LOOKING FOR OUR OWN STORIES: ASIAN AMERICAN REPRESENTATION AND THE LEGACY OF EAST WEST PLAYERS AND THEATER MU

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Images could be very powerful. The first time I heard Chris and Joanne[1] *sing, something opened inside me. I had never thought of myself that way—a grain of sand, in the belly of a monster, a yellow pearl—descended from a line of courageous workers who built railroads, endured great hardships, faced exclusion acts, were not allowed to own property or to marry outside our race, raised by women who slaved in sweatshops.*

It's hard to explain why it affects me so deeply, but it is like "seeing" for the first time. Seeing that we didn't have to fit into someone else's world, into someone else's image. ***Learning about our own history, our own culture, one that had been hidden for a long time. It is -- like finding a piece of myself. I learn how to write my Chinese name. I begin looking for my own stories.***

— Gordon Lee, "Parting the Wild Horse's Mane: Asian-American Images and the Asian Media Collective—A One Act Readable Play," *Asian Americans: The Movement and the Moment*, Edited by Steve Louie and Glenn K. Omatsu, 2006

In February 2020, four plays by Asian American playwrights premiered in New York City: Lauren Yee's *Cambodian Rock Band* at the Signature Theatre, Christopher Chen's *The Headlands* at the Lincoln Center, Celine Song's *Endlings* at the New York Theatre Workshop, and Haruna Lee's *Suicide Forest* at Ma-Yi Theater Company. It was an unprecedented moment in Asian American theatre history. It was a moment to be celebrated—a visible, tangible sign of progress in the decades-long struggle for inclusion and for greater diversity on America's stages. But all four productions were halted due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and months later, what was meant to be a

[1] Lee is referring to Chris Iijima and Joanne Nobuko Miyamoto. Together with William "Charlie" Chin, they formed the group Yellow Pearl. In 1973, they released the album, *A Grain of Sand: Music for the Struggle of Asians in America*. It is widely recognized as the first album of Asian American music and is available online, folkways.si.edu/chris-kando-iijima-joanne-nobuko-miyamoto-charlie-chin/a-grain-of-sand-music-for-the-struggle-by-asians-in-america/american-folk-protest/music/album/smithsonian.

celebration for Asian American theatremakers—and Asian Americans in general—rapidly transformed into a haze of fear, confusion, anger, and defiance as hate incidents against Asian Americans began to rise in major cities across the US[2].

Hate crimes against Asian Americans are not new, but the history of anti-Asian violence and sentiment in the US is not widely known—a history that begins in the middle of the nineteenth century after men from China began to arrive in the US by the thousands, lured by the promise of gold and the wages offered by railroad companies. Perceived as economic competition and as a "heathen race, unassimilable and alien to the American way of life" (Luo), they were killed or driven out of towns.

The erasure of this violent history, of Asian American history, broadly, and of Asian American people and their experiences is also reflected on America's stages. The Asian American Performers Action Coalition reports that in the 2018-2019 season in New York City, only 6.3% of all roles went to Asian American actors (*The Visibility Report*). David Henry Hwang was the first Asian American playwright to be produced on Broadway in 1988 with the play, *M Butterfly*. It would be thirty years until Young Jean Lee became the first Asian American woman playwright to be produced on Broadway. Several popular musicals about Asians or Asian Americans that continue to be produced are not written by Asian Americans nor do they take place in the US, such as *Miss Saigon, Pacific Overtures,* and *The King and I*.

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[2] According to *The New York Times*, the number of hate crimes against Asian Americans reported to the police jumped from 3 in 2019 to 28 in 2020 in New York City. Similar spikes occurred in other cities such as Los Angeles, Boston, and Dallas. For more information, refer to www.nytimes.com/interactive/2021/04/03/us/anti-asian-attacks.html. According to Stop AAPI Hate, 10,905 hate incidents were reported on the website, stopaapihate.org, from March 19, 2020 to December 2021.

Asian American theatres have been nurturing Asian American artists and telling Asian American stories since 1965. Theatres such as East West Players in Los Angeles; Asian American Theater Company in San Francisco; Pan Asian Repertory Theatre, National Asian American Theatre Company, and Ma-Yi Theater Company in New York City; Northwest Asian American Theater in Seattle; and Theater Mu[3] in Minneapolis were born out of a need for Asian Americans to be seen as complex humans, to tell their own stories, and to carve out space in a field that excluded them or relegated them to minor, often stereotypical, racist roles. As Ralph Peña, the Artistic Director of Ma-Yi Theater Company states, the work of Asian American theatres is to "tell Asian stories from Asian artists, with Asian agency and centering Asian lives, therefore humanizing Asian lives….so when we do that, it's harder to choke somebody on the subway until they're unconscious" (Tran).

This paper focuses on two Asian American theatres that were founded nearly thirty years apart in vastly different places in the US: East West Players in 1965 and Theater Mu in 1992. This paper draws attention to theatres that have an extensive legacy of serving their communities and producing relevant programming, explores common factors that have led to each theatre's stability and success, and interprets history through the lens of arts administration. As Asian American theatres, East West Players and Theater Mu are critical sites for negotiating identity and the evolving definition of (what it means to be) "Asian American," and their longevity has been powered by the resilience of Asian American artists and a vital commitment to representing their communities.

[3] Mu (pronounced as "moo") is the "Korean pronunciation of the Chinese character for the shaman/artist/warrior who connects the heavens and the earth through the tree of life" ("Mission").

