

Cambridge University Press  
978-0-521-85051-3 - A History of Asian American Theatre  
Esther Kim Lee  
Frontmatter  
[More information](#)

---

## *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.

ESTHER KIM LEE is Assistant Professor in the Department of Theatre at University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. Her work has appeared in *Modern Drama* and the *Journal of Asian American Studies*.

Cambridge University Press  
 978-0-521-85051-3 - A History of Asian American Theatre  
 Esther Kim Lee  
 Frontmatter  
[More information](#)

---

CAMBRIDGE STUDIES IN AMERICAN THEATRE AND DRAMA

---

*General Editor*

Don B. Wilmeth, *Brown University*

*Advisory Board*

C. W. E. Bigsby, *University of East Anglia*  
 C. Lee Jenner, *Independent critic and dramaturge*  
 Bruce A. McConachie, *University of Pittsburgh*  
 Brenda Murphy, *University of Connecticut*  
 Laurence Senelick, *Tufts University*

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.

*Books in the series*

1. Samuel Hay, *African American Theatre*
2. Marc Robinson, *The Other American Drama*
3. Amy Green, *The Revisionist Stage: American Directors Re-Invent the Classics*
4. Jared Brown, *The Theatre in America during the Revolution*
5. Susan Harris Smith, *American Drama: The Bastard Art*
6. Mark Fearnow, *The American Stage and the Great Depression*
7. Rosemarie K. Bank, *Theatre Culture in America, 1825–1860*
8. Dale Cockrell, *Demons of Disorder: Early Blackface Minstrels and Their World*

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-85051-3 - A History of Asian American Theatre

Esther Kim Lee

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

9. Stephen J. Bottoms, *The Theatre of Sam Shepard*
10. Michael A. Morrison, *John Barrymore: Shakespearean Actor*
11. Brenda Murphy, *Congressional Theatre: Dramatizing McCarthyism on Stage, Film, and Television*
12. Jorge Huerta, *Chicano Drama: Performance, Society and Myth*
13. Roger A. Hall, *Performing the American Frontier, 1870–1906*
14. Brooks McNamara, *The New York Concert Saloon: The Devil's Own Nights*
15. S. E. Wilmer, *Theatre, Society and the Nation: Staging American Identities*
16. John H. Houchin, *Censorship of the American Theatre in the Twentieth Century*
17. John W. Frick, *Theatre, Culture and Temperance Reform in Nineteenth-Century America*
18. Errol G. Hill, James V. Hatch, *A History of African American Theatre*
19. Heather S. Nathans, *Early American Theatre from the Revolution to Thomas Jefferson*
20. Barry B. Witham, *The Federal Theatre Project*
21. Julia A. Walker, *Expressionism and Modernism in the American Theatre: Bodies, Voices, Words*
22. Jeffrey H. Richards, *Drama, Theatre, and Identity in the American New Republic*
23. Brenda Murphy, *The Provincetown Players and the Culture of Modernity*
24. Katie N. Johnson, *Sisters in Sin: Brothel Drama in America, 1900–1920*
25. Scott T. Cummings, *Remaking American Theater: Charles Mee, Anne Bogart and the SITI Company*
26. Esther Kim Lee, *A History of Asian American Theatre*

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-85051-3 - A History of Asian American Theatre

Esther Kim Lee

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

*A History of Asian American  
Theatre*

---

ESTHER KIM LEE



Cambridge University Press  
978-0-521-85051-3 - A History of Asian American Theatre  
Esther Kim Lee  
Frontmatter  
[More information](#)

---

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS  
Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS  
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

[www.cambridge.org](http://www.cambridge.org)  
Information on this title: [www.cambridge.org/9780521850513](http://www.cambridge.org/9780521850513)

© Esther Kim Lee 2006

This publication is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception  
and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements,  
no reproduction of any part may take place without  
the written permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 2006

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

*A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library*

ISBN-13 978-0-521-85051-3 hardback  
ISBN-10 0-521-85051-7 hardback

Cambridge University Press has no responsibility for the persistence or accuracy of URLs for  
external or third-party internet websites referred to in this publication, and does not guarantee  
that any content on such websites is, or will remain, accurate or appropriate.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-85051-3 - A History of Asian American Theatre

