

The disco future of China in 2037

By Robert Hurwitt
OF THE EXAMINER STAFF

THE STAGE lights up with the glow of seven scattered video screens of assorted sizes. The traditional Chinese music on the sound system skews sharply, the notes bending into strange electronic synthesizer sounds — then settles into a steady background pulse.

As video collages of Mao Tse-tung, soldiers and demonstrators take over the screens, a Narrator (Darcy Elman) dances out, tells us that she's had a dream, that we're in it and that it takes place in China in the year 2037. With that, Harvey Stein's "Zhongguo 2037," which opened Wednesday at the Climate Theatre, takes us into the future, a future of video-psychic espionage and electro-mystic rebellion.

We're in a strangely amalgamated communist-capitalist China, where Beijing is "the disco capital of Asia" and "2.3 billion techno-peasants" labor in the microchip industry. Meanwhile Tibet has risen in rebellion after a few towns are accidentally sterilized by leaking microwaves.

Within this setting, Cindy Cindy (Cynthia Rector) and Elvis Mao Ding (Patrick Lee), a thoroughly modern couple, prepare for a Tibetan ski vacation. Elvis is a Chinese punk rocker, complete with biologically implanted portable CD player. Cindy is "an interplanetary American party girl" from Santa Monica, who teaches English in Beijing. She's also peculiarly receptive to dreams, and thereby hangs Stein's plot.

The Tibetan rebels — represented by Chogyam (Darren Ching), mystical lama, TV repairman and ritual medium for Jesus Christ

THEATER REVIEW

'Zhongguo 2037'

By Harvey Stein

Directors: Thomas Schulz and Stein

Cast: Cynthia Rector, Patrick Lee, Darren Ching, Darcy Elman, Mark Steger

Theater: Climate, through June 18 (626-9196)

and Marshall McLuhan — use dreams as a communications network. Cindy is an unconscious transmitter, and Chinese intelligence knows it. The agency must kill her in mid-dream to break the network, and the Interrogator, a TV talking head (Mark Steger), stalks her from monitors wherever she goes.

Stein, best known for his innovative monologues, has written a beguilingly intriguing piece, but one that still needs some work. The resolution is a bit too pat, even for a lampoon; the Narrator is so poorly integrated into the piece that she should be cut. Her prologue and epilogue are wittily written, but over-explain the play's form to the point that they detract from the pleasure of its originality.

Beyond that, though, "Zhongguo" combines cleverly constructed interactions between videotaped and live performers with some wonderfully imaginative flights of fancy. Stein's glib mixture of contemporary and futuristic technology, social attitudes and politics makes for some hilarious and telling juxtapositions. His story is just strong enough to carry the play's hour and 20 minutes.

And Stein and co-director Thom-

as Schulz have given "Zhongguo" a generally strong premiere production. Audrey Newell's set is a work of art in itself, a wondrous hodge-podge of Oriental and Occidental posters, pop art and cultural artifacts, creatively lit by Ed Bartholomew so that a stack of plastic milk crates can look like a Zen shrine and a poster of Mao gleams an eerie, reverse-image red.

Todd Erickson, Misse Montgomery and Jaime Levy provide a steady stream of video collages that mirror the effects of Stein's verbal stews of advertising, techno and new age jargon, and throw in some striking repetitive images by aiming their video cameras directly at the banks of monitors.

Where the production falls a bit short, though, is in its performances. Steger is captivating as his disembodied face mugs and grimaces its way through his confrontations with Cindy, rolling his crossed eyes upwards in an ecstatic orgasm of interrogation. Those scenes seem to bring out the best in Rector's Cindy as well, but at other times, though she moves well, her lines lack spontaneity.

Lee, Ching and Elman also seem to lack vocal training, their line readings more often sounding learned by rote than grounded in the present. "Zhongguo 2037" is a pretty entertaining piece as it is, but it deserves better than it gets.



The cast of Harvey Stein's 'Zhongguo 2037'