Origin Stories

The origin stories of East West Players and Theater Mu were informed by the demographics of their location and the time and place in which they were established. In 1960, the Asian population in Los Angeles County was 115,000, approximately 2% of the total county population, and were of Chinese, Japanese, and Filipino descent (Ong and Azores 2-5). East West Players was founded in 1965 by nine actors: Mako, Rae Creevey, Beulah Quo, Soon-Tek Oh, James Hong, Pat Li, June Kim, Guy Lee, and Yet Lock. They established East West Players "to create roles beyond the stereotypical parts they were offered in mainstream Hollywood" ("About East"). Mako, the first artistic director, once said in an interview that after years of lamenting the lack of non-stereotypical roles for Asian American actors, "we said, 'we gotta do something…we gotta do things of *our choice*'" (Shimakawa 285)—thus, the first Asian American theatre company was born.

In 1992, Dong-il Lee, a graduate student at the University of Minnesota, approached playwright Rick Shiomi and Augsburg University professor Martha B. Johnson about starting an Asian American theatre company in the Twin Cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul. Diane Espaldon joined the group as managing director, and together they organized workshops and recruited Asian Americans wherever they met them—in the street, at restaurants, in college classes (Shiomi). At the time, Asian American theatre did not yet exist in Minnesota. Shiomi and the other founders cultivated a community of theatremakers by nurturing those with an interest in theatre regardless of whether they had formal training (Shiomi; Tung Crystal). Many of the first Asian Americans to join Theater Mu were Korean adoptees (Shiomi). Theater Mu's

seminal work was *Mask Dance*, a play about adoption, which premiered at the end of 1993 (Kim Lee 213). For Korean adoptees, it was the first time they had ever seen their story—and themselves—on stage that was not reinforcing a "white savior" narrative (Leo).

The demographics of the Midwest, and specifically of Minnesota, have been profoundly shaped by US wars in Asia and the changes to US immigration policy after 1965. In 1990, the total Asian population in Minnesota was 76,952, with the Hmong[4] making up 22% of the population, followed by Koreans at 15%, and Vietnamese at 12% (United States). The transnational adoption of Korean children began in 1953, after an armistice divided the Korean peninsula into North and South Korea. Over 10,000 Korean adoptees came to Minnesota as the state's "social service agencies were very active in the adoption network through the state's missionary connections in Asia," which started as early as 1850 (Lee 261, 256; Leo). According to history professor Erika Lee, it was the "American refugee resettlement policies following the end of the wars in Southeast Asia [that] brought tens of thousands of Southeast Asian refugees to the Midwest" (Lee 262). Due to the social service institutions and nonprofit organizations ready to assist in the resettlement process, many Hmong refugees settled in the Twin Cities and encouraged their relatives and friends to move to Minnesota from other states (Lee 262; Yang).

The origin stories of these two theatres molded each organization's focus and eventual reputation. East West Players became known as an actor's theatre and to this

[4] The Hmong people (pronounced "mong") are a distinct ethnic group with roots in ancient China. In the mid-1800s, they left China and moved to mountainous regions in Laos, Burma (Myanmar), Thailand, and Vietnam. More information about the Hmong people can be found on the Hmong Archives website, hmongarchives.org, and the Minnesota Historical Society website, www.mnhs.org/hmong.

day, developing actors of color is an integral part of its mission ("About East"). Theater Mu's productions emerged directly from the people who were part of the organization, and their production history boasts a dedication to local writers and artists ("Production History").

On Asian American Identity

When East West Players was established, the idea of "Asian American" did not exist as a social identity or term. Despite Asians being present in the US for more than a century, the term "Asian American" is a rather recent invention, first coined in 1968 by college students in Berkeley, California, as a call for solidarity among people of Asian descent (Maeda 39; Kang 48; Wang 13). It was a "political alliance devoted to ending racism and imperialism" (Maeda 39). In the 1980s, "Asian Pacific American" was used to be inclusive of Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders, but drew criticism for obscuring the distinct histories between the groups (Wang 14). To preserve the distinctions, "Asian/Pacific Islander American" was used in the 1990s and changed again to "Asian American and Pacific Islander" in the 2000s to emphasize the distinctions (Wang 14) and as an attempt to create coalitions given their intersecting histories (Vu and Yang 16), especially with regard to colonization and US militarization.

Who, then, is part of the "Asian American" umbrella term and how do theatres define it? The term "Asian American" has become a primarily demographic marker[5], "flattened and emptied of any blazing political rhetoric" (Park Hong 190). In 1960, the Asian population was 52% Japanese, 27% Chinese, 20% Filipino, 1% Korean, and 1%

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[5] The US Census Bureau officially tracks twenty-one ethnic groups: Bangladeshi, Bhutanese, Burmese, Cambodian, Chinese, Filipino, Hmong, Indian, Indonesian, Japanese, Korean, Lao, Malaysian, Mongolian, Nepali, Okinawan, Pakistani, Sri Lankan, Taiwanese, Thai, and Vietnamese.

Indian (Takaki 420). The Hart-Celler Act of 1965 lifted restrictions on immigration from "undesirable" countries, bringing millions of immigrants from Asia, Africa, and parts of Europe, and fundamentally altering the demographic fabric of the US (Kang 22; Takaki 420-448). This second wave of immigrants from Asia consisted mostly of professionals and people from cities, in contrast to the first wave of immigrants who were mostly farmers and from rural areas. By 1985, the Asian American population in the US increased to five million: 21% Chinese, 21% Filipino, 15% Japanese, 12% Vietnamese, 11% Korean, 10% Indian, 4% Laotian, 3% Cambodian, and 3% “other” (Takaki 420).

