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Play(ing) in the Pear Garden: Theater and the Makings of the Asian American Identity

By Jeffrey Nishimura

In *Tripmaster Monkey* (1989), Maxine Hong Kingston's Sino-*Ulysses*, Wittman Ah Sing is a hip, Chinese American existentialist, wandering the streets of San Francisco. When he is not contemplating a bullet in the head, Wittman is declaring his artistic dreams to a stock boy at a San Francisco toy store where he is employed:

> I'm going to start a theater company. I'm naming it The Pear Garden Players of America. The Pear Garden was the cradle of civilization, where theater began on earth. Out among the trees, ordinary people made fools of themselves acting like kings and queens. As playwright and producer and director, I'm casting blind. That means the actors can be any race. Each member of the Tyrone family or the Lomans can be a different color. I'm including everything that is being left out, and everyone who has no place. My idea for the Civil Rights Movement is that we integrate jobs, schools, buses, housing, lunch counters, yes, and we also integrate theaters and parties. The dressing up. The dancing. The loving. The playing. Have you ever acted? Why don't you join my theater company? I'll make a part for you. (Kingston 52)

It isn't surprising that Wittman settles on this particular medium as the chance of his own Becoming, confessing: "I'm not ready for Being yet" (Kingston 52). This view of theater has always been shared by fledging artists, longing to bask in the spotlight as a way to make a name and identity for themselves. The stock boy informs Wittman of his earlier reputation as a "Yale Younger Poet" but has given up writing for good. For Wittman a poet has already achieved "Being," reflective of Percy Shelley's understanding of the romantic lyricist as the "unacknowledged legislator of the world" while the stage artist is constantly at work (or at play) on his incomplete project, never achieving its totality as "literature": "On the modern stage only a few of the elements capable of expressing the image of the poet's conception are employed at once" (Shelley 489). When it comes to the competitive realm of Western literary stature, the playwright's words/dialogue have always been semiotically unfulfilled (Carlson 506) and can only attain partial completeness "in the shifting universe of action in which author, actors, and spectators are implicated" (Eschbach 146). Theater

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becomes, as Wittman understands it, ever-enveloping within the Moment, confined in its black box by the Unities of time, space and plot, parted by the proscenium arch from History.

The theater arts is not only an appropriate medium for the phenomenological discovery of the lost Spirit, but also a communal gathering of lost souls for socio-historical change. When the Cultural Revolution erupted in 1965, Chairman Mao worried about reactionary bourgeois authorities after a scathing review of Wu Han's *Dramas of the Ming Mandarin*. As Western Communists like Bertolt Brecht knew, the stage works well with revolutionists' agendas, with its showcase of the Individual as a representative product of his/her Society and its dramatization of the people's performative acts as a form of pop entertainment.

Wittman's words of a revolutionary agenda resonates specifically with young, ambitious Asian American performers, who, marginalized in the modern midst of History, still struggle to find their sense of cultural identity. They frequently turn to a life in theater not so much for the fame and fortune and respect in the Business but for the chance to express whoever they are under mostly Western eyes. While Asian culture has its own rich traditions of dramatic poetics, from Noh Theater to Chinese operas, the Asian American playwright/performer is mostly set on using Aristotelian poetics to allow comment on assimilation and legitimacy, while deconstructing Western representations. Because theater presents the Derridean act of "play" within the structure and sign of performance, Asian American dramatists are able to establish their status by adhering close to the "script," at the same time splinter the boards of cultural and national determinisms. Within these multilevels of theater's mimetic agendas, there is also a sense of duty for the Asian American performer to present Asian roles to the public. Because theater fluctuates between reality and representation, more so than any other medium, the actor is able to display the role of the character while playing his/her becoming-being. Encircled by darkness and yet isolated by spots, the performer's existence is highlighted as spectacle on the world's stage, not only observed by the dominant "gaze" but applauded for public approval.

