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Cave Quest



Today, we have shortcuts for everything. Cliff's Notes for reading a book, instant noodles instead of a proper meal, and now a \$49.99 video game that'll lead you to inner peace. Can salvation be obtained without experiencing it? Les Thomas's "Cave Quest," produced by East-West Players, claims that genuine religious experience, like great Korean BBQ, cannot be imported.

That claim begins with the arrival of Oregonian video game designer Justin Yi (West Liang) at the Himalayan cave of his idol, the number three ranked Buddhist recluse in the world according to hardcorebuddhist.com, Padma (Kim Miyori). Justin's plan A to save his company is to distill Padma's years of quiet meditation into a video game to be distributed to the mass of stressed out mortals. Of course, that venture relies on a short cut of epic proportions: to convey the experience of Padma without himself ever living through it.

Obie winner Diane Rodriguez's direction relies on a contrast between the two lead roles as well as the two lead performers. The former is manifest in their actions. While Padma sits down to tea to solve any problem, Justin relies on connections, finding out that Padma likes raisinettes from her sister Rosy. While Padma meditates by levitation, Justin prefers physical exercise, and has a hard time chewing a grain of rice more than 15 times while eating. The difference in the performer's personalities also comes through in the performance. Liang is energetic and quirky; he does a great sitdown exercise meditation routine in which he twitches and can't stop talking. Miyori is the polar opposite, reserved and serious. Hailing from Fresno, where she's known as Ruby, Padma has refused every earthly concern, holds dear only her knowledge gleaned through three years of silence.

The contrast between Justin and Padma is really Thomas's well-arranged ruminations on the interplay between a fast, success-driven, competitive society and a self-less, compassionate individual. When Justin's plan A breaks down, due to his inability to comprehend Padma's teachings, he resorts to a threatening plan B, the byproduct of his upbringing and constant exposure to a dog-eat-dog world. Even his idea of the Padma-cam, an online feed seeking to glimpse into the life of Padma, comes from the media frenzy of reality television. Justin seems to think that Padma's knowledge can be evident this way, a shortcut that relies on observation (TV) rather than experience (meditation). When Padma teaches Justin how to meditate, he turns back to the video game idea and decries Padma's lack of desire to enter his compassionless world as an unwillingness to share.

The stage design for "Cave Quest" is ideal for a sort of play-within-a-play. When Justin first enters Padma's confines, we realize that a performance is taking place, that he's ready to sell her on the investment of a lifetime. We are transported at once from our own video game world to an otherworldly experience, even though we know very well what compassion and inner peace is supposed to be. Human levitation is judge to be a gimmick by both the audience and Justin, but the stage's upper strata of light helps reinforce that the levitation is no miracle. The stage is down-to-earth, much as Padma is. But it is so down-to-earth, it seems to be otherworldly.

There's a lot of music in "Cave Quest" that goes unnoticed when we focus on the story. There's Justin's hip hop picks flowing from his ipod, in addition to the surreal quality of the music of the cave that creeps in during

Padma's sleep. The sound ranges from trendy to eclectic to downright out-of-this-world. Even the rhythmic music for dancing played by Justin is what he advertises: infectious.

It's one thing to read about this play and another to see it. Much as Padma would advise, it is a meditative effort to live the experience of "Cave Quest" on your own. Do that, before it becomes what it looks like on its playbill poster, a rock-band-inspired major Playstation 3 hit.

"Cave Quest" is performed by East West Players (<http://www.eastwestplayers.org>) at David Henry Hwang theatre in downtown Los Angeles until 14th of March, 2010.