Today, Asian Americans are the fastest growing population in the US—a growth of 81% from 10.5 million in 2000 to 18.9 million in 2019 (Budiman and Ruiz). Based on the 2020 Census, approximately 19.9 million people identified as “Asian alone,” and 4.1 million people identified as Asian in combination with another race, bringing the combined population to 24 million people (Jones et al.). A projection by the US Census Bureau suggests that the growth in population will stem from international migration as baby boomers age and the number of deaths outpace the number of births (Vespa et al. 2); if trends continue, most of the migration will come from Asia (Vespa et al. 9). Asian Americans also have the highest income disparity of any racial group in the US. From 1970 to 2016, Asians in the top 10% of income distribution made 10.7 times as much as Asians in the bottom 10%. This is in part due to the Hart-Celler Act with its emphasis on family reunification, the waves of refugees from Southeast Asia, and the Immigration Act of 1990, which increased the number of highly skilled workers moving to the US, especially those in the technology industry (Kochhar and Cilluffo).

In his book, *The Loneliest Americans*, Jay Caspian Kang, staff writer for *The New York Times*, argues that the Hart-Celler Act “created two Asian Americas” (59-60): one with roots and connection to the activist history of the 1960s and 1970s, and the other that has no knowledge or awareness of that history. History professor Erika Lee observed this in her students back in 2009. She notes that the “Asian American identity formation rooted in the Asian American movement and third world strikes of 1968 and 1969 seem distant—and even irrelevant—to students who arrived in the United States after 1980” (252). As new immigrants continue to arrive and as generations strengthen their roots in the US, there will be “continual metamorphoses of the Asian American identity” (Nishimura 30). The term is at once broad and deep, complex and shallow, for the category sprawls:

> sixth-generation toddlers and undocumented teens; crazy-rich coeds chilling on Rodeo Drive or in Singapore Air first-class and couples on public assistance packing their meager belongings under eviction notices; architects and oncologists, nannies and bus drivers, seamstresses and factory bosses; class divisions that reflect the displacement of the Cold War and congressional preferences for the not so tired and not so poor; innumerable histories colliding, even in a single family. (Chang 143)

The Asian American label is both limitless and limiting, and Asian American theatres are one of the sites in which negotiations of identity take place—a place where racial and ethnic identity is formed and evolves, where representation of ethnicities and experiences is paramount and an inherent challenge.

Ethnic studies professor Daryl J. Maeda notes that cultural workers in the 1960s and 1970s explored themes of Asian American identity “[i]n poems, plays, and debates over aesthetics,” and they meditated on questions of “Who is Asian American? Does Asian American identity inhere in culture or politics? What is the relationship between Asian Americans and Asia? What is the relationship between Asian Americans and other nonwhite people in the United States?” (129). These are questions Asian American artists, performers, and theatremakers continue to ponder today.

For many Asian American actors and performers, Asian American theatres have been where they first learned about themselves and Asian American history. Veteran actor Emily Kuroda learned about the Japanese internment camps when she joined East West Players in 1978. Born after World War II, she was not allowed to speak Japanese, and the Japanese American community around her rarely talked about internment. Upon recalling that period, Kuroda says, “I was denied my own culture in order to survive” (Kuroda). For actor Greg Watanabe, Asian American theatre has been the vehicle through which he has explored his identity and discovered Asian American history, literature, and political movement. Watanabe was first involved with the Asian American Theater Company in San Francisco, where he got to play the lead role for the first time. For him, it was “a transformative experience, seeing Asian American stories get told by Asian Americans at an Asian American theatre company” (Watanabe). For writer and performer Katie Hae Leo, who grew up as a Korean adoptee in the Midwest, attending a cabaret performance organized by the artist collective Asian American Renaissance was “such a clarifying moment” (Leo). It was the first time she had ever seen an Asian American woman talking about being angry in a public setting. She

"never knew that we could be angry, that we could access our anger, and that we could talk about it" (Leo).

Asian American theatres are motivated by "[t]he importance of *visibility,* both for Asian Americans seeing themselves reflected and for non-Asian Pacific American audiences learning to *see* Asian Pacific Americanness 'correctly'" (Shimakawa 288). For East West Players and Theater Mu, visibility and storytelling are the core of their respective mission statements. East West Players is dedicated to "raising the visibility of the Asian American experience by presenting inventive world-class theatrical productions, developing artists of color, and providing impactful youth education programs" ("About East"). Theater Mu "produce[s] great performances born of arts, equity, and justice from the heart of the Asian American experience" ("Mission"). But the breadth of the label and the range of linguistic, generational, and socioeconomic differences make the "project of 'truthful' or adequate representation/visibility for APAs on stage…more crucial and more complicated than ever" (Shimakawa 291). Both Leo and Saymoukda Vongsay, the Andrew W. Mellon Playwright in Residence at Theater Mu, point to these differences as a major challenge for Asian American theatres: "We think differently. We have different political ideologies, histories, and experiences, *and* perceptions of our own histories and experiences as people. You're gonna find people who are not offended by *Miss Saigon* and you will find people who will protest against it[6]" (Vongsay).

East West Players and Theater Mu are also bound by the laws of time and labor; each theatre can only produce a set number of performances every season. East West

[6] For more context regarding *Miss Saigon*, refer to Viet Thanh Nguyen's opinion in *The New York Times*, www.nytimes.com/2019/08/03/opinion/miss-saigon-play.html.

Players produces three to five mainstage performances while Theater Mu produces three. Therefore, they are essentially limited in the number of ethnicities and experiences that can be represented within a given season. While representation and visibility are embedded in the mission of East West Players and Theater Mu, the range of differences among and within groups that fall under the Asian American umbrella and the limitations of time and labor prove to be inherent challenges to their work and to the work of Asian American theatres, broadly.