The founders of East West Players in Los Angeles share the same shadow as Kingston's hero. This group, led by the great character actor, Mako, in 1965 and later by Nobu McCarthy in 1990, was determined to give performers of pan-Asian descent equal opportunity. Fed up with the stereotypes and the lack of stage work on Broadway and film, the troupe financed its own versions of Western dramas which had always been restricted from them. Erasing and thereby tracing racial divides, these actors finally were able to play the Tyrones in Eugene O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey into Night* or the Lomans from Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, just as Wittman had hoped for. While the troupe at first assimilated to the tragic American roles, it would later stock its seasons with dramas by Asian Americans with Asian American themes. Other such ethnic-focused companies quickly immigrated throughout the country, allowing Asian Americans to ultimately legitimize their roles against the typecasting that the rest of the society has marked for them in movies, television and more technological media. Shattering Oriental tropes and presenting a forum for their varied traditions and displaced cultures, these companies were steadily developing their own identity, their sense of Becoming-Being Asian American, all on their

own stage and all for the purpose of challenging and changing global perspectives of Asian Americans.

While the Federal Theater Project in the 1920s strongly sponsored African American and working-class dramas, little governmental funding was spent on advocating an Asian American theater movement. Although in the early part of the 20th century there had been traditional productions of Chinese opera in San Francisco and Willard Wilson's landmark collection of plays by Hawaiian women, most Asian themes and roles in popular theater houses were obscenely Orientalized. While several Asian characters in Western dramas were meant to be sympathetic— like in Brecht's *The Good Person of Szechwan*, Gilbert and Sullivan's *The Mikado*, or Rodgers and Hammerstein's *The King and I*— they always portrayed "foreigners," outsiders, and marginalized Others, and always offensively mimed by non-Asian performers. Asian American actors and actresses were initially reduced to "slant-eyed" and heavily-accented archetypes of "yellowfaces": slaves, cooks, Dragon Ladies, geisha girls, WWII enemies or exotic figures, all symbolizing the fantastical "non-West." These caricatures of the Asian Other under the disguise of public entertainment would undoubtedly reflect the kind of racial profiling during wartime with the Pacific Rim.

In 1958 there was a slight scratch in the glass ceiling with the Broadway opening of *Flower Drum Song*. Just as the Gershwins did for the African Americans' "ways of life" with their affectionate (yet illiterate) *Porgy and Bess*, Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein wanted to present an "honest" portrayal of a Chinese family living in San Francisco. Dealing with issues of arranged marriages and cultural clashes of Eastern familial traditions and Western influences (now standards in Asian-themed productions), the producers of the show were dedicated to casting all Asian American actors in the leading parts. However, their good intentions were met with mixed criticism. While the success of the show finally showed "minority" performers onstage, they were still acting out "Eastern" roles as defined by the West. Furthermore, the decision to cast Japanese Americans in Chinese American parts demonstrated the overall ignorance of ethnic specificity. Nevertheless, the musical has become such a guilty-pleasure for Asian Americans —and admired for its "honorable" attempt at racial equality on Broadway— that David Henry Hwang's first project of the new century planned a de-orientalized revision of this popular musical, while keeping the same musical numbers.

Instead of waiting for the Great White Way to chart their own cultural path, a group of Asian American actors decided to form their own companies, run and performed by their own people. After the East West Players, the Kumu Kahua Repertory Company was formed in 1971 in Honolulu, Hawaii. A few years later Eric Hayashi and Frank Chin set up the influential Asian American Theater Company in San Francisco, with Hwang, Chin, and Philip Kay Gotanda in its prestigious writing line-up. In 1976 Bea Kiyohara settled the Northwest Asian Theatre Company in Seattle, of which the formal title, the Asian American Exclusion Act, brilliantly mirrored governmental enforcement of discrimination with the Hollywood Industry. A year later, the Pan Asian Repertory Theatre, under the direction of Tisa Chang, strengthened the Asian American drama scene in New York. In 1990, after the Asian American Renaissance in St. Paul, a number of new stages were built for under-represented Asian groups. Theater

Mu, founded by Rick Shiomi, Dong-il Lee, Martha Johnson and Diane Espaldon, aimed to locate the Asian American identity in the wheat-fields of the Midwest. Brooklyn's National Asian American Theatre Company in 1989 also followed the East/West program by showing its gifted actors in classical and contemporary (re: Eurocentric) dramas, before taking on works with Asian American themes. While Asian Americans in Western roles could be taken as conforming to the superiorly written "white" dramas, these companies were a liberating step in the theatrical development of a too-often silenced culture. Asian American companies seemed devoted to upholding a color-blind, affirmative-action policy that mainstream producers had preached but very rarely practiced.

