

Aleta G

*The Cook* on Life and Happiness in Cuba

*The Cook* gives off a distinctly Latino vibe, bright with the sunshine of Cuba. This lively play takes the viewer back to 1958, 1972 and 1997 in La Habana, Cuba at a large mansion. *The Cook* shows Cuba at its most volatile, but also tempers that image with its rich culture.

In this Eduardo Machado play, we see the spacious kitchen of the house, which is ruled by the vivacious Gladys. On the eve of 1959, Adria, the mistress of the house, decides to leave Cuba because of Fidel Castro's imminent rise to power. As she flees, Gladys vows to her mistress that she will care for the mansion until Adria can return.

Gladys, played by Zabryna Guevara, is the heart of the play, just as she is the heart of the house. She is stubborn to the point of obstinacy and also displays nuances of a character rich with true moral confusion, anger and sadness. Guevara deftly navigates between the different aspects of Gladys' personality, using each to its fullest effect.

Gladys' husband, Carlos, played by Al Espinosa, is a veritable sparring partner for Gladys. Espinosa brings passion to the stage, vibrating with anger and obstinacy. Espinosa carefully establishes a strong character who changes naturally as he ages. Gladys and Carlos share excellent chemistry and establish a quick rapport, embodying the ultimate lover's squabble.

The clear establishment of class distinctions in the show is reflected in their dress. Adria wears a magnificent gown and a black mink coat, which contrast sharply with the warm kitchen. The rest of the cast is distinguishable in their dull-colored, utilitarian work uniforms.

When we first encounter it, the kitchen is gorgeous. In a spectacular display of lighting, Geoff Korf captures sunlight streaming in through the open side windows. However, as the years go by, the once pristine brown-gold paint, curving staircase, and tiled accents slide into disrepair.

This story is fast-paced, but the long pauses for cooking tend to break up the comfortable rhythm of the show. The riveting dialogue is sometimes reminiscent of children arguing, thus disagreements take on the tedious "I love you, I hate you" formula. The characters are realistic, except for Adria and Lourdes, who are caricatures that ultimately seem shrill and contrived.

The plot twists are easy to grasp and fun to watch play out as they are accented with spot-on costuming and set design. *The Cook* is a touching show, more about life than food, as it chronicles the life and times of the cook.