‘Almond Eyes’ dazzles sold-out crowd

Bolstered by Dorothy Toy’s huge extended family and the exuberance of an Asian community thrilled to celebrate one of their own, the July 24-25 run of “Almond Eyes” – based on the life of ‘40s performers Dorothy 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, and drew from across the Bay Area, including 10 CSUEB students, plus 10 CSUEB technicians and crew, two City College of San Francisco students, one from San Francisco State University, one from Laney College, and even one CSUEB staffer, Annie Manning from ethnic studies.

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, and the opening night appearance of Dorothy Toy, herself, now 91 and attired in a spangly black and silver evening gown and six-inch heels, the performance took on the air of an event and drew 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.”

Almond Eyes was also invited to participate in the San Francisco Theatre Festival at Yerba Buena Gardens on the Sunday following closing night. Another venue in San Jose has also approached the Department to remount the production in San Jose, pending funding, according to Director A. Fajilan.

Fajilan praised her team of musical director Chris Erwin and choreographer Laura Ellis for fixing, refining, re-envisioning and keeping the students on task as they brought Jay Chee and JoAnn Yuen’s script to life and showed 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, according to the director.

“Asian Americans have such few shows that focus on their American experience,” said Fajilan. “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,” she said.