Still, the opportunity for Asian Americans to make it on Broadway was difficult to attain. The last straw came in their blatant omission in the notorious, 1990 production of *Miss Saigon*. After B. D. Wong, a Tony-winner for Hwang's *M. Butterfly,* complained of the casting of British actor Jonathan Price in the role of an Euro-Asian pimp (hardly a flattering role in the first place), casting director Vincent Liff stated Asian actors and singers were not professionally developed for the Broadway stage. Such degrading disregard of the emerging Asian American performers and their independent playhouses quickly lead to the moderately successful boycott by the entire Actors' Guild in 1991, which demanded a public apology from the producers and a call-back audition of only Asian American actors for minor roles in the show. With the slight changes to the cast, the *Saigon* production resumed in 1992. Hwang would later revisit this incident in his Broadway comeback, *Yellowface* (2008). Even with such Civil Rights activism, Asian Americans didn't get the lead roles and clearly understood that the only way to highlight their dramatic skills is if they provided the roles themselves.

Because of the large umbrella of diverse Asian cultures, these companies further began dividing their agenda into specific segments and causes. Their playwrights were determined to partition their different cultural histories and conflicts — the Japanese from the Chinese, from the Vietnamese, Filipino/as, Indians, Koreans, and so forth—to emphasize the diversity under the Asian American umbrella In 1971 Pom Siab Hmoob Theatre concentrated on the small Hmong community in Minnesota. The 1989 Ma-Yi Theatre Company and the 1989 Teatro ng tanan (Theatre for Everyone) focused on Filipino American experiences. Silk Road Playhouse in New York promoted Korean American playwrights. Soon, the Asian American theater widened its already broad scope to mixed heritage Asian Americans and multiethnic groups, like the ambitious Luna Sea Theater in 1994, which promoted women of Asian, African, Native American, Latino heritages, and those who were lesbian, bisexual, transgendered, and/or low income. These non-profit, NEA-granted companies filled the tremendous gaps left in mainstream entertainment, giving stage time to the unspoken and the unseen and contributing a formidable collection of various ethnic experiences to the American arts.

After establishing their long-suppressed acting chops in European American dramas, the companies later used their seasons to spotlight their forgotten histories. While dramas concerning Asian American issues were written as far back as the 1920s, like Gladys Li's *The Submission of Rose Moy* (1924), post-WWII writers felt a need to develop scripts that focused on

contemporary experiences of racism, especially after the tragic events of Hiroshima, the Executive Order 9022, and the dual American conflicts in Korea and Vietnam. The mass news media were already broadcasting unflattering images of Asians either as violent perpetrators or as nameless victims. These new Asian American playwrights were resolute to break through such subtle yet skewed prejudices and promote their "real" identities.

