

REVIEW ARTS & CULTURE ENTERTAINMENT

# East West Players lets fly a heartfelt take on 'La Cage aux Folles'

By DAVID NICHOLS

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Gedde Watanabe, left, and Jon Jon Briones in "With You on My Arm" during East West Players' production of "La Cage aux Folles." (Michael Lamont)



The best of times are now at the David Henry Hwang Theatre, where East West Players concludes its 50th

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Following the celebrated Menier Chocolate Factory rethink, this edition reduces cast and compresses milieu, high-heel-kicking us into the title St. Tropez establishment.



As musical director Marc Macalintal's atmospheric band heralds proprietor Georges (Jon Jon Briones, in fine form) through the red-glitter-with-dragon curtains that dominate designer Victoria Petrovich's functional set, we're in for anything-goes drag shenanigans courtesy of those notorious Cagelles — Christopher Aguilar, Carlos Chang, Jonathan Kim, DT Matias, Alex Sanchez and go-go studs Cesar Cipriano and Reuben Uy — gamboling through "We Are What We Are" to delirious effect.



Still, all centers on the long-term union of Georges and Albin, a.k.a. headliner Zaza (the great Gedde Watanabe), threatened by Georges' son, Jean-Michel (Jinwoo Jung), after his engagement to the daughter of a conservative politician (Michael Hagiwara).



Briones and Watanabe radiate a delightfully off-kilter rapport, stopping the show at "With You on My Arm." Briones' rapid-vibrato baritone and vivid energy are dead-on, particularly in "Song On the Sand" and "Look Over There." Watanabe weds fluttering grandeur to palpable vulnerability — his stillness at the Act 1 climax segues into the most affecting "I Am What I Am" since Christopher Sieber on tour in 2012 and David Engel at Musical Theatre West in 2007.

Grace Yoo's restaurateur Jacqueline and Allen Lucky Weaver's uproarious Jacob are other standouts in an engaging company. Glad in Anthony Tru's inventive costumes, the cast embraces choreographer Reggie Lee's patterns with

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Purists will blanch — there are fudged lyrics, and book scenes could pick up pace. But by the time we are clapping along to "The Best of Times," this heartfelt "La Cage" has long since made its ineluctable point.



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**"La Cage aux Folles,"** David Henry Hwang Theater, 120 Judge John Aiso St., Los Angeles. 8 p.m. Wednesdays through Saturdays, 2 p.m. Sundays. Ends June 26. \$48-\$58. (213) 625-7000 or [www.eastwestplayers.org](http://www.eastwestplayers.org). Running time: 2 hours, 30 minutes.

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