A History of Asian American Theatre

In 1965, the first Asian American theatre company, the East West Players, was founded by a group of actors who wanted to find better opportunities in the acting industry. Forty years later, Asian American theatre is one of the fastest growing theatre sectors with over thirty active theatre companies and numerous award-winning artists such as Frank Chin, Jessica Hagedorn, Ping Chong, David Henry Hwang, Philip Kan Gotanda, Velina Hasu Houston, and B. D. Wong. Based on over seventy interviews, the book surveys the history of Asian American theatre from 1965 to 2005 with focus on actors, playwrights, companies, audiences, and communities. Emphasizing historical contexts, Esther Kim Lee examines how issues of cultural nationalism, interculturalism, and identity politics affect a racially defined theatre. Addressing issues ranging from actors’ activism to Asian diaspora, the book documents how Asian American theatre has become an indispensable part of American culture.

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The American theatre and its literature are attracting, after long neglect, the crucial attention of historians, theoreticians, and critics of the arts. Long a field for isolated research yet too frequently marginalized in the academy, the American theatre has always been a sensitive gauge of social pressures and public issues. Investigations into its myriad of shapes and manifestations are relevant to students of drama, theatre, literature, cultural experience, and political development.

The primary intent of this series is to set up a forum of important and original scholarship in and criticism of American theatre and drama in a cultural and social context. Inclusive by design, the series accommodates leading work in areas ranging from the study of drama as literature to theatre histories, theoretical explorations, production histories, and readings of more popular or para-theatrical forms. While maintaining a specific emphasis on theatre in the United States, the series welcomes work grounded broadly in cultural studies and narratives with interdisciplinary reach. Cambridge Studies in American Theatre and Drama thus provides a crossroads where historical, theoretical, literary, and biographical approaches meet and combine, promoting imaginative research in theatre and drama from a variety of new perspectives.

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A History of Asian American Theatre

ESTHER KIM LEE
To Bert O. States
who taught me to dream in color


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Select chronology of Asian American theatre:
1965–2005

1965  East West Players (Los Angeles) is founded by Mako, Rae Creevey, James Hong, June K. Lu, Guy Lee, Pat Li, Yet Lock, Soon-Tek Oh, and Beulah Quo.

1966  East West Players produces Rashomon, a play based on a short story by Japanese writer Akutagawa Ryunosuke and adapted by Fay and Michael Kanin.

1968  East West Players receives a $38,500 grant from the Ford Foundation. The first playwriting competition is held at the East West Players, and Henry Woon’s Now You See, Now You Don’t wins the first prize.

Oriental Actors of America, an activist group formed by actors in New York City.

1970  Ellen Stewart supports the establishment of La MaMa Chinatown led by Ching Yeh.

1971  Kumu Kahua (Original Stage) founded in Honolulu, Hawaii by a group of University of Hawaii students and their professor, Dennis Carroll.

Frank Chin’s Chickencoop Chinaman and Momoko Iko’s Gold Watch receive the first prize in the East West Players’ playwriting competition.

1972  East West Players relocates to a permanent performing space (99 seat theatre) on 4424 Santa Monica Boulevard in Los Angeles’ Silverlake area.

Frank Chin’s Chickencoop Chinaman premieres at the America Place Theatre in New York City.

1973  Asian American Theater Workshop (San Francisco), led by Frank Chin, is established as part of the American Conservatory Theater (ACT) in San Francisco.
Asian Multi Media Center (Seattle) begins as an acting group and receives a $14,500 grant from Washington State Arts Commission.

Chinese Theater Group is formed as a workshop in La MaMa Experimental Theater Club in New York City under the direction of Tisa Chang.

Sining Bayan (meaning Filipino People’s Performing Arts) founded as a subgroup within the Filipino American political group, the Katipunan ng mga Demokratikong Pilipino/Union of the Democratic Filipinos (KDP).

1974
Theatrical Ensemble of Asians (Seattle) is formed by a group of students from the University of Washington and produces its first play, a staged adaptation of Carlos Bulosan’s writings.

Frank Chin’s The Year of the Dragon premiers at the American Place Theatre in New York City.

1975
Theatrical Ensemble of Asians moves out of the University of Washington campus and becomes affiliated with Asian Multi Media Center. It is renamed as Asian Exclusion Act (Seattle) with Garrett Hongo as the artistic director.

Pacific Overtures, a musical by Stephen Sondheim, opens on Broadway with all-Asian American cast.

Pan Asian Repertory Theatre (New York City) is founded by Tisa Chang, Ernest Abuba, Lu Yu, and Hsueh-tung Chen.

