

Asuncion: Inauspicious debut play from film actor Jesse Eisenberg

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Directed by Kip Fagan, October 27—December 18, at the Cherry Lane Theater, New York

The debut play by actor Jesse Eisenberg, *Asuncion*, is currently running at the Off-Broadway Cherry Lane Theater in Manhattan's West Village. It is produced by the reputable Rattlestick Playwrights Theater, which has garnered a degree of notoriety in recent years for introducing "cutting edge" new works to New York audiences. And naturally this production has received quite a bit of critical and public interest as the author himself plays a leading role in the piece.

The title of the play is the name Eisenberg has given to a Filipina character played diligently by Camille Mano. Asuncion enters the scene as wife to Stuart (Remy Auberjonois), the elder brother of Edgar (Eisenberg himself).

Stuart, a Wall Street trader insists that Asuncion stay with his brother in Binghamton in upstate New York for a couple of days while he attends to some important business in the city. This request initially irks Edgar, but his roommate Vinny (Justin Bartha) openly welcomes the beautiful young Filipina.

The 28-year-old Eisenberg has successfully carved out a film acting career playing self-deprecating, neurotic characters, perhaps most notably the role of Mark Zuckerberg (the creator of Facebook) in *The Social Network*. And in *Asuncion* he has not strayed far from that formula with the character he penned for himself.

Edgar is a middle class, well-educated yet unemployed young man who aspires to journalism. But for now he merely spends his days blogging about American imperialism. He has recently started rooming with his former African Studies professor Vinny, eccentrically played by Justin Bartha (best known to cinemagoers from the *Hangover* movies). However, one has to treat the phrase "African Studies" rather loosely, as Bartha's portrayal and, more pertinently, Eisenberg's writing is frankly offensive in how it deals with this particular subject. But this is not the play's central question nor its most offensive feature. More on that soon ...

To Eisenberg and Bartha's credit, they do share a mildly appealing stage chemistry. In the early portions of the piece in particular, we see that teacher/student status games have filtered into their everyday life, as the assertive Vinny dominates the

obsequious Edgar. Eisenberg demonstrates a reasonably good ear for dialogue in some of the characters' first exchanges.

But as soon as *Asuncion* enters, the play essentially deflates. An old adage suggests that many male novelists and playwrights don't know how to write for women. And in *Asuncion*, Eisenberg has proven the truth of this platitude in the most unpleasant fashion.

On meeting the central character, Edgar accuses her in a lecturing tone of being a "sex slave" and a "mail-order bride" simply because of her national origin. And he even fails in that regard, as he initially insists she's from Cambodia, not the Philippines. Apparently, in Eisenberg's eyes and those indeed of many critics (who have generally lauded the play), this passes for "subversive socio-political humor."

Eisenberg is only too aware of who his target audience is. Let there be no doubt about that. And creating a one-dimensional character of foreign descent whom his complacent public can have a good laugh at seems to be a safe and successful bet in his eyes.

The character of Asuncion is obtuse and banal. Yet Mano deserves a good deal of praise for her performance. It is one of incredible integrity as she searches continuously for the truth in a dreadfully underdeveloped role.

The actress is forced throughout to comment on her character's love for American culture. Pop music, McDonalds et al! Furthermore, Eisenberg coerces her to react to lines such as: "You are from the Philippines. You are poor. You are a sex slave. That's what you do."

Unfortunately, Edgar's former teacher Vinny is more interested in seducing Asuncion than admonishing his friend for his chauvinism. Throughout the play he sadistically finds ways of preying on her naïveté.

Yes, *Asuncion* for the most part is a thoughtless, irresponsible and chauvinistic piece of theater.

Oh, but wait, apparently this reviewer may have missed the point completely!

In a recent interview with *New York* magazine, actor-playwright Eisenberg explains: “I started traveling a lot a few years ago, and went to countries like Cambodia, which my character discusses. I went to Venezuela for a while; I went to countries that are not often visited by American tourists. And my initial reaction was to imbue the people who lived there with great wisdom and victimhood. And I thought, *How strange that I would instinctively imbue them with victimhood?* It’s so condescending. In fact, it’s more condescending to view them as victims than as oppressors in some cases. That was such an awful quality I noticed in myself. The character is really exploring that.” [Emphasis added.]

This may sound well-intentioned and refreshingly contrarian, but Eisenberg’s failure to approach his play at any point from the “oppressed” character’s point of view renders such “humanist” opinions beside the point. To expect any serious audience member to empathize with Edgar as he merely makes a mockery of Asuncion for one hour and forty minutes is too far a stretch for the first-time playwright. One has to wonder why director Kip Fagan and the Rattlestick Playwrights failed to question Eisenberg’s “plot devices” and “character choices.”

Asuncion has been described as Eisenberg’s “anti-political correctness film,” and his comments in the interview tend to support that notion. He may be reacting to the type of liberal leftism, which flourishes on campuses, that simply and endlessly (and condescendingly) commiserates with the poor, that sees the peoples of the Third World as saintly and hopeless victims. (Eisenberg attended the New School in New York, where he graduated with a liberal arts major with a focus on “Democracy and Cultural Pluralism,” no less!)

The problem is, there’s a *left-wing* critique of middle class “multicultural” politics, and that entire morass, and a right-wing reaction to it, and also, perhaps more to the point here, a muddleheaded response.

There are a number of figures in the arts who take the opportunity provided by the stupidities of “political correctness” to throw everything out the window and revert to backwardness, chauvinism, bullying, violence etc. (Filmmaker Quentin Tarantino, playwright David Mamet, the actor Vincent Gallo and the writer James Ellroy, in quite disparate ways, come to mind, and there are many others.) This is their answer to the “oppressiveness” of the liberal milieu. It’s not an answer of course, it’s a retreat into something foul.

Eisenberg may not be doing the same thing, but he seems very confused. The question is, do imperialism and colonialism actually exist as historical and social phenomena, with all their consequences? “It’s more condescending to view them as victims than as oppressors in some cases.” What does that mean? Oppressors in social and political life, or individually oppressive in personal relations? Whoever suggested that Filipinos or Iraqis or Nigerians were always, under every personal circumstance, the victims? What would that even mean? It’s hardly the point. The

actor-playwright Eisenberg is setting up a straw man, and then knocking it down.

Despite Eisenberg’s ear for sharp dialogue the decision to portray Asuncion as a brainless idiot leaves the playwright with nowhere to go. It seems to this reviewer that his travels “imbued” him with a rather cynical view of mankind.

As for Eisenberg’s political engagement, there is a brief moment early on when one thinks he may venture down an interesting avenue: “I want to apologize for my country’s imperialism.” Edgar flippantly remarks to the young lady. However, rather than expand on this observation, Eisenberg chooses simply to ignore it, focusing on Asuncion’s supposed failings for comic effect instead.

Another rare moment of perhaps quasi-insight (confused as it may be) comes in a more intimate scene between Edgar and Asuncion. When she requests to hear one of his “anti-imperialist” poems, he complies with the comment: “I was going to submit this one to the *Nation* but I think they have become too corporatized.” But again Eisenberg is reluctant to expand on such arguments.

In a later confessional scene with Vinny, Edgar remarks: “I asked her who her [Asuncion’s] hero was? MLK? [Martin Luther King] Gandhi? [Noam] Chomsky? You know what she said? She said: Mariah Carey. I don’t even know who Mariah Carey is!”

This self-involved facetiousness sums up Edgar’s character and indeed the vast bulk of the play. One can only hope that Eisenberg will broaden his social and political horizons in future works, and simply think a bit more carefully. One can only hope.



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