On Representation and the Alchemy of Community and Programs

Questions of whose story and voice is represented are debated among Asian American theatres through “mission statements and ongoing conversations, but also through their practices and programming” (Kim 431). Adequately representing such a disparate and complex group of people seems like a near-impossible task—and perhaps it is. However, East West Players and Theater Mu are undaunted by such a task. Not only is it a responsibility to be as inclusive as possible in defining what it means to be “Asian American,” but adapting to shifts in the scope and understanding of the term has been, and will continue to be, key to their survival.

East West Players started out as an actor’s theatre, focusing on training and showcasing actors’ talents to increase the chances of being cast in films and television. Its productions during the first several years consisted of interpretations of Western plays and Japanese classics performed in English (Kim Lee 44)—nothing that necessarily spoke to the Asian American experience. But by the early 1970s, East West Players increasingly became a home for Asian American playwrights such as Momoko Iko, Wakako Yamauchi, and Frank Chin. The first annual playwriting contest took place

in 1968 with grant support from the Ford Foundation; then between 1972 and 1980, thanks to additional workshop and playwright-in-residence grants, East West Players produced over twenty original Asian American plays (Kim Lee 46, 50). The expanding number of original works by Asian American writers, combined with strong financial support, a solid subscription base of mostly Nisei (second generation Japanese), and consistent profit from musicals transformed East West Players into the largest Asian American theatre in the 1980s (Kim Lee 51-52).

Prior to Tim Dang's artistic leadership from 1993 to 2016, East West Players was viewed as rather insular and was known more as a Japanese American organization than the panethnic one it claimed to be (Kim Lee 52). Under Dang's leadership, East West Players focused its attention on the Korean American, Filipino American, and South Asian American communities and commissioned themed plays on issues that affected Asian Americans broadly (Dang). In an interview for *Theatre Survey*, playwright David Henry Hwang, who has a long history with East West Players, credits Dang for expanding the topics and themes of Asian American plays. When Hwang first began to write, Asian American plays were focused on Chinese Americans and Japanese Americans, tackling issues of identity, immigration, and Japanese internment (Young 234). In the 2002-2003 season, East West Players presented the world premiere of *Queen of the Remote Control* by Sujata G. Bhatt, a serio-comedy centered on a 17-year-old protagonist from an upper middle class South Asian family who longs for freedom ("Production History and Archive"). East West Players followed that production with *As Vishnu Dreams* by Shishir Kurup in 2005, an adaptation of the epic Hindu poem, *The Ramayana* ("Production History and Archive"). The 2005 production was in

collaboration with the Hindu community in Los Angeles, "underscoring the East West Players' commitment to involve all Asian American communities and their experiences" (Kim Lee 221).

East West Players is currently led by Snehal Desai, whose parents immigrated from India. Upon becoming the producing artistic director after Dang in 2017, Desai spoke to the *LA Times* of his vision: "East West [Players] needs to be a place where we welcome all of our identities into the room" (Wada). To Desai, portraying the intersections of identities is recognizing that people check off more than one box to identify themselves. He states, "I don't prioritize my sexual orientation, my gender identity over my cultural heritage" (Wada). As for staying relevant, "[i]f we want to be around another fifty years, our mission is going to have to evolve and adapt and change," says Desai (Easter).

Theater Mu's approach to representation has been a combination of "always being open to whoever from whatever group wanted to be involved in the company, but also a recognition of who was involved in the company" (Shiomi). Korean adoptees comprised the first group involved in the organization, and their experiences were portrayed in several productions including *Mask Dance* in 1993 and *Walleye Kid* in the 1998-1999 season. Hmong Americans also became more involved in Theater Mu in the 2010s; an original play, *WTF*, written by Hmong American Katie Ka Vang, was produced in 2011. Shiomi notes that there has been a visible growth in Southeast Asian American artists' involvement in Theater Mu since then, and Eric Sharp, long-time Theater Mu actor, traces the evolution of the company: "Theater Mu started out very much focused on Filipino, Japanese, Korean adoptee folk tales and experiences, then

into musicals, into plays with spoken word. The next iteration is Hmong, Karen[7] and Karenni[8], it's queer."

East West Players and Theater Mu approach representation in their programming in distinct ways, influenced by the artistic choices of leadership, the perception of the organization by the communities they serve, and the evolving understanding of Asian American identity. In 2021, both the leaders of East West Players and Theater Mu were interviewed as part of *The Alchemy of High-Performing Arts Organizations, Part II: A Spotlight on Organizations of Color,* a white paper by Drs. Zannie Voss and Glenn Voss of SMU DataArts. They interviewed twenty visual and performing arts organizations which primarily serve communities of color to develop "a kind of 'mental map,' or playbook, linking their strategic choices and decisions" (Voss and Voss 3) to short-term and intermediate outcomes that eventually lead organizations to financial sustainability. The arts leaders noted that environmental factors such as racism, gentrification, disasters, and lack of access to institutional funding inhibit their ability to translate their vision into short-term and long-term outcomes (Voss and Voss 15-16); internal factors include mission alignment, adaptive capability, organizational culture, investment in marketing and fundraising, and a multiyear planning horizon (Voss and Voss 17-22). The leaders of these organizations "attributed their success to the alchemy between two essential, common cornerstones: community orientation and high-quality programming" (Voss and Voss 12-13). One of the arts leaders shared that

[7] The Karen people (pronounced kah-ren) are indigenous people who live mostly on the southeast edge of Burma (Myanmar) and northeastern Thailand. For more information, refer to the Karen Organization of Minnesota website, www.mnkaren.org/, and the International Institute of Minnesota website, iimn.org/publication/finding-common-ground/minnesotas-refugees/asia/karen/.

