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MY TURN

■ Dmae Roberts



Why an AAPI theatre is important

When Portland Center Stage (PCS) produced David Henry Hwang's *Chinglish* last year, I discovered it had been 22 years since one of the Tony-Award-winning playwright's works had a professional production in Portland. This realization started a chain of events that included conversations with Asian-American actors and community groups about the lack of representation of Asian American and Pacific Islanders (AAPI) in local theatre.

Soon after, two talented young actors — Heath Hyun Houghton and Samson Syharath — and I staged *The Dance and the Railroad*, an early Hwang play, as a reading at PCS. The performance proved so successful that the theatre volunteered to host three additional readings, which were presented by Theatre Diaspora, a project of the nonprofit Media-Rites. Chisao Hata, Wynnee Hu, and Larry Toda have also become members, and we're raising funds to pay for royalties and performers for future performances. We have the support of two Portland theatre companies: PCS and Artists Repertory Theatre, who have donated their stages.

If anyone had told me a year-and-a-half ago that I'd be involved in starting an AAPI theatre in Portland, I would have laughed. It became clear, however, that unless we directly addressed the lack of roles for actors of color, things would never change.

In fact, Houghton, Syharath, and I thought of the series of staged readings when some local productions featured Asian characters portrayed by white actors. It was such a hot topic after *The Dance and the Railroad* reading that we decided to hold discussions after the shows. So far we've talked with the community about representation, discrimination, the lack of performing opportunities, historic injustices, and the absence of diverse topics in plays.

Nationally, discussions like ours come up regularly. A few months ago, the Asian American Performers Action Coalition protested Dallas Summer Musicals for casting a white actor to play the King of Siam in the musical *The King and I*. For several days, the organization's Facebook page and Twitter account were inundated with criticism and pleas from people to cast an Asian actor to play the lead Asian role. The company eventually recast the role with a veteran Asian-American actor.

In 2014, an explosion of protest erupted when the Seattle Gilbert & Sullivan Society produced *The Mikado* with white actors. The maelstrom began when *Seattle Times* columnist Sharon Pin Chan wrote a July 13, 2014 opinion piece calling out the production as "yellowface," a term describing the

use of theatrical makeup and costumes to represent Asians.

Through the years, I've had discussions with both professional and community theatre groups about casting non-Asians and the ethics of using makeup to portray AAPI characters. Recently, I conversed with a theatre education group planning a Chinese production with mostly white students.

I happened upon the group's blog and Facebook posts instructing students how to look and act Asian. That was troubling enough, but they also confused Chinese and Japanese cultures. I saw pictures of costumes that were not only Japanese, but the students were instructed on how to create *kabuki* and geisha makeup with chopsticks in their hair. After several e-mail exchanges, there was a positive resolution, though it took time to impress upon them the seriousness of the concerns. In looking at the post-production photos on Facebook, the group refrained from using makeup to look Asian, but their costumes were still a mishmash of Japanese and Chinese styles.

The reality is there is very little theatre being produced that represents AAPI experiences. Readers Theatre Repertory produced *Tea* by Velina Hasu Houston this year. The Oregon Shakespeare Festival (OSF) in Ashland just premiered Stan Lai's *Secret Love in Peach Blossom Land*, an international hit in China and Taiwan. OSF is producing *Vietgone* by Qui Nguyen next season and is also hosting the National Asian American Theater Conference and Festival in 2016. Portland Playhouse will produce *You For Me For You* by Mia Chung in 2016. And then there's Theatre Diaspora, which is committed to producing at least four staged readings per year, if funding allows.

It's important to have AAPI characters portrayed by AAPI actors. It's essential to talk about race, ethnicity, and stereotyping with theatre professionals as well as community members. I'm excited there is a group of actors who share a similar mission and also understand the complexities of working as an Asian American in a mostly white profession. Our next production is a staged reading of my interracial family play, *Breaking Glass*, that was originally produced by Portland Repertory Theatre 20 years ago, in May 1995. Back then, there was little AAPI theatre, but I hoped one day there would be. So now there's Theatre Diaspora. *Breaking Glass* performances are scheduled for May 9 at Artists Repertory Theatre and May 17 at PCS. Both presentations take place at 2:00pm. To learn more, visit <www.theatrediaspora.com>.