

THEATER TRENDS

by Mel D. Gionson

Smashing Stereotypes: The Pan Asian Repertory Theater

Since 1973, Tisa Chang has been forging new directions for audiences and for the future of Asian-American theater.

"I grew up dreaming of playing Blanche du Bois and Joan of Arc, but if the world is not ready to see an Asian playing Blanche du Bois, then perhaps we can find our own equivalent—our own *Streetcar Named Desire*."

So proclaims Tisa Chang, artistic/producing director and founder of Pan Asian Repertory Theater. As a performer Chang realized that her career and those of other Asians were restricted to playing stereotypical villains, servants, and exotics. To begin rectifying that situation, in 1973 Chang approached Ellen Stewart, the famous La Mama herself. Under Stewart's auspices Chang adapted and directed a Peking Opera called *Return of the Phoenix* at LaMama. "Somehow I knew this was a correct move," Chang recalls. "I believe in 'forces' and

instincts. Though we had the Fourth of July weekend 'death' slot, the *New York Times* came and reviewed us favorably. I knew vibrations were right."

Return of the Phoenix went on to be broadcast by CBS-TV. This led to the formation of the Chinese Theater Group, which in turn metamorphosized into Pan Asian Repertory Theatre. P.A.R.T. was formally incorporated by Chang in 1977, and an important chapter in American theater history was opened. Chang's efforts over the last decade have continually reflected the efforts of one woman to redress artistic and social stereotypes of Asian and Asian Americans within the theater community. Through those efforts, she has made important contributions to both theater and Asian-American communities.

Born in Chungking, China, Tisa Chang came to the United States at the age of six, when her father was assigned to the Consular Corps at the United Nations. After making New York City her permanent home, she was graduated from the High School of Performing Arts as a music major and attended Barnard College and City College. Before establishing P.A.R.T. Chang was an accomplished actress/dancer, working on and off Broadway, and in television and film since 1963. She appeared opposite Al Pacino in David Rabe's *The Basic Training of Paulo Hummel*, with Robert De Niro in the film *Greetings*, and in Michael Cimino's *Year of the Dragon*. At Robert Redford's Sundance Film Institute, she created the lead role of Brave Orchid in Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*.

Chang has directed at Equity Library Theater, Lincoln Center Library and Museum of the Performing Arts, The Women's Project at American Place Theater, and Studio Arena of Buffalo. Along the way she has been honored for her outstanding contributions to the arts and the community by the Chinese American Arts Council (1980 Theater Artist Award), the Chinatown YMCA (1982 Recognition Award), the New York Lionesses' Club and the Long Island Chapter of the Organization of Chinese Americans.

Through P.A.R.T., Chang created unique opportunities to present Asians as people with a full range of human experiences and not just exotics coloring the fringe of Western society. Now in its 11th season, Chang's New York-based





Martha Swope Associates/Carol Rosegg

Top: Weird Sisters:
Toshi Toda, Aki, and
Allan Tung in
Shogun Macbeth
Right: Sandy Hom
and Tom Matsosaka
in *Teahouse*



Carol Rosegg



Mama Swope Associates/Rebecca Leshner

Top: Ann M. Tsui and Keenan Shimizu in *Rosie's Cafe*.
Right: Carol A. Honda, Lily Sakata, and Kati Kuroda in the 1984 *Manoa Valley*.



Mama Swope Associates/Carol Roseing

company has produced full seasons of plays, staged readings, and workshops utilizing hundreds of theater artists and providing an artistic home for Asian-American performers from all over the United States. P.A.R.T. has performed at LaMama ETC, the Actors Outlet space on 28th Street, and the Puerto Rican Traveling Theater "home"; for the last two years, P.A.R.T. has been ensconced at Playhouse 46 (423 West 46th Street at St. Clement's). In addition to its normal season, P.A.R.T. has toured and participated in the Third World Theater Festival, and performed at Tufts University, Syracuse University, Cornell University, the East Coast Asian American Educators Conference, the Empire State Institute for Performing Arts, and this year was chosen as one of nine Off-Broadway Theater Companies to participate in the first New York International Festival of the Arts.