[8] The Karenni people (sometimes called Kayah) are also one of the many ethnic groups in Burma.

> [w]hen you build community with a group of people that have been historically underrepresented, it builds a lot of loyalty. Organizations rooted in their community are very valued because it's where people find their people. We get a lot of value from our resources and because there's such loyalty, people want to work with us. We give Asian Americans a home, representation, high-quality art, and projects they want to work on. (qtd in Voss and Voss 13)

And a home is exactly what Asian American theatres like Theater Mu have provided for numerous Asian American artists. Sharp identifies this as a reason why he has been involved with Theater Mu for over fifteen years: "I continue to work with the company because it feels like my home. It feels like a safe space for me. It feels like my family in many ways and that's throughout the leadership changes and things that have happened over the years." Vongsay describes Theater Mu as "a creative home for so many people." She explains that once Asian American artists discover Theater Mu, they think, "Holy shit. I come here and I don't have to explain myself. I don't have to explain my adoptee experience. I don't have to explain my refugee experience. I can come here and there are no asterisks. I'm just more whole." Theater Mu's current artistic director, Lily Tung Crystal, identifies the theatre's commitment to its community, and especially to its artists, as fundamental to its longevity. Along with Leo and Sharp, Tung Crystal credits co-founder Rick Shiomi with nurturing and cultivating that circle of artists and ingraining that approach into the work of Theater Mu. According to Sharp,

> Rick's amazing, principal talent is community building. He makes people believe in themselves because he'll trust you to do these things. At twenty-five, I was playing Nick Bottom [in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*]. I had an absolute ball. I

can't tell you what the production looked like from the outside. All I can tell you is how powerful that made me feel as an individual.

While both organizations demonstrate clear mission alignment and enact a multi-year plan, there are several factors that differ for each theatre. Unlike East West Players, Theater Mu does not own a building, making it more financially nimble (Shiomi). East West Players' home is a 240-seat theater in the former Union Church building in Little Tokyo. As a historic building, it requires maintenance and limits certain renovations. Theater Mu rents rehearsal space and collaborates with other theatres on co-productions, which strengthens its community ties and increases its reputation and visibility (Shiomi; Sharp). Theater Mu has also benefited from strong support from the state of Minnesota. In 2019, Los Angeles and the Twin Cities were identified as the third and fourth most arts-vibrant communities in the US, respectively. The Los Angeles region was ranked first on arts providers and first on independent artists and arts, culture, and entertainment firms per capita while the Minneapolis-St. Paul area scored within the top 1% on government support overall and ranked second on state arts dollars per capita (Voss et al. 11-12). Based on the National Assembly of State Arts Agencies' calculation of fiscal year 2022 data, Minnesota has the third highest per capita funding for the arts: an estimate of $7.34. California ranks eighth, with an estimate of $4.32 in per capita funding for the arts ("Raise Your Ranking").

On Resilience

A less quantifiable element in the alchemy of high-performing arts organizations like East West Players and Theater Mu is the resilient characteristic of Asian American artists. Both Dang and Tung Crystal explain that Asian American artists' resilience and

flexibility have been built and sharpened from when they were kids growing up with dreams of becoming an actor or artist and their parents disapproving of and discouraging their choice, and later as adults, scraping by and doing their own work because of the lack of opportunities in theatre. In a literature review of Asian American women's resilience published in the *Asian/Pacific Island Nursing Journal*, Reyes and Constantino describe resilience as "a coping strategy to persevere through difficult experiences and to resolve challenging situations" (107). These difficult experiences include the immigration journey of the women studied, their "persistence through menial jobs and battling the loneliness and fear of living in communities where racially motivated aggressions were prevalent" (107), and dealing with challenges in the family, such as disapproval of career choices (110). While parents disapproving of career choices is not isolated to Asian American families, it is a narrative that holds true for many Asian American artists across generations.

The narrative has roots in the model minority myth: the notion of a "good Asian American" who works hard, does not protest, and becomes successful without government help began to take hold in the 1950s (*Asian Americans*). The influx of skilled, highly educated immigrants after the Hart-Celler Act of 1965 further perpetuated the idea that all Asians are doctors, lawyers, engineers, or in technology, and not in the arts. Unlike the arts, those careers are perceived as stable, financially secure, and a status symbol. For many immigrant families, the arts are seen as a luxury, rather than integral to daily life. As Dang states, "we're facing these uphill battles from the very beginning as children, and it continues as we grow up. We are not valued; our voices are not heard." Because Asian American actors must work hard and have to maneuver

through obstacles and doubters to prove that they can make a living as an actor, "[they] automatically have that disposition within [them] to navigate this terrain of crises" (Dang). Navigating situations of not being taken seriously and having to "fight the fight all through their careers" (Tung Crystal) have made Asian American artists agile. This agility was most recently on display as both theatres transitioned to online programming throughout the pandemic, maintaining engagement with their communities, and embracing a different way of doing "theatre" ("Production History"; "Our 55th Season").