Frank Chin resigns as artistic director and leaves the Asian American Theater Workshop.

The East West Players produces Wakako Yamuchi’s And the Soul Shall Dance.

1977
Asian Multi Media Center in Seattle loses its funding and closes. Garret Hongo leaves Asian Exclusion Act, and Bea Kiyohara becomes the artistic director.

Great Leap (Los Angeles, CA) is founded by Nobuko Miyamoto.

Winston Tong performs “Three Solo Pieces” at La MaMa Experimental Theater Club.

Soon-Tek Oh founds Korean American Theatre Ensemble in Los Angeles.

1978
Philip Kan Gotanda’s musical, The Avocado Kid, premiers at the East West Players.

Roberta Uno founds Third World Theater (later renamed New WORLD Theater).
SELECT CHRONOLOGY

1980  Wakako Yamauchi’s *The Music Lessons* and David Henry Hwang’s *FOB* premiere at the Public Theater in New York City.


          Philip Kan Gotanda’s *Bullet Headed Birds* opens at Pan Asian Repertory Theatre.

          Cold Tofu, a comedy group, is founded by Denice Kumagai, Marilyn Tokuda, Judy Momii, and Irma Escamilla.

1982  R. A. Shiomi’s *Yellow Fever* opens at Pan Asian Repertory Theatre.

1983  Japan America Theater (Los Angeles) has a grand opening with the performance of kabuki from the National Theater of Japan.

1984  Asian American Theater Company loses its ninety-nine seat theatre due to financial troubles.

1987  Northwest Asian American Theater Company opens its permanent performing space, Theater Off Jackson, with the world premiere of *Miss Minidoka* 1943 written by Gary Iwamoto.

          Velina Hasu Houston’s *Tea* premieres at the Manhattan Theater Club in New York City.

1988  National Asian American Theatre Company in New York founded by Richard Eng (Executive Director) and Mia Katigbak (Artistic Director).

          hereandnow (college touring company based in Los Angeles) is founded.

          David Henry Hwang’s *M. Butterfly* debuts at the Eugene O’Neil Theater on March 20 with John Lithgow and B. D. Wong starring, runs 777 performances, and wins a Tony Award for best play.

1989  Angel Island Theater Company (Chicago) founded by eight local Asian American community leaders and theatre artists.

          Ma-Yi Theater (New York) founded as a Filipino American theatre.

          Mako resigns from East West Players. Nobu McCarthy becomes the new artistic director.

          Asian American Theater Company secures a permanent performing space with a 135-seat main stage in the Asian American Theater Center.

          Teatro ng Tanan (San Francisco) is founded.

1990  The controversy over the casting of the musical *Miss Saigon* begins.

          Asian American Repertory Theater (Stockton, CA) founded.

          Kumu Kahua attends Edinburgh International Festival, Washington DC, and the Los Angeles Festival of the Arts. Becomes the first
group to tour with plays that had been written wholly, or in part, by the people of Hawaiian ancestry.

1991 Asia On Stage (Boston, MA) founded as a part of Chinese Culture Institute, a membership organization.

1992 Theater Mu (Minneapolis and St. Paul) founded by Rick Shiomi, Dong-il Lee, Diane Espaldon, and Martha Johnson.

1993 Eric Hayashi, a twenty-year veteran with Asian American Theater Company resigns, and Pamela Wu becomes the executive director.

Tim Dang becomes the artistic director of East West Players.

Club O’Noodles, a Vietnamese American troupe, is founded in Los Angeles.

1994 Mighty Mountain Warriors (San Francisco) founded.

Community Asian Theater of the Sierra (Nevada City, CA) founded.

InterACT (Sacramento) founded.

QBD Ink (Washington, DC) founded.

1995 Asian Pacific Theater Project (Sacramento, CA) is founded.

Asian American Repertory Theatre (San Diego, CA) is founded.

Lodestone Theatre (Los Angeles) is founded.

Slant (New York City) is founded.

1998 East West Players moves to a 240-seat theatre space in downtown Los Angeles.

1999 Asian Stories in America (Washington, DC) founded.

2000 SALAAM! (South Asian League of Artists in America) and Disha Theater, a “South Asian diaspora theatre,” founded in New York City.

Mango Tribe Productions (Chicago) is founded.

2002 David Henry Hwang’s version of the musical, Flower Drum Song, opens on Broadway.

2003 Due East (Chicago) is founded.

Shunya (Houston), an Indian-American theatre company, is founded.

2005 Mark Taper Forum’s Asian Theatre Workshop (Los Angeles) closes.