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Thoroughly Modern Millie's outrageous antics work

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By [Colin Thomas](#), December 17, 2009

Thoroughly Modern Millie

Book by [Richard Morris](#) and [Dick Scanlan](#). New music by [Jeanine Tesori](#). New lyrics by [Dick Scanlan](#). Directed by [Simon Johnston](#). A Gateway Theatre production. At the Gateway Theatre on Friday, December 11. Continues until January 3

If you were going to do a show that contained an outrageous impression of a Chinese person, would you mount it in Richmond? Me neither. But the Gateway Theatre has done just that, and it's working out fine.

In *Thoroughly Modern Millie*, young Millie Dillmount arrives in New York City in 1922, determined to become emancipated, a plan that involves—ironically—marrying rich. Millie sets her sights on her boss, Trevor Graydon III, but as luck and the conventions of romantic comedy would have it, she falls in love with Jimmy Smith, an apparently penniless paper-clip salesman.

Then things get weird. Mrs. Meers, Millie's landlady, is a white criminal who pretends to be Chinese in order to avoid detection as she sells young orphaned women into "white slavery". That term is racist, forced prostitution is morbidly unfunny, and Mrs. Meers's performance of Chinese-ness is as broad as Mongolia.

Irene Karas, who plays Mrs. Meers here, does so with such a thick accent that she's hard to understand at first. Once your ear gets attuned, however, Karas's performance is hilarious—big, but playful and precise. Director Simon Johnston's decision to reveal Mrs. Meers's true race early on helps us to see the character's racial impersonation as part of an outrageous caper, as opposed to an insult. Besides, Mrs. Meers has two sympathetic Chinese-speaking sidekicks, and one of them, Ching Ho, is a serious romantic player in the story, so the musical isn't all about white privilege and perspectives.

Raugi Yu plays Ching Ho with enormous heart. Actor Gaelan Beatty uses his matinee-idol looks to good effect as he sends up Trevor Graydon III's noble naiveté. Kenneth Overbey's complex choreography is fantastic throughout and, under Allen Stiles's musical direction, the eight-piece orchestra is powerful and tight.

Elsewhere, the production is strangely chilly, however. The leads sing and dance well, but there's little chemistry between Lauren Bowler's Millie and Mat Baker's Jimmy. Diana Kaarina is gifted, but her portrait of Millie's friend Miss Dorothy Brown is so presentational that no vulnerability shows through. And Denis Simpson's Muzzy van



Irene Karas (with Lauren Bowler) is hilarious in *Thoroughly Modern Millie*.

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Hossmere—he plays this socialite character in drag—is far from the earth mother the character wants to be.

Director Johnston's pacing feels rushed. And Drew Facey's cold, grey set never evokes a textured sense of place.

There's enough singin' and dancin' to win the day, however—that and one tall, loud Chinese lady.

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