Esther Kim Lee

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

---

*To Bert O. States  
who taught me to dream in color*

## Contents

	<i>List of illustrations</i>	page x
	<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xii
	<i>Select Chronology of Asian American theatre: 1965–2005</i>	xiv
	Introduction: The links and locations of Asian American theatre	I
1	Asian American theatre before 1965	7
2	Actors in the 1960s and 1970s	23
3	The first four theatre companies	42
4	Diversification of Asian American theatre	92
5	The second wave playwrights	124
6	Solo performance	155
7	The <i>Miss Saigon</i> controversy	177
8	Asian American theatre in the 1990s	200
9	Epilogue	225
	Appendix	229
	<i>Bibliography</i>	233
	<i>Index</i>	255

## *Illustrations*

- |   |  |                |
|---|--|----------------|
| 1 | The 1968 picketing of <i>Here's Where I Belong</i> at the Billy Rose Theater by the Oriental Actors of America. Courtesy of the Tamiment Library and the Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives at New York University.   | <i>page</i> 30 |
| 2 | The casting director Joanna Merlin with the cast of <i>Pacific Overtures</i> in front of the Winter Garden in 1976. Courtesy of <i>The New York Times</i> .  | 38             |
| 3 | A scene from the 1968 production of <i>Now You See, Now You Don't</i> by Henry Woon, the first play to win the East West Players Playwriting Competition. Courtesy of the East West Players and the Arts Library Special Collections at the University of California, Los Angeles. | 47             |
| 4 | Frank Chin performs the role of Fred in his play <i>Year of the Dragon</i> in the 1977 production at the Asian American Theater Workshop. Photograph by Aileen Ah-Tye.   | 63             |
| 5 | Pan Asian Repertory Theatre's production of <i>And the Soul Shall Dance</i> by Wakako Yamauchi in 1990. Photograph by Corky Lee.   | 90             |
| 6 | Nobuko Miyamoto in her solo performance <i>A Grain of Sand</i> (1994). Courtesy of Nobuko Miyamoto.  | 95             |
| 7 | Buzz, the gorilla, interacts with an American suburban girl Lulu in <i>Kind Ness</i> by Ping Chong, created in collaboration with Robert Babb, John Fleming, Brian Hallas, Jeannie Hutchins, Lenard Petit, Louise Smith, and Louise Sunshine. Courtesy of Ping Chong.              | 114            |



LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS	xi
8 Eric Hayashi, Philip Kan Gotanda, David Henry Hwang, Rick (R. A.) Shiomi, and Lane Nishikawa at the Asian American Theater Company Benefit at the Asian Arts Museum in San Francisco on November 12, 1988. Photograph by Cynthia “Kiki” Wallis.	130
9 The 1980 production of Philip Kan Gotanda’s musical <i>The Avocado Kid</i> at the Asian American Theater Company. Photograph by Cynthia “Kiki” Wallis.	141
10 Performance artist Dan Kwong describes the Khmer Rouge reign of terror in Cambodia, 1975–1979 in his solo performance show, <i>The Soul of a Country</i> at the Highways Performance Space, Santa Monica, California, June 2005. Courtesy of Dan Kwong.	169
11 Protesters picket the opening night of <i>Miss Saigon</i> in front of the Broadway Theater in New York City. Photograph by Corky Lee.	197
12 Slant Performance Group’s original song parody “My Girlfriend is a Yakuza” from the show <i>The Second Coming</i> . Photograph by Corky Lee.	210
13 Ching Valdes Aran, Han Ong, Mia Katigbak, and Jessica Hagedorn, stalwarts of the Ma-Yi Theater, which began as a Filipino American theatre in New York City. Courtesy of Ralph B. Peña.	217
14 Bernard White, Meera Simhan and Poorna Jagannathan in the 2002 world premiere of <i>Queen of the Remote Control</i> by Sujata G. Bhatt at the East West Players. Photograph by Michael Lamont. Courtesy of the East West Players.	221
15 Antigone being sentenced to imprisonment in a cave in the National Asian American Theatre Company’s 2004 production of Sophocles’ <i>Antigone</i> , directed by Jean Randich with original music by Robert Murphy. Photograph by Ching Gonzalez. Courtesy of Mia Katigbak.	223

Cambridge University Press  
978-0-521-85051-3 - A History of Asian American Theatre  
Esther Kim Lee  
Frontmatter  
[More information](#)

