

THE NEW YORK NEWSDAY INTERVIEW WITH TISA CHANG

Her Theater Fights Asian Stereotypes

Q. You began working as an actress and dancer in New York in 1963. What were things like for an Asian performer then?

A. There was a lot of work for female Asian dancers in the '60s in New York theater — chorus jobs in "A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum," "Cabaret," "The World of Suzie Wong." But for an actress it was a different story. The few roles open to me were limited and stereotypical. There was no question of being cast in a production of, say, Shakespeare. You'd go to an Equity open call and wait three hours for an "interview" — not even an audition, just a chat with the director. What I usually heard was, "You're not the right type." And we all knew what that meant. After my third production of "Suzie Wong" — two of them in the title role — I realized that this was not how I wanted to spend the rest of my career. Pan Asian Rep was founded [in 1977] to give Asian theater artists the chance to express themselves in a context that was not influenced by non-Asians' traditional images of them. I wanted a company that would promote a wider repertory — modern Asian-American plays, Western classics.

Q. Was it the same situation Off-Broadway then? There was an enormous surge of experimental work going on at that time.

A. Yes, but in a way that I found problematic. There was some new stuff happening for Asian actors, but it was all produced by non-Asians who weren't interested in having us do contemporary work. Their interest was in the ancient Chinese and Japanese classics. So instead of being stereotyped on Broadway, we were exotic oddities Off-Broadway.

Q. What is the size of your company?

A. We have somewhere between 75 and 100 actors, designers and directors — Chinese, Japanese, Filipino, Hawaiian, Burmese, Nepalese, Korean, East Indian. I don't think that leaves anyone out.

Q. Who is your audience?



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CULTURAL TRANSLATOR

Tisa Chang is founder and artistic director of New York City's Pan Asian Repertory Theatre. Randall Short spoke with her for New York Newsday.

A. My guess is that it's pretty evenly divided between Asian-Americans and non-Asians. We get scholars and students with a professional interest in things Oriental, and a good number of people from the Chinese and Japanese communities. And since we often do firsts — like the 1983 American premiere of "Teahouse" by Lao She, an extraordinary Chinese playwright who died in the Cultural Revolution of 1968 — we attract New Yorkers who are into the very latest thing, whatever it may be. I don't think, however, that the proportions of those groups are the

same from show to show, since the four plays [we produce] each season are... [so diverse].

Q. You produce new works from both Asia proper and by Asian-Americans. Are there any political sensitivities that have to be considered?

A. That can be a real headache. In the early '70s, I did a famous Chinese mainland writer, and I was strongly cautioned by a couple of Chinese friends from Taiwan that it was a mistake to do his plays. They thought I should be a little more "discreet." Chinatown in New York is basically very rightist, and they warned me that I was opening up the two-China question by producing a mainland writer's work — that putting it on made some sort of political statement. There was also some controversy over a trilogy that had as a common theme the internment of Japanese-Americans during World War II... A good half of running Pan Asian Rep involves diplomatic rather than artistic work. However, since my father was a career diplomat, it's been easy!

Q. Joseph Papp's Public Theater also produces plays by Asian-Americans, most notably writer David Henry Hwang. Does Papp's work complement your own offerings?

A. Sometimes, and sometimes I think it's sheer opportunism. You come back again to the constant danger of stereotypical attitudes creeping in when non-Asians produce Asian theater work. But I do think that Joe Papp has been enormously beneficial to the writers he's taken under his wing. Maybe I'm just worried about the large theater institutions.

Q. Why should you be?

A. The New York State Council on the Arts recently [introduced] a program called "New Audiences for the Year 2000" whereby large organizations get additional funds for targeting certain audiences and doing outreach work with them. Many minority companies are up in arms about the program, which is perceived as a way of siphoning off even more money to large, financially secure groups so that they can do what we financially insecure groups are already doing. My concern is that if such groups begin to do Asian plays, they will tend to select those that cater to a non-Asian perspective. I saw two shows last season that left me wondering if we'd made any progress at all since the 1940s — "Sayonara" and "Tea." There's nothing the non-Oriental world likes to see more than petite Oriental women bowing and scraping and whose lack of English is played for laughs. And there they were, the same old caricatures.

Q. Besides its artistic goals, does Pan Asian Rep have a sociological purpose?

A. There's a real dilemma among younger Asian-Americans who grow up in a basically white society. I have young Chinese-American friends in their 30s — "Chuppies," they're called — who tell me that they may be Asian on the outside but they're white on the inside. Losing touch with who you are and where you come from is very saddening. Now, how that "Asianness" can manifest itself is an open question; it doesn't mean you have to behave like your grandparents. It means you have a sense of your history. When such friends come to see our shows, they tell me that they're gratified. It's not that they were oblivious to what it means to be Chinese or Korean or Japanese in America; it's that the opportunities to connect on a meaningful level are not always available to them.

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