



Final scene from original production, 'Almond Eyes,' based on life of '40s Asian dance team. (Photo: Frank Jang)

## 'Almond Eyes' dazzles sold-out crowd

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Bolstered by enthusiastic support from Dorothy Toy's extended family and the Asian American community, the July 24-25 run of "Almond Eyes," based on the life of '40s performers Toy and Paul Wing, drew three sold out crowds to the Highlands Summer Theatre on the California State University, East Bay stage.

The cast of 23 ranged from two professionals to an elementary school student from across the Bay Area. Members of the production included 10 CSUEB students, 10 CSUEB technicians and crew, two City College of San Francisco students, a San Francisco State University student, one from Laney College and a CSUEB staffer.

Top that off with a post show performance by 70-year-old showgirls from the Grant Avenue Follies, a San Francisco troupe of Asian American chorus girls who began performing in San Francisco as early as the 1940s. Toy, now 91, appeared opening night, attired in a spangly black and silver evening gown and six-inch heels, giving the performance a celebratory atmosphere and calling considerable attention to the CSUEB Theatre and Dance Department.

Additionally, Ray Gin, production manager for "A Chorus Line," made a surprise visit to the show's final performance looking for artists to participate in the National Asian Artist Program, which fosters emerging artists who speak to underserved communities. The program was created by Baayork Lee, Broadway choreographer and originator of the role of "Connie" in the original "Chorus Line."

The "Almond Eyes" production also received an invitation to participate in the San Francisco Theatre Festival at Yerba Buena Gardens on the Sunday following closing night. Another venue in San Jose has approached the Department to remount the production in San Jose, pending funding, said Director A. Fajilan

Fajilan praised musical director Chris Erwin and choreographer Laura Ellis for fixing, refining and re-envisioning the show and keeping the students on task as they brought Jay Chee and JoAnn Yuen's script to life, demonstrating why Toy and Wing were dubbed the Asian Ginger Rogers and Fred Astaire.

The production and design staff also rose to the challenge and did not let the "workshop" label impede their designs and visions, Fajilan said.

"Asian Americans have such few shows that focus on their American experience," she said. "I hope to change that by presenting new works every year. It is quite a task to take on a premiere musical and workshop shows that have the potential to leave a lasting impact on American Theatre and History. We all were fortunate to have 'Almond Eyes' as the first installment in our Artists of Color Series."