

Strangers Onstage: Asia, America, Theatre, and Performance

by Esther Kim Lee

The Journal of American Drama and Theatre

Volume 28, Number 1 (Winter 2016)

ISSN 2376-4236

©2016 by Martin E. Segal Theatre Center

When I was writing my dissertation in the late 1990s, I would tell anyone who would ask that my topic was Asian American theatre. I was ready with my elevator speech tinged with obligatory graduate student's anxiety, but mostly, I was excited to share how I was interviewing artists around the country for the project. "Actors, playwrights, communities, and producers!" my voice would rise. Some people politely responded with "that's interesting," which could mean many things, but often, I would get an answer that ran something like, "oh, I love kabuki!" I would have no choice but to smile and say, "me too" because it was true and because I had to think about my follow up response. How aggressively do I explain that Asian theatre is different from Asian American theatre? How do I detail the links between Asian American theatre and other American ethnic theatres? Should I describe the stereotype of the perpetual foreigner and how it represents the exclusion of Asian Americans in the imagining of America? Or do I present a crash course on the East West Players, the first Asian American theatre company founded in 1965 in Los Angeles? Depending on the circumstance and my mood, my response varied, but generally, I tried my best to explain the significance of documenting a part of American theatre history that had been overlooked.

While I grew tired of explaining my project, I also fantasized about titling my yet to be written book "Strangers Onstage" to recall Ronald Takaki's seminal book, *Strangers from a Different Shore: A History of Asian Americans* (1990). Most Asian immigrants crossed the Pacific Ocean, not the Atlantic. Because of their visual and geographic strangeness compared to European immigrants, they were excluded from citizenship, accused as disloyal, interned, and disenfranchised from all sectors of the society. Theatre was no exception. American theatre, as Karen Shimakawa has brilliantly argued, has functioned as a major site of "national abjection" of Asian Americans. Feeling like a stranger myself, I wanted to tell the story of other strangers who collectively built Asian American theatre while hoping to bridge different disciplines, including Asian American studies and theatre and performance studies.

On that metaphorical bridge, I had the fortune of meeting scholars, both senior and emerging, who shared my scholarly mission and who also felt like strangers in a field that was still not legible to many. Together, however, we knew the field had much potential for multiplicity of research agendas, theoretical growth, and critical intervention. In the past five years, several books have been published as a full demonstration of that potential. The titles include: Lucy Mae San Pablo Burns' *Puro Arte: Filipinos on the Stages of Empire* (2013); Joshua Takano Chambers-Letson's *A Race So Different: Performance and Law in Asian America* (2013); Sean Metzger's *Chinese Looks: Fashion, Performance, Race* (2014); Eng-Beng Lim's *Brown Boys and Rice Queens: Spellbinding Performance in the Asias* (2014); and Ju Yon Kim's *The Racial Mundane: Asian American Performance and the Embodied Everyday* (2015). The books showcase innovative interdisciplinary approaches and nuanced understandings of how race, body, geopolitics, history, and performance intersect.

It is an incredibly formative time for those of us writing about the relationship between performance and “Asia.” I believe we are witnessing the emergence of a new field that has yet to be named. I can try to name it, although none of them are completely satisfactory: Asian diasporic performances; transnational performance in the Asias (to borrow Lim’s plural noun); and Asian/American performances (although I wince at the thought of using the slash). The difficulty in naming the field stems from the fundamental shift in how the authors pose their questions. Two decades ago, the questions I asked about Asian American theatre were about representation and empowerment onstage: for instance, how can we let Jonathan Pryce perform in yellowface makeup in *Miss Saigon* when talented Asian American actors do not even get to audition for the role? While such questions of representation and empowerment are still relevant, the books I mention above ask readers to look beyond the stage and to reexamine all concepts. Performance, for instance, is not simply a mode of representation, but it is an episteme. Instead of looking at performance as an object of study, as I did for my dissertation, the authors use performance as a methodological tool to examine how meaning is created both on and off stage. Similarly, Asia is not a stable geographical location but a constructed concept that connotes power structure and positionality.

The books examine the interplay between the quotidian and the theatrical and between racialization and the performative to address broader questions of gender, sexuality, politics, and law. For instance, Burns uses the term *puro arte* to explore how the Filipino/a performing body is central to understanding the US-Philippine imperial relations. Metzger, on the other hand, focuses on fashion to trace how American perception of China has changed in the past 150 years. In all of the books, the performance of everyday, or what Kim calls the mundane, is central to identifying what is at stake in body politics.

Indeed, what *is* at stake now? Perhaps an answer to that question can be found in how all of the authors variously describe their subjects of study as ironies, paradoxes, and ambiguities. Lim, for example, describes the Asian native boy during colonial encounters as a “critical paradox” because he embodied contradictory fantasies and fears and because his identity can be described only as queer and performative, both of which are paradoxical concepts to begin with. Chambers-Letson focuses on the legal paradox of demanding assimilation of Asian Americans while passing exclusionary laws. What can we learn from these paradoxes? Come to think of it, “stranger onstage” is also a paradoxical idea. The theatrical stage demands an illusion of reality that promises to make the stranger familiar. The stranger is still onstage, the recent books seem to say collectively, except the stage is much broader, and the stranger has many questions.

Esther Kim Lee is Associate Professor in the School of Theatre, Dance, and Performance Studies at the University of Maryland. She is the author of *A History of Asian American Theatre* (2006) and *The Theatre of David Henry Hwang* (2015).