

Randall Duk Kim: A Sojourn in the Embodiment of Words

by Baron Kelly
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For Asian American actors, there is a persistent fear of being left out of the diversity conversation entirely, since “diversity” has often been conflated with Black representation only. Black actors Earle Hyman, James Earl Jones, Gloria Foster, and Franchelle Steward Dorn broke ground by playing leading roles in classical and contemporary plays. Joining their ranks, Randall Duk Kim is a Hawaiian-born Chinese-Korean American actor whose work may also be held up as an extraordinary yet under-examined example of Asian American representation. Kim has performed leading roles in the works of Shakespeare, Chekhov, Molière, and Ibsen at institutions like the esteemed New York Shakespeare Festival as well as regional theatres, including the American Conservatory Theater, Guthrie Theater, and his own American Players Theatre, which he founded in Wisconsin in 1979. Among his television and film performances, he is most well-known as the Key Maker in *The Matrix Reloaded* and Oogway in *Kung Fu Panda*. Kim starred in the American Place Theatre’s historic Asian American productions of *The Chickencoop Chinaman* and *The Year of the Dragon*. His Broadway appearances include *The King and I* (1996), *Golden Child* (1988), and *Flower Drum Song* (2002). The following is an edited version of the interview that I conducted with Kim on January 4, 2022.

Baron Kelly: Let me start by saying that this is a genuinely incredible honor for me to dialogue with you, Randy. You have been a true inspiration for me and countless others in your work and craft.

Randall Duk Kim: That is very kind and gracious of you to say.

BK: Let’s start with talking about Earle Ernst at the University of Hawai’i when you were a theology major there.

RDK: He was the head of the Drama department. And, of course, he was a kabuki expert. He oversaw the censorship program of legitimate Japanese theatre during the American occupation. After the war, Earle was part of the American occupation forces there, and he got to know the kabuki actors and the kabuki theatre. Earl also established The Great Play Cycle at the University of Hawai’i. Those works in our dramatic western heritage had a significant impact on me. I became entranced by the great plays’ questions they encompassed.

BK: Were you a student actor in the productions, and did that ignite your love of classical drama?

RDK: I never had a formal acting class. I jumped right into the work itself. I watched by imitating. I studied under the tutelage of a kabuki master, Oneo Kuroemon II, whom Earl had brought over from Japan. His family is six generations in the kabuki theatre starting in the 18th century. He was passing on centuries of physical and vocal work. In the kabuki tradition, one of the key methods of a student learning anything is imitating someone who’s teaching you specific methods and ways of doing a walk, a gesture, a way of speaking to have the visceral experience in your body, your voice. Another influence was my

upbringing as a fundamentalist Baptist and learning my Bible. I had a foothold into Elizabethan speech by using the King James Bible and being familiar with that. In the Bible, you're dealing with poetic language.

BK: Eventually, you left the university, went to New York, and dove into trying to become an actor going to auditions for classical theatre. Did you face any resistance being an Asian American actor auditioning for classical theatre?

RDK: No, not really, although I was at a cattle call for a film, and the woman running the call came in the room, saw me, and announced in a booming voice with everyone present, "We don't need any Orientals. Orientals are not needed for this."

BK: She said "Orientals"?

RDK: Yeah. Oh, yeah. Yeah. I vowed that I was not going to permit myself to be in a situation like that ever again. I was not going to be in a position where either my race or my height would prevent me from doing what I love to do. I was going to prove to people that I could do the job. When I got to New York, I started looking for summer Shakespeare festival work. So, I would send out pictures and resumes and get rejection letters. I finally got hired by the Champlain Shakespeare Festival up in Vermont. I did three summer seasons with them. I also managed to work between summers. I did a couple of stints with the New York Shakespeare Festival. In the meantime, in the city, the American Place Theatre used me.

BK: When you talk about the American Place Theatre, are you referring to your work in Frank Chin's *The Chickencoop Chinaman* (1972) and *Year of the Dragon* (1974)? *The Chickencoop Chinaman* was the first play written by an Asian American to be produced professionally in New York. Frank Chin paved the way for playwrights, including David Henry Hwang and Philip Kan Gotanda. From your standpoint, what was the importance of the premieres of Frank Chin's plays at the American Place Theatre?

