

# Onodera shows comic flair with 'Heartbreak Hoteru'

By KAT MOTOSUNE

Just when I begin to think that examining our identity as Japanese Canadians is a lot of hard work and not much fun, along comes something that encourages me to believe that life need not be so serious — this time it was “Heartbreak Hoteru.” An episode of the CBC’s *Inside Stories*, it is a whimsical story of the power of belief in the self, with the teleplay written by Midi Onodera.

Like Onodera’s previous venture with *Inside Stories*, “Then and Now,” this is a gentle family drama that touches on the concept of living up to parental expectations and making your own statement. It seems that Onodera learned from the earlier experience that the vagaries of producing and directing were beyond her control. In “Heartbreak Hoteru,” she has cut back on her on expectations of her statement coming through in her voice. Given the scope of the piece, a half-hour of CBC family programming, her choice to use a lighter hand is wise. The proof is in the thoroughly enjoyable result.

The almost formulaic plot — two sons inheriting their father’s hotel, one son losing his share in a gambling debt, the other son being resourceful and thus winning back the hotel, and his self-respect — is enlivened by details that are pure kitsch. The hotel is the Blue Hawaii, and good son Aaron, played by Dennis Akiyama, remembers his days of



Midi Onodera.

Photo: Candy Pauker

glory as a champion bowler and Elvis impersonator. There is a wonderfully understated film-noir voice-over, and a lot of very Hammond-organ music used in the score. Even the ghostly appearance of lost loved ones, including that of the “King” himself, only enhances the neon-signed, sequinned-outfit charm of the show.

---

## REVIEW

---

In her essay for *Yellow Peril: Reconsidered*, the Asian Canadian art show currently on tour across Canada, Onodera states her intention “to redress the negative stereotypes and portray multi-dimensional characters who reflect a variety of experiences.” It is significant that,

like “Then and Now,” “Heartbreak Hoteru,” gives us characters who need not necessarily to be Japanese Canadian, in stories that most Canadians can relate to. Onodera seems more comfortable with characters who share with her a multi-ethnic background with mass-media influences — like a Japanese Canadian Elvis impersonator.

Onodera states that, “My experience as a sansei woman informs my work, it does not dictate it.” It is fascinating to see “Heartbreak Hoteru” as the next step in a growing body of work by this talented artist as she continues to inform Canadians, Japanese and others, of the ways we can break out of the stereotypes to tell and hear our own stories. Not to mention that “Heartbreak Hoteru” is also entertaining and fun.