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MY TURN

■ **Dmae Roberts**



Tim Dang: Mover & shaker of AAPI theater

When I was writing plays in the '90s, many were produced in Portland with some around the country. One of the highlights was a staged reading at East West Players (EWP) in Los Angeles. My director, Tim Dang, served as EWP's artistic director for 23 years before he retired. We hadn't been in touch since then, but last year we connected when he was in Ashland, Oregon to plan a big conference and festival to be hosted at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival (OSF) — more about that event later.



Tim Dang. (Photo courtesy of Palma Photography)

Dang has had a major influence on Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) theater both in Los Angeles and nationally. During his tenure, he moved EWP from a 99-seat black box where he originally held my play reading in 1996 to a 240-seat theater. Dang helped make EWP the oldest continually operating theater of color in the country.

In 2042, the U.S. Census projects that people of color will become the majority of the population in the U.S. In response to the trend, Dang recently challenged American theater groups to reflect the community with a bold vision statement — the "51% Preparedness Plan" for American theater — which urges them to reach a goal of having their artists and production personnel be either 51 percent people of color, 51 percent women, or 51 percent under the age of 35, by the year 2020. The plan encompasses those who work onstage and behind the scenes, in all facets of production, including administration, performers, playwrights, designers, artistic staff, stage managers, carpenters, electricians, running crew, board recruitment, and more.

Dang says it is important to start thinking about it now so there will be new stories in American theater that are more inclusive. The "51% Preparedness Plan" is part of a larger initiative called the "2042: See Change," which aims for American theater to better reflect the changing U.S. population.

Dang recently stepped down as EWP's artistic director, but he is continuing his diversity work as co-chair of the Advisory Committee on Cultural Equity and Inclusion of the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors. This past November, the Stage Directors and Choreographers Society recognized Tim with the Zelda Fichandler Award for transforming the regional landscape of theater arts.

Dang's other big contribution to American theater was his role spearheading the first National Asian American Theater Conference by the Consortium of Asian American Theaters & Artists (CAATA), an organization created in 2003 by six theaters. This fall, the fifth National Asian American Theater Conference and Festival, also known as ConFest, is scheduled to take place October 1 through 9 in Ashland. Hosted by OSF, it has the theme "Seismic Shifts: Leading Change in the American Theater" in 2016. Dang's connection to OSF's current artistic director, Bill Rauch, was instrumental to ConFest being held in Ashland.

ConFest 2016 features six CAATA-presented theater shows and five new staged readings as well as free shows through OSF's Green Show on the courtyard stage. If you haven't ventured to OSF this year, I highly recommend Qui Nguyen's *Vietgone* (which moved me with laughter and tears) and Desdemona Chiang's Chinese-inspired staging of Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*. It's a good year for AAPI theater in Ashland.

ConFest attendees will discuss the future of AAPI theater, which Dang believes is dependent both on sustainability through funding and the next generation of new leaders. He says with "so many different voices and so many of mixed heritage," having strong leadership is "even more important."

AAPI communities have traditionally not been connected to local theater because we are rarely represented. Often times, however, theater is the first exposure young children have to stories that might appeal to them. As demographics change, I hope theaters in all communities include AAPIs not just in the audience, but onstage also. How great it is for area AAPIs to have a national festival featuring theater, dance, and music performances held in the Pacific Northwest, as well as an opportunity to learn about the changing faces and issues of AAPI theater.

There's a long way to go for AAPI actors to be seen in both Hollywood and on local stages. Dang is one of many people across the country working to create more opportunities for actors of color. There's no denying Dang has left a legacy with his leadership at EWP and through his contributions to CAATA and ConFest. I hope to see you in Ashland the first week of October!

To learn more, visit <www.osfashland.org>.