RDK: Frank is significant. And just a singular and unique voice among playwrights in general, not just as an Asian American playwright but among playwrights. Frank's voice is of a contemporary poet. I had to wrestle with the language in his work. The character of Tam Lum in *Chinaman* said things that I would never say in my life. That was a whole new experience for me. I thought the play was out of my league because it was a contemporary work, and I was uncomfortable doing it. The character was verbose and rough. I was doing too much Shakespeare. Frank would say to me, "I want to dirty your mouth."

BK: Randy, *Miss Saigon* (1991) framed the modern discussion of racial diversity and Asian American representation. It was argued that the production supported the practice of yellowface, casting non-Asians in roles written for Asians, often relying on physical and cultural stereotypes to make broad comments about identity. Slant eyes have also been used in popular culture as a form of erasure, that whiteness is the norm in the US. Because your artistry is also about transformation, were there any feelings you had?

RDK: Asian American actors have been underrepresented in the business. Society has got to deal with issues of representation and wrestle with them. One of the best ways the theatre can deal with these issues is to start a multiracial company. Let me say that nobody under the sun would accept me without my doing something with my physical being in doing Falstaff. They would never believe that I was Falstaff without the padding, face, and makeup. An older man who's overweight. So, I created a vision of how I

thought Falstaff could look.

BK: This is a nice segue into my next question. When did your interest in the art of makeup and transformation begin?

RDK: I got my first makeup kit in the 6th grade. I found an early makeup book called *The Last Word in Makeup*. And for a while, I carried that around, my little Bible. It was amazing that someone could have the tools to make themselves into another person. And for me, that was like a key. It was a way to step into somebody else's shoes, to take on somebody else's life for a time, for a moment, whether it was an older man or a hag or a Quasimodo. It was a magic key. Our eyes can be biased, and I will play with the audience's bias to take them on a deeper journey into a story and a character's life that they may not have expected. We're drawing up lines now, and we're drawing each other out of our box.

BK: Did no one ever approach you about why you transformed your features as part of your craft?

RDK: During a summer Shakespeare workshop at the Public Theater, a young Asian American man practically called me a banana, yellow on the outside, white on the inside. He wanted to know why I had to use makeup. As far as being white on the inside, I was educated in the west; I wasn't educated in the east. I am closer to Plato than I am to Confucius in my whole frame of reference. I played the role of Hamlet at the Guthrie without makeup, but there are certain characters like Falstaff, Shylock, or Puck I have done makeup for because they deserved their own unique look. In my education, these plays are part of my history. Recently, I saw *The Lehman Trilogy* with Adrian Lester on Broadway. Lester played the brother of two white actors, and no one batted an eye.

BK: Asian American actors have been historically underrepresented on the stage and usually have not been allowed to tell their own stories. You have been and continue to be the exception. Randy, you have been the only Asian American actor to build a track record and develop a reputation in many classical roles. Other actors did not follow your path. You are a true anomaly.

RDK: We've got to get back to the art of acting. The argument is sometimes used, "Well, it's more truthful to be without makeup." It's nonsense. The Greeks used masks, and a lot of truth was spewed out on their stages. So, don't tell me masks or makeup inhibit the truth. Theatre should be a place for transformation and that our instruments can be conduits for experiences that are greater than we are. We need to develop a racially diverse and genuinely American repertory company. How we cast our stories is an essential part of creating the American culture we want.

BK: When you've worked with younger actors on Broadway in plays like *Golden Child* or *Flower Drum Song* and *The King and I*, did anyone ask you to share any advice or wisdom?

RDK: What I could share was that I want them to find a way to strengthen and expand their imaginations because possibly what's happening in our time is imaginations are withering into nothing. I don't know whether there's a study on our capacity to imagine. And yet, Einstein said imagination is more important than knowledge. We need to strengthen our imagination somehow to do meaningful work in the theatre. Otherwise, it's all going to be small, withered, malformed, not healthy, not robust, not as wide-ranging as humankind is. I think. All our stories are rich.

BK: I hear you saying that we should encompass the broadest possible human experience. Have you seen courageous casting choices?

