

Unscripted - A Blog for Actors - Backstage

Asian Invisible?

There is a bit of a rumble going on in New York right now within the theater community; more specifically within the Asian theater community.

This article is my response to that rumble.

In the past five years, the participation and/or casting of Asian actors on Broadway, on Off-Broadway, in theater in general, has significantly declined.

In the last five years, 1.6% of roles on Broadway were filled by Asian American Actors and only 18 principal contracts were given to Asian performers...in the last five years.

The above statistic is one of the reasons why I left New York. Though having done an Off-Broadway play just last year and being a working actor now, I am wrestling with 'complaining'.

Still...as a community, why are we almost invisible?

I have a theory.

When there is a recession and a war, producers go for their bread and butter money. You can't blame them.

Someone has to keep a roof over our heads. But rarely does the bread and butter money include minority or diversity casting in their theatrical season.

What it does include is a lot of first choice celebrities on Broadway, a lot of 'safe bets' and revivals when it comes to season selection, followed by traditional casting in those seasons.

Producers know that a diverse audience will still attend a traditionally cast show because they know '(We) will want to see how *they* do it, to figure out how *we will* do it.'

They also know that there is more of a financial risk in getting their subscriber audience to see a show involving 'diversity' that may or may not enlighten or expand their world through a different perspective.

An audience with a tighter wallet just wants to be entertained. And when a theater ticket is more than twice a movie ticket, people are going to go for what they think will give them their money's worth.

Well, during times of war and recession, can you blame producers for at least wanting to keep the money flowing? Someone has to think 'business'.

And I don't know what it's like to be a producer who is forced to call the tough shots. There is no bad guy in this situation.

But, the truth is there are NO MORE ORIGINAL Stories!

The only thing original is WHO is telling them and HOW.

Therefore, the Asian theater community (on and off stage) must show up for each other and prove to the mainstream that we make up a significant part of the box office/audience/artistic voice in the NY theater community, in ANY artistic community.





We have to become the mainstream that we seek with which to flow. If we don't show up for ourselves, or for each other, who will?

How we (as Asians) get to be viewed in life starts on the screen, on the stage, and bleeds into how others view us; which in turn, recycles into how we see ourselves, and more significantly into how young children of diversity, looking up to us, see *themselves*.

We are not only creating art. We are creating identity, self-esteem, and possibility.

In regards to a recurring role on a new sit-com, two acquaintance friends asked me, "Is it a stereotypical Asian character you're playing?" Hmm...?

I found it odd that *that* was the first question out of their mouths, as opposed to, "What's your character's name? What's it like shooting in front of a live audience? What's it like being on set?"

The truth is, a natural humanistic portrayal of the Asian-American subculture in this country has yet to make a permanent footprint in the parade of mainstream behavior.

We are not just the other white meat. And there's no use in attempting to blend ourselves in as that.

I underestimated this situation one day in rehearsal, where I switched to an Asian accent during my English lines by default, and was immediately stopped by the director who looked at me with a warm compassionate expression on his face and said, "No accent, Ann. All American please."

And it's not to say that *that* representation of Asian in this country is less valid than another.

But the 'accent-filled' Asian in this country has been represented. So has the *ghetto* African American and the *mafioso* Italian, and the *drunken self-deprecating* Irish Catholic.

But the Asian American, stripped down to his/her individual, specific personality traits which are the culmination of his/her very own individual experiences of life here in America...?

We are brewing. Percolating.

We are familiar with a romantic comedy experienced by the dozens of Caucasian actresses in Hollywood. But a romantic comedy experienced by an Asian-American female? Or an Asian-American male?

What is it like to look and live through those eyes?

Personally, I think the Asian American *male* experience in this country is unique and challenging all in its own. In fact, I think it's harder for the boys. There are obstacles in regards to social status, power, and gender that only they know of and have experienced.

And when young Asian boys and girls go out to see films and do not see themselves in them, I wonder if they feel that the romantic comedic experience (for example) is only credible, only able to be experienced by others? And



not them?

We know that isn't true. But do they? Do others?

And maybe that lack of representation of behavior is what prompted those two acquaintances of mine to ask and only ask, "Is it a stereotypical role?", because they themselves, through lack of vision, could not imagine otherwise.

But this is the thing; Hollywood is loyal to box office. New York is loyal to tradition. It's not personal. It is just what has been honored through time.

Hollywood isn't doing it on purpose and New York isn't either.

Honestly, it seems there are more Asians working in Hollywood now than there are in theater.

The more Asian actors we employ within our own means and establishments, the more moxy we are giving each of them individually to compete within the mainstream.

We have to be loyal to ourselves. We have the power.

The more progressive work we put up ourselves, the more we are *progressing* our own identity not just in theater, but in life.

You see, the funny thing about the invisible man is, as soon as he realized he wasn't invisible...*everybody* saw him.

(photos courtesy of punchstock.com, Blake Gardner and the fabulous Ralph B. Pena of the Ma-Yi Theater Company in New York)

Yours Truly -- Ann Hu

ps. Congratulation to Hettiene Park for getting cast in Seminar on Broadway! Another Asian takes the stage!

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Nice and very insightful response.

I agree with all that you said and I STILL blame the producers and the casting directors and the writers for NOT thinking outside of their collective "white boxes". Any minority that has made it into the "mainstream" has done so because someone dared to think outside of what was comfortable and safe to them. The producers and writers of your show and that role came about because someone went "outside of the box" - or rather I would like to think that they saw the USA for what it is: a collection of different races that have made our country what it is and could not see any other way of telling the story.



Theater, Film, TV are not real, the stories that we tell in them are made to "hold the mirror up to nature" but they are not real and I know that it is when we look at the humanity and truth of the characters - in those stories - that we start to see ourselves. Tony Kushner's recent play at The Public; "The Intelligent Homosexuals Guide..." was a wonderful example of seeing the "landscape" of NYC - it featured a multi-racial, multi-sexual cast Was it Kushner's writing, was it the producers/theater's bravery or was it the casting staff? I think it was all of them as a team.

While no one may be a victim - I don't see any hero's either. Well, maybe one.

Posted by: [Dathan B. Williams](#) | [October 03, 2011 at 08:15 PM](#)



Excellent and inspiring post. This, to me, also speaks a lot to the broader lack of Asian representation in several other arenas, mainly politics comes to mind...

Posted by: [Jasmine](#) | [October 06, 2011 at 02:26 PM](#)



Very inspiring post. It's hard not to blame producers and directors when you get rejected 99% of the time because you're a minority, particularly if you're Asian. I think we're the only fairer skin race without sharp, pointy noses (at least most of us don't) - and something about our features that stands us out from the other races.

I completely agree with standing out together. Quite shamefully, I have to admit that I have only recently come to embrace my identity - I'd always lived in denial that I was Asian. I wanted to be white. It's quite normal, but it's a major hindrance not just in acting but in life. You feel more free when you speak out, admit the truth, and accept yourself for who you are. "The truth will set you free." - That's what my acting instructor always reminds us.

And like you said, if we don't embrace ourselves, who will embrace us?

Thank you very much for writing this. All Asian actors need to read this.

Posted by: [Daphne](#) | [October 23, 2011 at 12:06 AM](#)

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