---

## *Acknowledgements*

I could not have completed this book without the support of numerous individuals. I first thank Albert for sharing his perspective on this project and in life. He and our families, with their unwavering patience and love, offered their time and service, which I could never pay back fully. To my mentor Thomas Postlewait, I owe immense gratitude for guiding me intellectually and for encouraging me to find my voice as a theatre historian. Other professors at the Ohio State University, including Alan Woods, Esther Beth Sullivan and Lesley Ferris, opened my mind to what is possible in the scholarship of American theatre. This project is a revision of my dissertation, which I wrote with the financial assistance of the Five College Dissertation Fellowship. During my tenure as a fellow at Hampshire College, I had the privilege to meet and work with Lorna Peterson, Carol Angus, Ynez Wilkins, Ellen Donkin, Mitzi Sawada, Roberta Uno, and many others, all of whom made my stay in the Pioneer Valley productive and enjoyable.

At University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, the faculty and staff in the Department of Theatre and the Asian American Studies Program have been selfless with their encouragement. In the Department of Theatre, I thank Robert Graves for his responses to earlier drafts of this book and for believing in the project to the fullest. I thank George Yu, Kent Ono, and Sharon Lee for their generous support and for advocating the need to include performing arts in the curriculum of Asian American studies. The Faculty Summer Research Awards in Asian American Studies were especially vital to the completion of this project. The Research Board at University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign was instrumental in this project: the Humanities Release Time gave me time to write, and the Arnold O. Beckman Research Award allowed me to travel and purchase equipment essential to my research. The award also supported my

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

xiii

research assistant, Clara Mee-Young Shim, whose work always exceeded my expectations.

The scholarship of Asian American theatre is a small but growing field, and I am truly honored to be part of an excellent group of colleagues and friends. Josephine Lee has not only been a role model, but her suggestions on earlier drafts of this book were invaluable. The conversations I have had with Dan Bacalzo, Lucy Burns, Yuko Kurahashi, Daphne Lei, SanSan Kwan, Sean Metzger, Emily Roxworthy, Karen Shimakawa, Priya Srinivasan, and Yutian Wong have informed this project. I have also benefited greatly from the writings of Terry Hong, whose vast knowledge of Asian American theatre has guided me. Richard Kim helped me gain access to interviewees, and I thank him for acting as my informal agent during the research process. The staff at the following libraries and archives were tremendously resourceful: The California Ethnic and Multicultural Archives at the University of California, Santa Barbara; Arts Library Special Collections at the University of California, Los Angeles; The Billy Rose Theatre Collection at the New York Public Library for Performing Arts; Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives at New York University.

I wish to thank Don Wilmeth and Victoria Cooper for recognizing that Asian American theatre should be included in American theatre history. Along with their advice, the guidance of Rebecca Jones of the Cambridge University Press consistently improved this project, and a number of friends gave me the confidence and strength to finish it. The intelligence, kindness, and sense of humor of Valleri Robinson Hohman, Barbara Kim, Moon-Kie Jung, and Cynthia Oliver have sustained me throughout my career. I also thank my students at the Ohio State University, Hampshire College, University of Southern California, and the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign for their insightful comments, many of which I have borrowed for this project.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge all of the Asian American artists who helped me with this project. Without their participation, this book could not have been written. I give special thanks to Harold Byun, Joanna Chan, Tisa Chang, Ping Chong, Frank Chin, Tim Dang, Alvin Eng, Philip Kan Gotanda, Eric Hayashi, Velina Hasu Houston, David Henry Hwang, Mia Katigbak, Bea Kiyohara, Dan Kwong, Corky Lee, Mako, Soon-Tek Oh, David Oyama, Ralph B. Peña, Wayland Quintero, Sung Rno, Rick Shiomi, Roger Tang, Marilyn Tokuda, Denise Uyehara, and Cynthia Kiki Wallis. I apologize in advance for any inaccuracies in this book and request the continued patience, generosity, and indulgence of all interviewees. They are my inspiration, and this is their story.

*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 Pilipinos (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* premieres 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.

- 1977 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*.

- 1978 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.

- 1979 Philip Kan Gotanda's musical, *The Avocado Kid*, premieres at the East West Players.

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

- 1980 Wakako Yamauchi's *The Music Lessons* and David Henry Hwang's *FOB* premiere at the Public Theater in New York City.
- 1981 Asian Exclusion Act is renamed Northwest Asian American Theater Company.  
 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

## SELECT CHRONOLOGY

xvii

- 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 18 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.