction with the audience, hearing them laugh or clap, or just having the feeling that they are with you, even without them making a sound.”

Lisa Helmi Johanson, playing Kumiko, also found *Waterfall* to be a good developmental project. “The role of Kumiko has actually changed a bit from the previous production that we did at the Pasadena Playhouse just a couple of months ago, but I think that they are changes that help to more specifically define her character,” Johanson said. “While I loved the work that I got to do in the previous run, I’m even more excited at the beginning of this process here at the

5th Avenue Theatre because the changes that have been made add layers of depth to Kumiko, which is a delightful thing for any actor.”

Johanson, who grew up in Northern Virginia outside of Washington D.C., describes the changes in Kumiko as being almost like night and day. “She went from being a sassy student who loves American dance and music to a conniving entrepreneur who owns a dance club almost Prohibition-style in the basement of an empty warehouse and takes risks in her own little fight for freedom,” Johanson said.

But at heart, it is Kumiko’s strength that Johanson finds compelling. “Kumiko has a heart of gold,” she said. “I think that it’s from her pain of not being accepted in either America or Japan that she wants to provide an outlet for others who may be constrained or oppressed in their own way.”

But for Johanson, *Waterfall* is not just a compendium of various strong characters. “It’s an important show to be done for Asian Americans because, while it does have certain plot points that deal with ethnically specific parts of history, it’s also about Asians dealing with problems that humans universally struggle with,” she said.

She believes the commonality of human experience is often given short shrift. “Sadly, that’s something that is generally lacking in mainstream media,” she said. “People of different races can have problems that don’t involve their race. It seems obvious but is somehow not said in mainstream media.”

Johanson hopes that *Waterfall* can add this perspective that she finds lacking elsewhere. “I relish the opportunity to contribute to a story that is about a beautifully true but forbidden love,” she said, “and the discovery of growing into the person you’re meant to be through the cultivation of experience.”

Waterfall runs from October 1 to 25, at the 5th Avenue Theatre, 1308 Fifth Avenue, Seattle. For more information, visit www.5thavenue.org/show/waterfall.