

Rednecks, blue balls & yellow ducks

Crazy, colourful Fringe fest set to fly

ON STAGE

Serafin LaRiviere

IT'S HOT, IT'S HUMID and there isn't a damn thing on TV. Perfect time to head down to a lovely air-conditioned theatre to view this year's Fringe Toronto theatre festival, running Wed, Jul 2 to 13. Our next issue comes out just after opening night and will profile queer productions premiering later in the festival. But for now, here's a taste of tantalizing entertainment for the discriminating homo.

Four Ways Till Rain

In a city as big as Toronto, dating can still sometimes feel like a V05 shampoo commercial: Lord only knows how many friends and exes have already had intimate knowledge of the guy you're currently hitting on. It's that six degrees of sexual separation that playwright T Berto explores in his new play *Four Ways Till Rain*.

We meet Carl (Graeme Gerard), an embittered 'mo whose journey from college to middle age meanders through every club, bar and gay man a town can offer. He's contrasted by the optimistic dignity displayed by Ramon (Jorge Nef), a Mexican-American whose struggle against racism and homophobia in his military career hasn't been helped by an unfortunately small stature.

Christian (Neil Adams) was just a pretty young thing when he hooked up with the first daddy who came upon him. Now in his 30s, he's curious about the gay cultural scene he missed out on, while partner Khalil (Justin Darmanin) laments sacrificing his Muslim culture for gay life.

Their gay lives, along with that of 18-year-old enigma Ryan

(Cole J Alvis), come together through a straight man named Hawlis (David Tripp). This Appalachian bubba is as belligerent as he is masculine: the epitome of American machismo. How the others manage to intersect with this paragon of heterosexuality, despite cultural and geographic disparity, is a central element of Berto's story.

"I wrote this play from meeting people all over North America," says Berto. "I found it interesting that the queer community doesn't pay as much attention to national borders as they do to redneck and non-redneck areas. It's amazing how people meet up and come together."

Four Ways Till Rain opens Jul 2 at 8:15pm in Factory Theatre's Mainspace (125 Bathurst St).

Touch

Toronto playwright and actress Reese Baguio is an out-and-proud Filipina lesbian who has managed to balance her Catholic upbringing with that pesky desire to eat pussy. This journey from genuflection to cunnilingus is detailed in her play *Touch*, one of five stories in Pulang Maleta Collective's production of *Baggage*.

Touch is the coming-out tale of Alex (Michelle Turingan), a newly minted lesbian trying to navigate the passions and perils of Sapphic life in the city. The plucky gal follows a less-traditional route than many of her sisters, however, as Baguio puts a unique spin on things.

"It's basically a simple girl-meets-girl, girl-loses-girl, drag-queen-gets-girl-a-stripper-and-chaos-ensues story," Baguio deadpans.

The girl Alex meets and falls for is Rachel, played by Baguio



STRIP AWAY THE FEAR. Newly minted lesbian Alex (Michelle Turingan) gets an unconventional introduction to lesbianism in Reese Baguio's *Touch* (one of five stories in *Baggage*).

herself. She really likes Alex, but is having some trouble dealing with the fledgling lesbian's closeted attitude and discomfort with intimacy.

These issues eventually drive Rachel away, leaving Alex crying on the shoulder of her best friend Richmond (Leon Aureus). The young man empathizes with Alex, having already reconciled spirituality, homosexuality and the compulsion to wear eyelashes and heels.

"He's one of those classic Filipino characters from our community," Baguio says. "He has no

problem identifying with being gay because you can spot him 600 miles away. And if you didn't, he'd make sure you did!"

Richmond drags his depressed friend out to a strip joint, where she first sees sultry temptress Eden (Caroline Mangosing) working the pole. Needless to say Alex's hesitancy around touching another woman is challenged that evening in raucous and riotous fashion.

The fun and hijinks of *Touch* are written as much for laughs as they are for healing. Baguio wrote

the play as a reaction to the tragic tales she heard while attending gay Asian support groups.

"It was a bunch of people sharing their experiences in trying to come out, and there were a lot of tears," she says. "The Philippines in particular is very Roman Catholic. In proclaiming your queerness, it's like you're destroying your faith and your family."

Baguio responded to these jarring stories by creating a play that focused instead on the fun and humour of being a freshman dyke.

"I really needed to tell this story that wasn't about the stigma of being gay," she says. "I wanted to show that there can be a happy ending."

Touch is directed by Karen Ancheta and premieres with the other *Baggage* stories on Jul 2 at 8pm in the Kapisanan Philippine Centre for Arts and Culture (167 Augusta Ave).

Sitting in a Tree

Steve and Cindy are sitting in a tree, K-I-S-S-I-N-G. It's a gloriously sunny day in the park, but Cindy (played by Ronit Rubenstein) is a little underwhelmed by the homemade engagement ring Steve (Michael Posthumus) has just given her. You'd think that having a hand-crafted ring would be the icing on the cake, but the ring's setting claws are open and — to Cindy's eyes — depressingly empty. She knows it's expected of her to settle down with a guy and have kids, but is it the right decision for her?

It's just one of the stories unfolding in Rubenstein's new play *Sitting in a Tree*, an examination of love in all its stages and forms.

Elsewhere in the park, three little girls are speculating on

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