From Frank Chin's *Chickencoop Chinaman* (1973) to the late Garrett H. Omata's *S.A.M. I Am* (1995) and the sketch comedy of San Francisco's 18 Mighty Mountain Warriors, Asian American performers played with "oriental" stereotypes in order to undercut them. Gotanda's *Yankee Dawg You Die* (1988) illustrates the difficulties of Asian American actors to find a suitable role-model, on stage and in life. Shifting from a thick, Chinese accent to a less distinguishable Chinese American one, Vincent Chang, the hero of *Yankee Dawg*, screams out to the audience: "Why can't you hear what I'm saying? Why can't you see me as I really am?" (Gotanda 127) Historical events once shunned by white-washed, American textbooks were given full treatment on the Asian American stage. Most of the time, the Japanese American Internment was portrayed as a Williamsesque "memory play" (from Gotanda's *The Wash* (1987) to his *Sisters Matsumoto* (1998); in Momoko Iko's brilliant *Gold Watch* (1970), the refreshing focus was on the pre-Interment racial paranoia that tears up a family and a nation. The subjects of interracial brides and the "silent," submissive Asian women were at the heart of Velina Hasu Houston's touching *Tea* (1983). The student uprising at Tiananmen Square and its ideological difficulties with American civil rights were shown in Elizabeth Wong's *Letters to a Student Revolutionary* (1989). Homosexuality, a topic unspoken by older generations of Asian Americans, was at the center of two benchmark plays: Hwang's *M. Butterfly* and Chay Yew's *A Language of Their Own* (1997), both of which gave a new and true twist to the Asian woman/ white male relationship and won numerous theater awards. Ching-Valdes-Aron's OBIE-award winning performance in Ralph Pena's *Flipzoids* (1997) spotlighted a character study of Filipinos adjusting to the American Way. Suddenly, an explosion of Asian Americans had their ethnic names on the marquees: playwrights (R.A. Siomi, Jeannie Barroga, Prince Gomolvilas, Ed Sakamoto, Lane Nishikawa, Genny Lim, Euijoon Kim, Cherylene Lee, etc.) and a slew of skilled actors (Kelvin Han Yee, Amy Hill, Dennis Dun, Lauren Tom, John Lone, Sab Shimono, Karen Amano, Dan Kwong, John Cho, Daniel Dae Kim, Alec Mapa, Rob Schneider, Lou Diamond Phillips, Lea Salonga, Jose Llana, Sendhil Ramamurthy, Kal Penn, etc.) created a substantial community of professional artisans.

The medium was such a pliant art form that several predominant authors and poets (Wakao Yamauchi, Laurence Yep, Jessica Hagedorn, etc.) found refuge on the stage. The theater art was a great place to carry on the "lost" practice of oral story telling, as "I Was Born with Two Tongues," a Chicago Pan Asian American group, focused on the power of the spoken word and stage movement. Theater is also a good vehicle to inform its generational audiences on their ancestral backgrounds, as John Miyasaki tours his troupe, "hereinnow," around to national universities, in order to give Asian Pacific Islanders chances to tell their stories to a younger spectatorship. Asian American companies moreover applied the newest, high-tech, multimedia gimmicks to enhance their ancient, Asian myths, music, and dance programs, as a way of attracting new audiences,

born in front of video screens. Despite the computer-generated, large screen projections, which visually stimulate and sometimes distract from the story, the primary strength of these Asian American productions still lie in the themes relevant to their community.

In addition, their theaters present Asian American histories for the non-Asian public, giving them a side of American culture that was otherwise suppressed or overlooked. In turn, they shape the view of their people for those outside of their community. Previously, these companies anticipated their primary audience to be narrowed to their specific segments of society. Thus, their performances often refer to cultural signifiers that had been only understood "in the family." But, as Asian American theaters appealed to audiences unfamiliar to their racial experiences, they also wanted to make their histories accommodating to the growing, pluralistic, post-racial public. Thus, their productions tend to blend ethnic ingredients—a kind of East/West fusion—not only to show the conflicts among the diversified cultures but also to stretch the American palate. They would mark their stage territory with allusions to Asian food, Asian pop and ancient traditions, while the characters would speak in a less-accented English, wear Western clothing, and show interest in pro-capitalist prosperity. A memorable example is the smell of Korean kim chee that waft in the theater's air as a VW bug dominates the stage during a great 1995 San Francisco performance of Sung J. Rno's *Cleveland Raining*. The scenes hark to its Asian-ness and American-ness at the same time, showing home and nomadism in Asian America for their mixed audiences.

As the theater broadens its vision from cultural communities to the whole world, the ethnic performer learns to respect the audience's position as well. Many Asian American productions depend on solo performances such as Cho's *I'm The One That I Want* (1998), Nishikawa's *I'm on a Mission from Buddha* (1991), and Alec Mapa's *I Remember Mapa* (1996) to distinguish their ethnic individualism from their watchful, non-specific crowds. There is still a professional struggle of being categorized as Asian American, as the public and producers continue to judge ethnic actors by color, shape, accents and appearances. Just as the "minorities" nowadays are changing into the majority, the strength of the Asian American theater is that it does not set specific, identifying determinants to be used as ethnic traces. Instead, it always promotes that act of "play" to change the performative roles of Asian-centric characters and caricatures, in order to disarm racism while celebrating race, and to reflect the continual metamorphoses of the Asian American identity.

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