

Asian Americans in Seattle Theatre



Josh Kenji and Mi Kang in *Nadeshiko* by Keiko Green, Sound Theatre Company, Spring 2017. Photo by Ken Holmes.

Kathy Hsieh revisits her 2012 survey of the space for Asian Americans in Seattle theatre, and looks ahead to work still to be done.

In 2012, I wrote a piece featured on the online dramaturgical commons Howround about the importance of Asian American representation on Seattle stages and how invisible we were in the local theatre scene. If it weren't for Asian American theatre companies like SIS Productions, Pork Filled Players, Repertory Actors Theatre (ReAct) and Pratihwani, Asian American actors telling Asian and Asian American stories by Asian American playwrights would be almost non-existent in Seattle. In the intervening five years, the Seattle theatre ecosystem has

harbored both monumental failures and unprecedented successes when it comes to the representations of Asians and Asian Americans on stage. The artists that work here—especially white arts administrators—still have a lot of work to do.

I grew up in Seattle, and our theatre scene has always been incredibly white. In the 1990s, a guide for actors wanting to work in towns like New York; Chicago; San Francisco; Los Angeles; Washington, D.C. and Seattle stated plainly that of all the cities covered in the book, Seattle was by

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The cast of *Do It for Umma* by Seayoung Yim. Photo by Dangerpants Photography.

far the most white on stage. The guide warned that it would be incredibly challenging for any actor of color to work here. It was a reality that actors of color in Seattle already knew, but most theatres remained unaware. Twenty years later, a series of events cracked the Seattle theatre scene wide open, uncovering a long-overdue conversation about race and lack of representation.

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In 2014, the Seattle Gilbert & Sullivan Society mounted a production of *The Mikado*. *The Mikado* is a Gilbert and Sullivan "comic operetta" from 1885. Even though the operetta is set in Japan, in the summer 2014 production, not a single actor was of Asian ancestry. Sharon Pian Chan of *The Seattle Times* called out the production's use of "yellow face," a term for having non-Asian actors made up to look stereotypically Asian, and incited a controversy. The local Asian American



This page: The cast of *Do It for Umma* by Seayoung Yim. Photo by Dangerpants Photography.

community protested, audience members told protestors to “Go back to where you came from,” and the conflict attracted national media attention. Locally, the controversy was contained primarily within the performing arts realm, but via social media and local radio, the conversation grew. These conversations made it apparent how divided Seattle was about race.

I felt an open conversation about race was vital for our community to create understanding and to move forward. I requested and was granted permission to quickly organize a community forum through my office, the City of Seattle’s Office of Arts & Culture, which we called “Artistic Freedom and Artistic Responsibility.” The evening featured a panel of theater artists, educators and activists and was done in partnership with the City’s Office for Civil Rights, 4Culture, and the Seattle Repertory Theatre. Through the discussion, it became clear that within Seattle’s theatre community two very different populations existed: people of color whose lived experience had long demonstrated to us that things were not equal and that the lack of representation and inclusion in the local theatre scene was palpably real, and many open-minded, progressive, white liberals who were shocked to discover that any of this was true.

Five years ago, the only production featuring Asian American protagonists not being produced by an Asian American theatre company was Annie Lareau’s adaptation of Jamie Ford’s novel *Hotel on the Corner of Bitter & Sweet* for Book-It Repertory Theatre. Between 2013 through early 2016, there were a handful of local productions that, while written by Asian American playwrights, did not feature any Asian Americans in the casting. But a study of the most recent theatre season and the one coming up reveals a distinctly hopeful trend.

In 2016, 16 productions in Seattle were either written by and/or featured Asian Americans as the leading protagonists, and of those almost $\frac{2}{3}$ of them were produced by non-Asian American theatres. That’s a 400% increase in the number of Asian American productions since 2012. That count doesn’t include another hopeful trend: that many more Asian American actors were being cast in non-Asian specific roles. By the looks of the 2017 season, the upward trend is set to continue.

So what spurred this incredible growth? Several factors might be in play. After that 2014 convening, many local arts administrators realized that if they wanted to be perceived as truly inclusive, they needed to start

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making changes from the inside out. Many started participating in racial equity learning cohorts and trainings offered by the Seattle Office of Arts & Cultural Affairs. Others joined a diversity and inclusion cohort through Theatre Puget Sound and led by Carmen Morgan, a much-respected activist and teacher, who helped the Oregon Shakespeare Festival transform itself towards becoming more of an anti-racist organization. Andrew Russell, soon-to-be Artistic Director Emeritus of Intiman, and Matthew Wright, Artistic Director at ArtsWest, credit color conscious casting workshops offered in early 2015 as opening their awareness about the lack of equity for actors of color. They both made a commitment and told the directors they hired to cast more diversely.