On What Comes Next

With the production of four plays by Asian American playwrights in the spring 2020 season in New York City and the noticeable growth in films featuring Asian Americans, such as *Crazy Rich Asians*, *The Farewell*, *Minari*, and *Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings*, Asian American representation in arts and entertainment looks to be improving. (It is worth noting that most of the films mentioned above feature East Asian characters. The growth in representation in film is worthy of celebration, and it begs more varied and nuanced stories from all of Asian America.) Yet, it is also true that Asian Americans have increasingly become targets of violence and hate since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic (Yellow Horse et al.). One could argue that the growth in representation and opportunities in the film industry has not made much of a difference in "humanizing" an often-invisible group. But being resilient is persisting even if the odds are stacked against you. For Asian American theatremakers, especially actors, they continue to battle against biases and a lack of imagination. According to Leo, "[t]here's a basic lack of imagination in the US around the Asian American experience. They can't see us in those roles. They have a hard time making a leap

around, 'Can an Asian person play King Lear?'" When Sharp was in a Bachelor of Fine Arts program, he was given ancillary roles. "They didn't know what to do with me. It was like, 'Where are we gonna put the Asian kid in this show? Ok, you can play Fabian in *Twelfth Night*….You can be the acrobat," says Sharp of his undergraduate experience. Directors and professors of undergraduate and graduate theatre programs, the staff of local and regional theatres, directors and producers, and independent theatremakers could benefit from checking their biases and stretching their imagination.

In efforts to be more diverse or multicultural, mainstream, predominantly white arts organizations can fall into the trap of tokenizing, allotting a single slot in a season to a work by an artist of color. When including Asian American stories into a season, decisionmakers in arts organizations must interrogate how they have come to define the term "Asian American," to ask themselves who they think of first, and to do the arduous, yet crucial work of engaging with communities prior to selecting the season. There is a myriad of untold Asian American stories to be shared and countless Asian American artists to be discovered.

Asian American theatres, arts organizations, and artists must also continue to learn about their communities, to be as specific as possible, and hold space for the overlaps and contradictions in experiences. They must also be aware of intentional or unintentional cultural ventriloquism: speaking for others instead of letting them speak for themselves. Vongsay explains: "For so long, Southeast Asians have had East Asians tell our stories for us….That made sense forty-five years ago when we didn't know English and [they] wrote our stories for us. But we can write now. We can act and we can do all this stuff, so we want to tell our own stories."

All arts organizations—Asian American theatres included—must also understand and respect the distinctions between Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders. As filmmaker Conrad Lilihi points out, “We’re half of the acronym, but not even close to half the representation” (Vu and Yang 17). If arts organizations decide to use “AAPI,” they must also hold true to genuinely engaging with Pacific Islander communities and issues, and not assume that those communities will connect with Asian American stories. Similarly, theatres in Hawai’i, like the Kumu Kahua Theatre, that has been telling local stories since 1971, deserve to be studied on their own. The history and culture of Hawai’i are rich and complicated, and racial/ethnic identity is not framed in the same way as the rest of the US.

Lastly, the work of Asian American theatres would not be possible without support from private and corporate foundations. In September 2020, East West Players was selected as one of “America’s Cultural Treasures,” a two-pronged initiative by the Ford Foundation in collaboration with sixteen foundations and major donors to “acknowledge and honor the diversity of artistic expression and excellence in America and provide critical funding to organizations that have made a significant impact on America’s cultural landscape” (“FAQs”). East West Players was selected as one of the twenty grant recipients and received a $2 million grant (“East West Players”) for “nationally or internationally recognized quality in artistic and cultural production and reach; a recognized legacy for stewarding and sustaining a cultural tradition rooted in a community of color; and a significant legacy of impact over more than two decades (“FAQs”). In 2021, Theater Mu was selected as one of “America’s Regional Cultural Treasures” with a legacy impact of over one decade. The grant awarded unrestricted

funds of at least $500,000 over the next five years ("$12.6 Million Initiative"). While receiving this recognition and the funds to go with it is a tremendous step in the right direction, it is but one step of many needed to ensure that theatres like Theater Mu and East West Players are prioritized by funders. Funders need to provide more general operating grants over project-based funding as general operating grants lead to greater sustainability and allows theatres to be flexible and responsive to the needs of their communities.

Conclusion

East West Players and Theater Mu have become an indispensable part of the cultural ecosystem of their respective cities because of their extensive record of presenting programs that empower artists and are relevant to their communities. They have been a home for Asian American artists and performers, whether a seasoned performer or one with little or no experience. They center Asian American bodies and experiences through original plays and musicals, but also through staging beloved classics with all-Asian American casts. These theatres are a place of refuge and empowerment, not only for artists, but also for Asian American audiences. They have been telling nuanced stories for decades, and their work of raising the visibility of Asian American history, experiences, and people is more urgent and important than ever.

In the time of the COVID-19 pandemic when Asian Americans have become targets of verbal and online harassment, avoidance, shunning, even physical assault (Yellow Horse et al.), there is greater urgency to examine the ways that the performing arts have perpetuated harmful stereotypes under the guise of "classics" and contributed to the erasure of Asian American stories on stage. In March 2021, shortly after eight

people, six of them Asian women, were shot in Atlanta, Georgia, the Asian American Performers Action Coalition remarked:

> [t]he perpetuation of hideous and inaccurate stereotypes, only seeing our stories via a White lens, and removing us from the American narrative through exclusion are all directly connected and have their ramifications. They dehumanize us to the point that some believe we are expendable enough to further erase with cold blooded murder. ("AAPAC Statement")

Asian American theatres exist to challenge those stereotypes and perceptions, to share Asian American stories, and to create a field that is more accessible and equitable. Greater investment of resources, people power, and funding is needed to support the work of Asian American theatres like East West Players and Theater Mu so they will not just survive for another decade or three decades, but thrive. These theatres have been and continue to be a home for Asian American artists and communities. Their existence is a declaration that despite erasure,

