



FROM THE DEAD

Colma: The Musical revives a genre.

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MUSICALS HARK BACK to childhood days and sitting awkwardly with parents, who, unlike you, never seemed to mind viewing a favorite musical for the umpteenth time. Then again, who among us hasn't secretly hummed a musical's catchy melody or practiced dance moves from a memorable musical number? Before musicals became 'uncool' after the 1950s, it was considered customary for people to break into song. However, today many of us perhaps hold a love/hate relationship with the musical genre.

What is the fate of the musical genre now, when the overwhelming tendency may be to laugh rather than to join in on the singing?

Just when faith in the musical genre was beginning to wane, *Colma: The Musical* came out of the production hands of director Richard Wong and writer H.P. Mendoza, whose collective vision brings us a feature film that evolves past preconceived pitfalls of former screen musicals and offers a fresh take on the genre. During a phone interview, Wong recalls how

he and Mendoza (who once lived in Colma, CA as a high school student) first met in a San Mateo, CA film class and says, "One of the main things that drew us together was how much we both loved musicals and pretty much nobody else did."

Featured this year on the film festival circuit, *Colma: The Musical*, which features over a dozen original songs composed by Mendoza, centers on Rodel, Billy and Maribel—friends and disenchanted high school graduates—living in Colma, a small town just south of San

Francisco, famous for its dead outnumbering the living.

The film's opening song, "Colma Stays," lists the recent developments of Colma (a new In-N-Out Burger!) and suggests the rest of the world continues on while Colma stays isolated and in a state of limbo. One of the film's cinematic highlights, the "Crash the Party" sequence—shot in a single take and lasting nearly eight minutes, according to the San Francisco International Asian American Film Festival program—follows Maribel as she tries to blend in with college partygoers and persuade the irreverently-humored Rodel and Billy to do the same. The trio later faces struggles and new directions that threaten their friendship: Billy becomes distracted with a new girlfriend and aspirations of an acting career while Maribel continues with her small-town es-

capades of late-night parties and underage drinking. Meanwhile, Rodel deals with the recent breakup with his boyfriend, Michael, and keeps his sexuality a secret from his father. In regards to Billy, Maribel and Rodel, Mendoza notes they are similar to characters in films that he and Wong admire most, who "flaunt their flaws and are ones you still root for."

When asked about the effect of *Colma: The Musical* upon its audiences, in particular, its Asian American counterparts, Mendoza replies in an email, while in transit screening his film around the US, "I never wanted to write anything that only catered to Asian American audiences. It's just not me ... While there may be a lack of volume in the Asian American voice in film, there's a significantly lower percentage of characters like these being represented."

"Colma was made by Asian Americans and has Asian American actors in lead roles, but I wouldn't say it is an overtly 'Asian experience' film," Wong writes in an email. In other words, it doesn't stuff the issues down your throat. He adds, "We deal with very universal topics that are not specifically Asian American."

Thankfully, we haven't seen the last of H.P. Mendoza and Richard Wong's collaborative projects as they have already embarked on a sequel to *Colma: The Musical*, titled *Serramonte: The Musical*, which will feature Maribel (played by L.A. Renigan) as a full blown lead. To keep tabs on future sightings and accolades of *Colma: The Musical*, be sure to visit www.colmafilm.com. 📍

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SONG AND DANCE

How does *Colma* compare with *Flower Drum Song*?

THEY EACH HAVE...	LAWBREAKERS	A MULTI-TALENTED EFFEMINATE GUY	LOVE TRIANGLES	LONGING FOR HOME	WOMEN WHO BELT	OLD VALUES IN MODERN TIMES
<p>FLOWER DRUM SONG (1961)</p>	<p>"I would only break it [the law] a little bit." (says Mei Li to her father about singing publicly in San Francisco without a license.)</p>	<p>The younger, teenaged brother of Wang Ta (played by James Shigeta) struts his balletic dance moves and singing while sporting a baseball uniform.</p>	<p>Bachelor Wang Ta chases after the modelesque Linda Low but Helen, the seamstress, secretly loves him and so does Mei Li, the singer of flower drum songs.</p>	<p>Mei Li and her father illegally immigrate to the U.S. from China. Mei Li loves San Francisco, the city at which their boat docks.</p>	<p>Mei Li, Linda Low and Helen cater mainly to attracting the attention of men, whether it be singing songs, hemming their jackets or performing seductive dances. And Linda Low just loves "being a girl."</p>	<p>Even after being robbed in front of his own home, Wang Ta's father still resists storing his money in a bank rather than storing it the traditional Chinese way—under his bed.</p>
<p>COLMA: THE MUSICAL (2006)</p>	<p>Recent high school graduates Rodel, Maribel, and Billy check out a college party and their underage drinking ensues.</p>	<p>Billy pursues his acting career by performing in a play, <i>Friend Joseph</i>.</p>	<p>Each time Billy falls in love, he sings the same tune (just replace old girlfriend's name with new one in the chorus) while Maribel just wants to get laid and Rodel suffers from a recent breakup.</p>	<p>Billy and Rodel dream of leaving Colma whereas Maribel views Colma nostalgically and can never imagine herself anywhere else. She wonders if, on clear days, folks in San Francisco think of those in Colma.</p>	<p>Maribel usually tells it like it is. She's thoughtful, tough, and vulnerable at the same time. A complicated character!</p>	<p>Rodel hides the fact he's gay from his Filipino father for fear of his father's rejection.</p>