

Portland Rose Festival in pictures

Photos by Jan Landis



Queen of Rosaria Michaela Canete



Shu-Te Home Economics & Commercial High School performer



Portland-Ulsan Sister City Association float



Vietnamese Community of Oregon float



Vietnamese Community of Oregon contingent



Northwest Chinese Alliance contingent

Reggie Lee tells authentic stories

By Maileen Hamto
The Asian Reporter

With more than 25 years of experience onscreen and onstage, Reggie Lee is ready for new challenges and stories.

Most well-known for playing the witty and intuitive Sgt. Drew Wu in the hit television series “Grimm,” Lee’s latest role was onstage — as Sancho Panza in the Portland Opera production of *Man of La Mancha*, which concluded this past weekend.

“I wanted to do this because I wanted to go back to my roots,” said Lee, who started his career in theater, touring with the first national company of *Miss Saigon* in the mid-1990s.

“After playing the same character in ‘Grimm’ for six years, I heartily accepted the challenge of filling in another space, another life.”

With his strong background in theater, Lee can act, sing, and dance equally well. Having worked in film and television, he says the experience of theater is immersive and all-consuming.

“In theater, you’re acting in front of an audience. You’re onstage for two hours straight. You’re constantly on, and constantly in this world of Don Quixote,” he said.

“For two hours straight, I’m Sancho Panza! I get to play pretend for a longer period of time.”

Beyond the challenge of regaining his song and dance prowess in live theater, Lee admitted he was also driven by the need to humanize Panza’s character. “Why does he follow Don Quixote? Where does he find his passion to be with this man who — for all intents and purposes — everyone sees as crazy? Where does he find his faith as squire to a knight?”

The approach and skill in stepping into lives and making them his own reflect Lee’s commitment to championing diversity in his work, especially as one of only a handful of Philippine-born actors in Hollywood who have gained wide recognition in mainstream roles. But a quarter century ago, Lee started out in a much different social landscape.

“I’ve been through the gamut: I started out always playing the bad guys,” he said. “The Asian was always the bad guy or a delivery boy. Or someone good with computers.”

Asian-American actors, in particular, had to take smaller, “sidekick” characters and make them human, even larger than life. Increased awareness and activism about the representation of people of color in the media has led to a greater breadth of roles.

“Playing Sgt. Wu in ‘Grimm,’ [the creators] started to bring [the role] forward,” he said. “When they saw what I could bring to the table, they started giving me these story arcs that had emotion and humanity.”

One of the most culturally significant turning points for “Grimm” was the 2014 episode that featured an aswang, a mythical creature prevalent in Philippine folklore. Lee said the producers wanted to expand Grimm’s fairytale world to be inclusive of mythology from other parts of the world.

“[Mythology] is part of Philippine culture. We’re an island nation. In the provinces, these stories are told and handed down,” he said.

Depending on the region of its origin, the aswang could share traits with western monsters such as ghouls or vampires. The “Grimm” aswang was a shapeshifter that devoured fetuses and also had a transformative effect on Sgt. Wu.

“Up until that point, Wu had been this comic sidekick,” he said. “Now, he had to confront his childhood fears, that these stories he heard as a kid may be true.”

For many Filipino viewers, inclusion of the aswang among the wesen was a validating moment. After tweeting about the episode, Lee said he was inundated with replies from Filipino Americans and Filipinos all over, proud that a Philippine monster has “made it” onto U.S. broadcast network television.

“Everyone was tweeting me back about their Filipino get-togethers and watch parties,” Lee said. “People were sending me pics of their dining room tables full of lumpia, pancit, palabok, adobo — a Filipino feast!”

He said people still communicate with him online about the episode. “It really touched me where that went,” Lee said. “I felt closer to my roots and a real emotional connection to my birth nation.”

While incorporation of cultural storylines for work designed for a mainstream audience is an important step forward, Lee believes Asian-American actors are ready for the next stage in advancing diversity.

“We now have writers coming into the fold who are



Photo/Cory Weaver, courtesy of the Portland Opera



Photo/NBC Universal

STAR OF STAGE & SCREEN. Reggie Lee (top photo, standing) recently concluded playing the part of Sancho Panza in the Portland Opera production of *Man of La Mancha*. Most well-known for playing the witty and intuitive Sgt. Drew Wu (bottom photo) in the hit television series “Grimm,” Lee has a strong background in theater and can act, sing, and dance equally well.

writing Asian-American stories,” he said. “Being Asian is part of your background, but it doesn’t have to be the main focus. We go through the same heartache after a breakup, the same grief when someone dies.”

Looking ahead to future projects, Lee is excited to take on lead roles as well as try his hand at producing. He said he is working on pilot scripts that involve Filipinos living in America.

“Our next big step is to tell our stories — not just as Filipinos or Asians, but as human beings,” he said. “I’d like to produce [shows] where Filipinos are an integral part of the story in the American landscape.”

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