

# Theater: 'The Impostor,' at Pan Asian Repertory

By MEL GUSSOW

**T**HE Pan Asian Repertory has opened its 10th season with a theatrical rarity from China, a contemporary comedy with political and social content. "The Impostor (If I Were Real)," written by a team of young Shanghai playwrights, Sha Yexin, Li Shoucheng and Yao Mingde, was considered controversial when it was produced in China — and one can readily understand why.

The role model of "The Impostor" is "The Inspector General," a production of which is about to take place as the play begins. Although we do not see the play within the play, Gogol's shadow is never far from center stage. "The Impostor" is much slighter than the Russian original and the dialogue in this uncredited translation lacks fluidity. However, there is irony in the air as the play re-

lessly ridicules those who claim special privileges. The biting spirit of the satire is not so far removed from the San Francisco Mime Troupe, a political theater that also avails itself of collaborative authorship.

The title character (Keenan Shimizu) is a likable young man, who wants to be transferred from a farm to the city in order to be near his girlfriend. But he is totally without influence. Accepting deceit as the only key to success, he pretends to be the son of a high Government official conveniently resident in another city. To the surprise of the impostor, people are eager to accept his bogus identity — partly because he is such a convincing liar, largely because they have their own selfish goals.

Officials are soon lining up to fawn for his favor in scenes that are decidedly reminiscent of "The Inspector General." The young man is pampered beyond his fantasies. Once the

plot is set in motion, there is no stopping it. The impostor presents an official with a bottle of liquor (cheap stuff, fancy label) and the same bottle is bestowed as a bribe, round-robin style, from bureaucrat to bureaucrat, finally working its way up the ladder to the impostor himself.

Carried away by the ease of his swindle, he becomes increasingly bold. He knows that eventually his empire will fall, but until then he will have a grand time at the expense of his greedy superiors, all of whom richly deserve to be duped.

As directed by Ron Nakahara, the comedy is played for farce, a workable approach that unfortunately leads a number of the actors into giving broad performances. They underline the fact that they are playing comedy. However, Mr. Shimizu is quite adept at role-playing and several others exercise the required restraint.

Portraying this aspiring Chinese yuppie, Mr. Shimizu scurries between his two identities — farm worker with aspirations, opportunist with connections — and narrowly avoids meeting himself. The actor is especially appealing as, in emergencies, he uses a pay phone in order to call in his own character references, impersonating long-distance operators as well as out-of-town officeholders. There is also a winsome performance by

## Cutting Corners

**THE IMPOSTOR**, by Sha Yexin, Li Shoucheng and Yao Mingde; directed by Ron Nakahara; special consultant, William Sun; light designer, Victor En Yu Tan; costume designer, Linda Tsuka; production stage manager, Patrice Thomas. Presented by the Pan Asian Repertory, Tisa Chang, artistic-producing director. At Playhouse 46, 423 West 46th Street.  
Theater Director Zhao ..... Kati Kuroda  
Division Head Qian ..... Mary Lum  
Section Head Sun ..... Norris M. Shimabuku  
Li Xiaozhang ..... Keenan Shimizu  
Public Security Officer, Bystander, Attendant and Farm Youth ..... Hamilton Fong  
Public Security Officer, Bystander, Farm Youth and Judge Zhou Minghua ..... Mary Lee-Aranas  
Secretary Wu ..... Tom Matsusaka  
Farm Director Zheng ..... Donald Li  
Juanjuan and Assessor ..... Bea Soong  
Venerable Comrade Zhang and Man on Telephone ..... Ben Lin

Mary Lee-Aranas as his patient girlfriend.

The funniest moments are provided by Donald Li in a cameo role as a farm director who is a helpless cog sunk in a deeply comic slough. His response to ennui is to drink on duty and to rubber-stamp all applications of transfer. Mr. Li makes the state of depression amusingly expressive. He is one of nine newly designated "senior artists" with the Pan Asian theater, the nucleus of an acting company and, one of several vital signs of the troupe's artistic prosperity.

## Weekend



Kati Kuroda and Mary Lum pinch Keenan Shimizu in "The Impostor (If I Were Real)," at the Pan Asian Repertory Theater.

## Controversial Chinese comedy

TO GET its 10th season off with a bang, the Pan Asian Repertory Theater has snagged the rights to a modern political comedy that stirred up a gale of controversial laughter when it was first produced on mainland China in 1979.

"The Impostor (If I Were Real)" celebrates — and despite official government doublethink, there is no other word for the play's attitude — a young con artist who makes utter fools of Communist Party functionaries. Student authors Sh Yexin, Li Shoucheng, and Yao Mingde based their farce on a colorful true-life fraud pulled off by a young man who wormed his way into Shanghai's upper-crust society by posing as the son of an important official in party politics. Both in life and on stage, the wily impostor is held up as a folk hero.

In Keenan Shimizu's ingratiating portrayal, the working-class youth could charm the almonds out of a candy bar. His life of socio-political crime is launched amusingly when he observes government bureaucrats getting free tickets to a sold-out theater production. The play happens to be Gogol's "The Inspector General,"

## Off-Broadway

By MARILYN STASIO

which gives the clever lad his idea for posing above his station.

Ron Nakahara's light-hearted production is handsomely mounted at Playhouse 46 (423 W. 46th St., through Nov. 1), but suffers performance strain from too many overdrawn comic caricatures of greedy bureaucrats eager to barter favors for a cushy life-style. Donald Li has a much truer perspective on his role as the alcoholic director of a government-run farm who has lost all his young workers because their parents pulled strings to get the kids back into the city.

Despite its air of youthful humor, the comedy is no lark. Western eyes should open wide at modern China's "back door" custom of influence peddling, and its political implications in a socialist society. Theater tickets, liquor, a larger apartment, a pet monkey — where will all this decadence lead? If the Chinese really want to know, they better ask us.

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# THE IMPOSTOR



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N.Y. Times

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Marilyn Stasio

N.Y. Post

WRITTEN BY: SHA YEXIN, LI SHOUCHEG and YAO MINGDE

DIRECTED BY: RON NAKAHARA

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