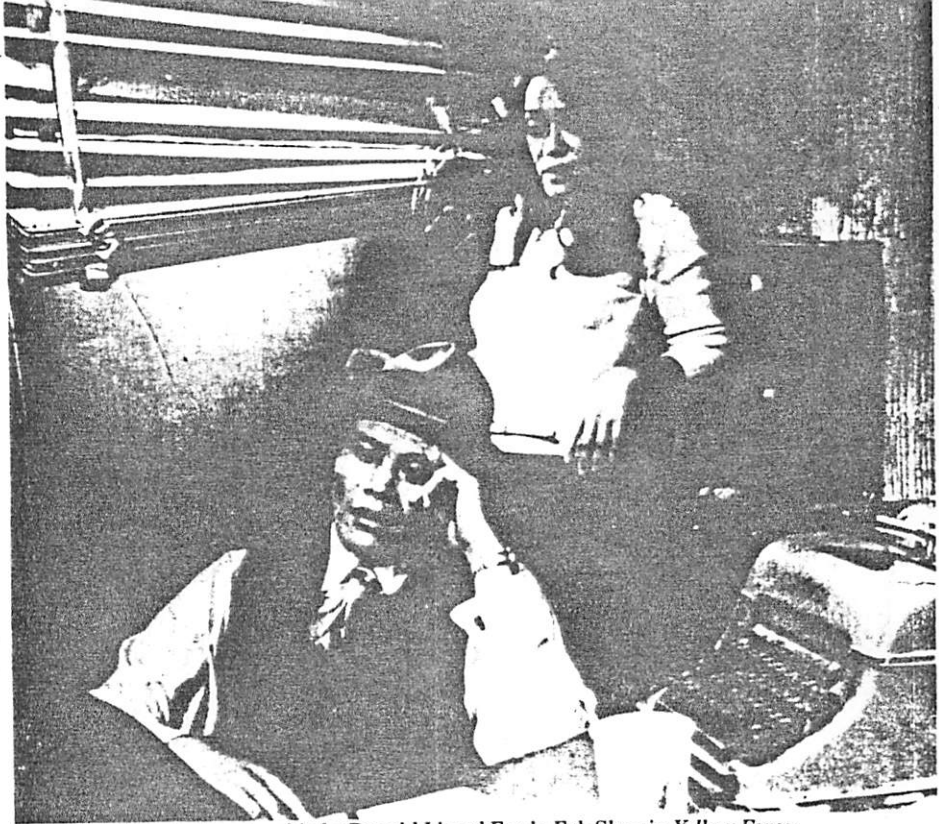
These activities have occurred over the years without obscuring P.A.R.T.'s original statement of purpose, which is "to attain the resources, understanding, and knowledge for producing the highest quality theater that is by and about Asian Americans."

Pan Asian Repertory Theater has earned its name by continuing to produce works about the varied peoples of Asian descent, plays that have told the stories of Japanese farmers in California, Chinatown residents and the conflicts they experience between Western society and their own insular one, Hawaiians grappling with the social changes that occurred when Hawaii achieved statehood, and an Americanized Filipina's struggle between filial duty and her conscience. The repertory also includes a Korean folk tale, a controversial Indian play about greed, lust, and power mixing historic and mythic characters, a compilation of plays about the relocation and internment of Japanese Americans during World War II, and a 30-year history of China, just before Mao, unfolding within the walls of a traditional teahouse. As Mel Gussow wrote in the *New York Times*, "Miss Chang's company has enriched the New York theater with stories of Asian-Americans from diverse backgrounds at the same time that it has encouraged emerging acting and writing talent."

But Chang has also taken the artistic direction of the company toward the challenge of Western classics to display Asian-Americans' ability to measure up with other repertory groups when compared against the same yardsticks. Chang explains: "We just seek to be on a level where we are able—and we are able to take on anything, though part of our unique sense of ensemble is because of cultural focus."