In fact, many theatres and directors started proactively seeking a greater diversity of actors and scripts and were surprised when the productions thrived at the box office. ArtsWest in association with SIS Productions produced *Chinglish* by David Henry Hwang in 2015 and sold out much of its run. *Chinglish* was the first Asian American play the company had produced and it ended up breaking their box office attendance for a non-musical show. Annex Theatre produced the world premiere of Seayoung Yim's *Do It for Umma* in 2016 as an off-night production and had so many sold-out crowds that Yim and director Sara Porkalob ended up remounting it in partnership with the Theatre Off Jackson to accommodate everyone who wanted to see it. Yim went on to receive the 2016 Gregory Award for People's Choice for Outstanding Play for her script.

What Seattle theatre companies discovered was that people were hungry for new stories and a greater diversity of representation on stage. When *Chinglish* was running, I was in line at a local deli in West Seattle, just down the street from ArtsWest, and the woman in front of me told the cashier all about



Malie Wong and Greg Lyle in *Nadeshiko* by Keiko Green. Sound Theatre Company. Photo by Ken Holmes.

the production, saying, “I’ve been to a number of shows there, but this was the first time I saw so many people of all nationalities and languages there. It was so cool! We were all laughing at the same things!”

Theatre has the power to bring people together, in one place, so we can experience our common humanity together. A greater diversity of stories gives people the opportunity to learn about other people, not only what makes us each unique, but also what is universal and connects us. Local actor Josh Kenji, recently seen in Sound Theatre’s *Nadeshiko* explains, “Theatre helps to cultivate compassion. If we only see stories of white people, we only cultivate compassion for white people.”

When people of color see other people of color on stage, it signals that we are

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included, that our lives matter, too. I remember seeing my first stage play when I was 14. I was enthralled. It was pure magic, and from that moment, I knew theatre would always be a part of my life. But it wasn’t until I saw a production of a Japanese folktale at the Seattle Children’s Theatre, where all the

actors looked like me, that I actually believed in the possibility that I, too, could be on that stage and not simply sit in the dark and watch others do what I wanted to do.

Khanh Doan, who can be seen in ACT’s upcoming *King of the Yees*, knows what it feels like to be on the other side of that equation. “When I’m performing at the Children’s Theatre, and I look out at the audience and see young Asian American kids looking up at me, seeing someone who looks like them, that’s worth everything.”

If we want to create true equity in this country, then we need to start by letting all people see themselves fully and regularly in these spaces. “Theatre is innately a democratic practice, and Democracy finds its roots in theatre,” elaborates Kenji. “Both are not being fully realized in the civic realm if they are excluding

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Evan Whitfield & Kathy Hsieh in *Chinglish* by David Henry Hwang, presented by ArtsWest & SIS Productions. Photo by Michael Brunk.

entire populations." We need a constant stream of diverse stories; single stories lead to stereotypes. Many stories, with multi-faceted characters, leads to greater cross-cultural understanding of each other and of ourselves. Diverse representation on our stages is one important part of creating a more equitable civic culture.

We've come a long way from having only a single David Henry Hwang play or *Madame Butterfly* opera once every decade on Seattle's largest stages. But even with the recent upward trend, Asian American productions still only represented 8% of all the productions in Seattle in 2016. That doesn't reflect the demographic of our city: 17.1% of Seattle's population is Asian American/Pacific Islander, so we still have much further to go before our worlds on-stage reflect our city beyond the theatre walls. It's vital for larger companies with greater resources to partner with the smaller people of color led theatre companies, not only to ensure greater cultural authenticity, but as a way of disrupting the inequitable systems in place, so that we can create a more vibrant theatre ecosystem.

Theatre is the art form that lays bare the human soul so that we might understand that we are not alone—

not only in our connection with the characters on stage, but also in the experiencing of the story communally with others. Imagine how truly powerful theatre might be if we did indeed consistently have people of all races sitting side-by-side, laughing and reacting, feeling and sharing the many stories of all of us together. And when we begin to see and experience the full spectrum of who we are as human beings together, think of how much more might be possible in every aspect of our lives. If all the world's a stage, then it's time we started seeing more of the world on our stages. ■

Kathy Hsieh is an award-winning actor, writer and director. She has worked in film, audio and theatre including the Seattle Rep, Book-It, ACT, INTIMAN, Seattle Public Theatre, ReAct, Living Voices, Theater Schmeater, Freehold, Live Girls!, 14/48 Productions, ArtsWest and more. As the Cultural Partnerships & Grants Manager for the Seattle Office of Arts & Culture, she's working to transform the City's arts funding program through a racial equity lens and helped the agency earn the Seattle Management Association's first Race & Social Justice Management Award. She is also a Co-Executive Producer for SIS Productions, a local Asian American theatre company run by women to provide them with opportunities for developing leadership skills.