



Photographs by PERRY O. MIDDLE Los Angeles Mirror

MOTHER'S LEGACY: Masha (Julia Morizawa) keeps her eyes on the money as her sister-in-law, Annabell (Esther K. Chae), and brother, Whitman (Eddie Shin), argue about it in "Masha No Home."

THEATER REVIEW

The ache for a place to call home

By **DOM SHIRLEY**
Times Staff Writer

Masha isn't the only character who feels homeless in the engrossing "Masha No Home."

She has plenty of company. In a production by East West Players, 27-year-old Lloyd Suh's play provides a portal into feelings about roots and responsibilities in two Asian American families.

At age 17, the Korean American Masha (Julia Morizawa) has moved into her older brother Whitman's new Long Island house, following the death of their mother. She hates it. The house is a work in progress, with builders coming and going.

Presumably, she's also attending a new school, far from her former friends, although this isn't spelled out. But she's certainly not doing well there. In the first scene, Whitman (Eddie Shin) berates his sister for her troublemaking at school.

Trying to be a good son, Whitman married a nice Korean girl, Annabell (Esther K. Chae). His bride doesn't speak English well, and she feels isolated now that the honeymoon is over. Whitman, who's working 60 hours a week at his law firm, isn't enjoying the new home either, especially with his rebellious sister underfoot.

Annabell decides to share a secret with Masha. Perhaps she wants to instigate some excitement, to draw closer to her scornful sister-in-law and to make Whitman re-think priorities. Whatever her reasons, she shows Masha a little box, left by Masha's departed mother, with \$30,000 in cash.

The cash is a *kae* — an off-the-books reserve fund of money, maintained by Korean émigrés to help even newer émigrés. After confronting her brother about the *kae*, Masha and Whitman soon are at war.

Whitman points out that no one knows who gave the money to their mother and that no one has claimed it since her death. He wants to use it to pay for the construction of his new home.

Masha, however, plans to flee from Whitman's home as soon as she turns 18. After talking it over with her boyfriend Felix, she decides to speed up her departure. She packs her belongings, throws in the \$30,000 stash and arrives at Felix's apartment.

Felix is a self-consciously cool cat, a Chinese American slightly



TROUBLED: Masha (Morizawa) and Felix (Teddy Chen Culver), at his apartment, share a similar sense of rootlessness.

'Masha No Home'

Where: David Henry Hwang Theater, 120 Judge John Aiso St., Little Tokyo

When: Thursdays-Saturdays, 8 p.m.; Saturdays-Sundays, 2 p.m.
Dark this Saturday matinee and Nov. 27.

Ends: Dec. 7

Price: \$28-\$33

Contact: (213) 625-7000, Ext. 20

Running Time: 1 hour, 30 minutes

Julia Morizawa	Masha
Eddie Shin	Whitman
Esther K. Chae	Annabell
Teddy Chen Culver	Felix
Dennis Dun	Father

By Lloyd Suh. Directed by Henry Chan. Set by Evan A. Bartoletti. Costumes by Don Quan. Lighting by Richard Ryan. Sound by Dennis Yan. Stage manager: Vicki Kark. Table.

older than Masha. He spews a lot of jive talk about the revolution and the plastic environs from which Masha has fled, throwing in references to Ionic, Asians from Buddha to Bruce Lee. His ears perk up when he hears about the \$30,000.

Teddy Chen Culver makes a charismatic Felix. But considering the overall realistic tone of the rest of the play, some of Felix's lines — and occasionally, Masha's — sound too artificial. It's hard to believe that anyone's speech could be so spontaneously and unrelentingly hip.

Not surprisingly, we soon learn that Felix also feels homeless. He dropped out of Harvard and is a severe disappointment to his widowed father. When fa-

ther and son finally reunite, Felix's speech is much more concise and plain. For years, he apparently was forced to respond to his father's pop quizzes about chemistry and math — a parlor game that didn't permit elaborate replies.

The \$30,000 bounces among all the characters, yet its final fate is left hazy. Still, it's a handy device for launching investigations into the characters' psychological makeup. By the end of the play, the memory of Masha's mother has become such a dominant force in determining what to do with the money that we wish we could hear her independent perspective too — from beyond the grave.

The performances in Henry Chan's staging are taut with tension, expressed in appropriately personalized ways. The absence of an intermission, despite a clear first act finale, is apparently intended to pick up the pacing. But it might help even more if Evan A. Bartoletti's set weren't quite so large and literal, which would allow for faster transitions between scenes.

Morizawa's face is a poignant emblem of the pain felt by a teenager who has just lost her mother. One also wonders whether Suh intended a connection to Chekhov's older Masha, in "The Seagull" and "Three Sisters," with their wearied recognition of disappointments and grim resolutions to keep going. If so, it's an encouraging demonstration that here is a writer who wants his characters to resonate beyond their particular environment.