P.A.R.T. has produced a bilingual production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* with a Mandarin-speaking Oberon and Puck. The blending of the sixteenth-century playwrights' fantasy and traditional Peking Opera techniques offered Western audiences a fresh viewpoint and Asians a chance to see themselves included in the realm of Shakespeare.

Last season, the company took on the Bard once more with a critically acclaimed production of *Shogun Macbeth*, adapted and directed by John Briggs of the Dallas Shakespeare Festival. This elaborate, eye-filling production, set in war-torn thirteenth-century Japan, was enthusiastically received; Gussow wrote in the *Times* that, "... though more accustomed to dealing with naturalism, Pan



You do know how to whistle: Donald Li and Freda Foh Shen in *Yellow Fever*.

Asian Repertory rises to the demands of epic drama and delivers a unified performance."

In 1986 the dauntless Chang at last produced a staged reading of *A Streetcar Named Desire* with an all-Asian cast starring the wonderful actress, Tina Chen, as Blanche. During an after-performance discussion, the audience revealed their delight with the staging, insisting that the play's motivations and characters were fully realized and clearly presented with an Asian cast. "Our staged reading of *Streetcar*," Chang maintains, "was one that enhanced the play, in that our actors had the right qualities for the characters and they served the playwright. If one calls Williams' work a 'classic' that speaks to the world, then we took our staged reading to the classic level by showing that a Southern setting and characters are no deterrent to ideas and truths that any culture can understand and portray without having to move it out of its original context."

More avant-garde productions have also been mounted as part of the repertoire. P.A.R.T. has presented Donald Keene's translation of *Man Who Turned Into a Stick*, by Japanese writer Kobo Abe, who wrote *Woman in the Dunes*; a version of Gogol's *Inspector General* called *The Imposter*, fashioned by writers from the People's Republic of China; and Californian Phillip Kan Gotanda's *Bullet-Headed Birds*, a Shepardesque fantasy mixing Pop, Western, and Japanese myths.

As part of the current season, P.A.R.T. is taking on a work by the legendary Japanese novelist Yukio Mishima, *Madame de Sade* which explores the psyche of the wife of the Marquis. The play poses a fascinating question: Why does she remain devoted to her husband through his years of debauchery and protracted imprisonment, only to leave him when he was finally freed?

But *Madame de Sade* will be presented later

in the season. The first show of the new season is set closer to home. *Rosie's Cafe* is a delightful new mystery by Canadian playwright Rick A. Shiomi, a pre-quel to Shiomi's *Yellow Fever*, which P.A.R.T. produced in an Obie-winning production in 1983. *Yellow Fever* is a parody of the gum-shoe detective genre with a film-noir milieu. It takes place in Vancouver, on Powell Street, the going-to-seed home of Sam Shikaze, a detective who refuses to give up on Canada's Japan Town. In *Rosie's Cafe*, Shiomi takes us back to the early Fifties to investigate the beginnings of his characters' relationships through the viewpoint of the young Rosie Ohara, Sam's friend and confidante from the earlier work. In *Rosie's Cafe*, Rosie has returned home to Powell Street from the internment camps where she was incarcerated with her family through the war—just for being Japanese. The now parentless young woman seeks to start anew by opening a cafe. Through this enterprise, Rosie encounters theft, violence, love, and rock and roll along the way. The delightful Carol A. Honda returns as Rosie, Donald Li resumes his role as the young detective-to-be Sam Shikaze, and Raul Aranas will again direct.

This new production will further the artistic goals of Pan Asian Repertory Theater. It was commissioned especially for the company, and it will utilize members of a new Senior Artists Program, a repertory group of performers, directors, and playwrights who are the core of a more permanent company. *Rosie's Cafe* promises to make a propitious beginning to P.A.R.T.'s Eleventh season.

If theater intends to serve audiences with varied points of view that broaden our perspectives, then Pan Asian Repertory Theater has surpassed that goal, for P.A.R.T. does not just serve one particular ethnic group. Rather, the demographics of P.A.R.T.'s audiences reveal a mixture of groups seeking not only Asian themes, but good theater that reveals our humanity to us. □