> We're still here
> We're going strong
> And we're getting tired of proving we belong. (Magnetic North and Taiyo Na)

Appendix – Biographies

Tim Dang
Tim Dang is a director/producer and is the recipient of the 2015 Society of Directors and Choreographers' Zelda Fichandler Award for transforming the regional theatre arts landscape through theatre. He is a Los Angeles County Arts Commissioner and serves on several committees including the Cultural Equity and Inclusion Initiative (Co-Chair from 2015-2020), the County's Economic Resiliency Task Force for which he is the Arts and Culture sector leader providing strategies and recommendations to the Board of Supervisors in response to Covid-19 and the civil unrest due to racial and social inequities across our country, and recently appointed to an ad hoc committee for Supervisorial District 1 for Measure J.

He is producing artistic director emeritus of East West Players (EWP), having run the longest running professional theatre of color in the United States for 23 years producing over a hundred plays and musicals for the mainstage.

Dang is on faculty at the USC School of Dramatic Arts and AMDA (American Musical and Dramatic Arts) College for the Performing Arts. His recent directorial credits include *Songs for a New World*, *Edges*, and *Ordinary Days* for AMDA College of the Performing Arts, *Vietgone* for L.A. Theatre Works, *The Joy Luck Club* for Sierra Madre Playhouse, *Pippin* for Pomona College, *The Emperor's Nightingale* for Mainstreet Theatre in San Bernardino County, and *Evita* at the University of Southern California.

Dang is a USC alumnus and started out as a performer before transitioning to a career in directing and becoming artistic director of a professional theatre company. He still manages to perform voiceovers such as *The Ghost of Tsushima*, *World of Warcraft: The Mists of Pandaria*, and *Avatar: The Last Airbender*.

Emily Kuroda
Emily has performed in over 35 productions at East West Players in Los Angeles including Chay Yew's *RED* (LA Times Top 10). Other theaters: New York Theater Workshop (ENDLINGS), ART (*ENDLINGS*), Theatreworks (*LANGUAGE ARCHIVE, CALLIGRAPHY*), Page 73 (*TODAY IS MY BIRTHDAY*), Alliance Theater (*TIGER STYLE*) , Actors Theatre of Louisville (we, the invisibles), Pan Asian Rep (*BROTHERS PARANORMAL*), Playwright's Arena, South Coast Rep, Public Theater, La Jolla Playhouse, Seattle Rep, Singapore Repertory Theater, Berkeley Repertory Theater, Doolittle Theater, Huntington Theater (Boston), Los Angeles Theater Center, Zephyr Theater, LA Women's Shakespeare Company, and the Los Angeles Shakespeare Festival.

Television: "THE POWER" Amazon, “GILMORE GIRLS”, "ALL RISE" , “THE GOOD DOCTOR”, “THE RESIDENT”, “UNDER ONE ROOF”, “DROP DEAD DIVA” (Margaret Cho’s mother), “ GREY’S ANATOMY”, “THE MEDIUM”. Films*: KIMI, PORCUPINE*, *PARTY BOAT, TAKE THE 10 , RED, PEEP WORLD, DAD, BROKEN WORDS, ABOUT LOVE* (Emmy nominated), *WORTH WINNING* and the award winning *THE SENSEI.*

She is the recipient of five Dramalogue Awards, a Garland Award for outstanding performance, and an L.A. Ovation award nomination for Best Lead Actress in a Play, Playwright’s Arena Award, East West Players Rae Creevey Award, and the Entertainment Today Best Actress Award for her performance in “Winter People”.

Katie Hae Leo (she/her) was born in Bucheon, South Korea and raised in Indiana. She is a writer and performer based in Saint Paul, Minnesota, whose creative work explores the multiple intersections between the adopted body and notions of race, gender, place, home, and (dis)ability. Her poetry and essays have appeared in journals such as *Asian American Literary Review*, *Kartika Review*, and *Water~Stone Review*. She has performed in venues such as Theater Mu, Dreamland Arts, Asian Arts Initiative (Philadelphia), Phoenix Art Museum, and University of Regina (Canada). Her awards include the James Wright Prize for Poetry, a Gesell Award for nonfiction, two Pushcart Prize nominations, and a Spark Leadership Award from the Coalition of Asian American Leaders. Katie is currently working on a young adult novel, initially supported by a Mirrors and Windows Fellowship for Indigenous writers and writers of color working in youth genres from The Loft Literary Center. She sits on the boards of Theater Mu and TaikoArts Midwest. www.katiehaeleo.com

Eric Sharp is an actor, writer, and director based in Minneapolis with over 20 years of professional stage and screen experience. Commercial and voiceover clients include Netflix, HBO Max, Hulu, Independent Lens, Penguin Random House Audio, Best Buy, Mayo Clinic, Target, Orange Julius, 3M, Kwik Trip, and more. He has appeared onstage nationally and internationally at the Guthrie Theater, Ten Thousand Things, The Jungle Theater, Mixed Blood Theatre, Alliance Theatre, and the Minnesota, Toronto, and Edinburgh Fringe Festivals. Eric played Mowgli in *The Jungle Book* at Children's Theatre Company, and the young Dalai Lama on multiple tours of TigerLion Arts' *The Buddha Prince*. A member of the Artistic Advisory Committee at Theater Mu, Eric wrote and starred in the world premiere of *Middle Brother,* and has appeared in *Hot Asian Doctor Husband, Two Mile Hollow, Twelfth Night, Charles Francis Chan, Jr. .., Yellow Fever* and many more. He recently directed the educational video series *The Remix with Theater Mu* (available on YouTube), and created and produced the audio series: *You Shall Hear Me: Stories from Beyond*. Eric will be featured this summer in the Mu/Jungle Theater co-production of Lauren Yee’s *Cambodian Rock Band*. He serves as

curator for AKOA (All Kinds of Awesome): a live storytelling event featuring true stories from the international adoptee community (www.worksharp.org).