RDK: I think the most courageous casting choice is to recognize talent regardless of its package. For the actor to communicate to the audience that, "I belong here. I belong in this world." That's what's courageous. The challenge to the actor is to make us believe you're a Roman. I don't care what the color of your skin is. You make us believe. Society has to get a grip on itself. Also, I believe the prejudices of the powerbrokers who are casting directors, directors, and producers must be tackled. We must get away from making judgements on a person's appearance.

BK: I think we can both agree that if an actor's ethnicity aligns with a role whose ethnicity is pertinent to the character in the script, that character should be cast as written.

RDK: Yes.

BK: Today, many young actors are skimming along the surface of the text without understanding how phrasing plays a large part in speech discipline. The text must live through them. It's like scoring music.

RDK: The best writers manage to take language and almost give the soul a means to express itself. I often use the image of an iceberg. The play itself sits on the top of the iceberg. That's what you can see and touch. But beneath the iceberg is this vast amount of unknown. And that's what you've got to explore and plummet and find out.

BK: You founded the American Players Theatre with your artistic life partners, your wife, Anne Occhiogrosso, and your late business partner, Charles Bright, who had an idea to form a theatre company in Spring Green, Wisconsin.

RDK: For fifteen years, we talked about an American classical repertory company. We discovered that cutting a text for whatever reason, whether it's to get the audience out so they can catch their bus, or whether it's too long, or whether the scene is repetitious, didn't make any sense ultimately. We needed to know how the plays worked uncut and conducive to the story in a period that the playwright probably imagined, Ancient Rome, Renaissance Italy, or wherever, to see the story within a context that could perhaps reveal something about the characters living in that world. We needed to start a company to do that kind of work and find out what these great plays say to us. If you already begin to twist it about and manipulate it, you're not going to learn anything. It's like a scientist going into an Amazonian village and saying, "Okay. If you dress in jeans, then I'll observe you." What are you going to learn from that? So, we needed to do it. By and large, it worked. Audiences sat there thinking, "I understand this. It's not obscure."

BK: You also had a particular vision to train an acting company. You wanted to form a center for the classics, research, training, and productions. That's above and beyond just presenting plays.

RDK: I wanted to start a school for the actors to study the plays, the playwrights, and the periods in which those plays developed. We hired a superb teacher of martial arts and tai chi. Jerry Gardner was our tai chi teacher. He was a champion kung fu fighter who knew sitting meditation, tai chi, kung fu, and ballet. We were beginning to form a faculty. Then the board came along and said, "No. It's too costly."

Throw it together, turn it out for the summer, make money, bring in an audience. But the very idea of a quality world repertory company, an American company, couldn't be had.

BK: You had a clarion call for about a decade in this belief for a company.

RDK: It was an uphill battle with the board. Every season I felt like a salmon swimming upstream to spawn. I also frequently thought about the description of John the Baptist, the voice in the wilderness.

BK: You've had many honors in your life, including an Obie for sustained excellence of performance. Currently, you're participating in the Actors' Equity Association's Performing Arts Legacy Project to document your career. How does Randall Duk Kim measure success?

RDK: I think I measure it by how well I've built a bridge between the past and the present. Has it been a good bridge where the past and the present can meet, see, and hear each other?

BK: The legacy and artistry of Randall Duk Kim must not be forgotten. Is there an essence of Randall Duk Kim that you want people to know and always remember?

RDK: I would say, "An actor who tried to see clearly."

Baron Kelly is a four-time Fulbright Scholar and Professor of Theatre in the Theatre and Drama Department at University of Wisconsin-Madison. His teaching of acting has led him to teaching and lecturing residencies in more than a dozen countries on five continents and in twenty American states. Baron has performed internationally for the Royal National Theatre of Great Britain; Stratford Shakespeare Festival of Canada; National Theatre of Norway; Yermelova Theatre, Moscow, Russia; Constans Theatre, Athens, Greece; Academy Theatre Dublin; Edinburgh Theatre Festival; Bargello, Florence, Italy; among others. Broadway credits include *Salome* and *Electra*. Classical and contemporary roles for over 30 of America's leading regional theatres including the Oregon, Utah, Dallas Fort Worth, and California Shakespeare Festivals; Yale Repertory; the Guthrie; Old Globe San Diego; among others. He has a PhD in Theatre Research from UW Madison and a diploma in Acting from London's Royal Academy of Dramatic Art.

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