Lily Tung Crystal
Lily Tung Crystal is an actor, director, and artistic director of Theater Mu in the Twin Cities. She is also the founding artistic director emeritus of Ferocious Lotus Theatre Company in the Bay Area.

As a performer, Lily has worked with theatres across the country, including Berkeley Rep's Ground Floor, Cal Shakes, Crowded Fire, Magic Theatre, Mountain Play, New World Stages, Portland Center Stage, Ragged Wing, SF Playhouse, Syracuse Stage, Those Women Productions, and Woodminster. Favorite roles include: Prosecutor Li (*Chinglish*, Portland Center Stage/Syracuse Stage), Mrs. Shin/God #2/Niece (*Good Person of Szechwan*, Cal Shakes), Rachel Li/Rashida (*Tough Titty*, Magic Theatre), Amanda (*Private Lives*, Whirligig Theatre), Mom (*Interstate*, Mixed Blood Theatre), Lulu (*Cabaret,* SF Playhouse), Mrs. Park (Jay Kuo's *Worlds Apart,* Magic Theatre; New World Stages), and Korean #2 (*Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven,* Crowded Fire; BATCC nomination). She also does on-camera work and is represented by JE Talent.

Her directing work includes David Henry Hwang's *Chinglish* and *Flower Drum Song* at Palo Alto Players and the world premiere of Leah Nanako Winkler's *Two Mile Hollow* at Ferocious Lotus, all for which she was named a Theatre Bay Area Award finalist for Outstanding Direction. She also recently directed Jiehae Park's *peerless* for Theater Mu and the musical *Allegiance* at Contra Costa Civic Theatre.

Lily is a 2016 YBCA 100 honoree, named by Yerba Buena Center for the Arts as a "creative pioneer making the provocations that will shape the future of culture."

Saymoukda Duangphouxay Vongsay aka Refugenius is a Lao American writer. She was born in a refugee camp in Nongkhai, Thailand and immigrated to Minnesota in 1985. Because of her unique background, her work is focused on creating tools and spaces for the amplification of refugee voices through poetry, theater, and experimental cultural production.

CNN's "United Shades of America" host W. Kamau Bell called her work "revolutionary." Governor Mark Dayton recognized her artistic contributions with a "Lao Artists Heritage Month" Proclamation. She's a 2019 recipient of a Sally Award for Initiative from the Ordway Center for Performing Arts which "recognizes bold new steps and strategic leadership undertaken by an individual...in creating projects or artistic programs never before seen in Minnesota that will have a significant impact on strengthening Minnesota's artistic/cultural community." Her plays have been presented by the

Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Center, Theater Mu, Consortium of Asian American Theater Artists, Theater Unbound, and elsewhere. She was a 2018 Playwright's Center and 2011 and 2012 Theater Mu fellow in playwriting, a 2018 Loft Literary Center fellow in poetry, a 2019 Loft Literary Center fellow in children's and young adult literature, a 2018 Twin Cities Media Alliance fellow in public art, and a 2017 Aspen Ideas Bush Foundation fellow.

Her poetry, essays, plays, and short stories can be found in the Asian American Literary Review, Massachusetts Review, Jungle Azn Magazine, Rubin Museums' Spiral Magazine, Journal for Southeast Asian American Education and Advancement, Saint Paul Almanac, as well as on coffee sleeves (Coffee House Press) and on metro transit (Saint Paul Almanac).

She's received creative grants from the Jerome Foundation, Bush Foundation, John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, MAP Fund, Andy Warhol Foundation, Visual Arts Fund, Forecast Public Art, Metropolitan Regional Arts Council, and the MN State Arts Board, and elsewhere. She holds a Master in Liberal Studies degree and co-hosted a podcast on Minnesota Public Radio. She is currently a National Playwright in Residence at Theater Mu, a program of The Andrew Mellon Foundation. The award comes with a nearly $200,000 stipend and a $30,000 professional development microfund. In January 2021, McKnight Foundation named her a Fellow in Community-Engaged Practice Art. The award comes with a $25,000 stipend and a $3,000 development fund. At the end of January 2021, Saymoukda received a Jerome Hill Artist Fellowship for Playwriting. The award comes with a $50,000 stipend and professional development resources.

Greg Watanabe
Greg made his Broadway debut in *Allegiance* and was recently seen in Cambodian Rock Band at Victory Gardens, The City Theatre Pittsburgh, Merrimack Repertory Theatre and *Hold These Truths* at Virginia Stage Company.
Other appearances include world premiere productions of *The Ballad Of Yachiyo* (Berkeley Repertory Theatre, Seattle Repertory Theatre, Public Theater-New York), *The Summer* Moon (A Contemporary Theater, South Coast Repertory Theatre), *The Happy Ones* (South Coast Rep, L.A. Drama Critics Circle nomination for Best Featured Performance) and *Extraordinary Chambers* (The Geffen Playhouse, Ovation nomination for Best Featured Actor).

Other appearances include *Golden Child* (Signature Theater), *Yellow Face* (Mo'olelo Performing Arts Company, San Diego Theater Critics Circle nomination for Outstanding Lead Performance in a Play).

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