

Asian American Theatre

Genre Beyond

It's as if our themes were removed, and what remains is universality," says Dennis Myers of Asian American Theatre. Working with the theatre, playwright Rick Shiomi has a ready context. He can exploit the clichés attendant on an ethnic cast—"a Chinaman's chance"—turning verbal patterns in upon themselves and working them out, inverting metaphors, making heroes of the alien menace and villains of the moral majority, yesterday's menace. In the play *Yellow Fever*, Shiomi frames Asian characters emergent from a dark morass of foreignness, rounding figurative social corners as they prowl the

by Alice Thibeau

obligatory alleys of the detective story mode. Using the "hard boiled" genre, the playwright employs its stereotypical roles for their easy familiarity; so much is taken for granted by the audience that the stock characters—hero/detective, girl reporter—are accepted as representatives of group ideals. The community itself is brought into focus, and that focus is the integral purpose of the Asian American Theatre. *Yellow Fever* exemplifies the theatre's intention.

Even Wayne Obata's lighting adheres to the detective genre clichés which carve the hero from mysterious darkness. His chiaroscuro device picks out Asians caught in Western conventions which leave them, eventually, inevitably, justly, a part of their own community. The form the production takes is arbitrary.

Dennis Myers is Asian American Theatre's executive director. Along with Smokey Leung, executive producer, he is the Asian American's complete staff. The theatre was conceived in 1973 as a workshop, under sponsorship of the American Conservatory Theatre (ACT), intended to create a pool of skilled ethnic theatre technicians and actors. Opportunities to acquire theatre competence were rare in San Francisco's Asian American community. Dennis Myers enrolled in a playwrights' workshop there in 1975. (In the footnotes of the playbill for *Yellow Fever* Myers lets on that he really wanted to play the hero, being generally stage struck.) This theatre was not created to serve art for its own sake—art in the spirit of spite towards the bourgeoisie. The audience on California Street is not the self-consciously avant garde; this is a community theatre, dealing by intent with widely shared ethnic allusions and issues. Asian American Theatre is disposed toward plays set sturdily in social context, distanced by the playwrights' and director's regard for the conventions of the theatre.

Therein is an implicit risk: Rick Shiomi is sensitive to the possibility that a rise audience might lack an understanding of those European expectations and traditions of theatre which are, in fact, the stuff of the cultural adaptation he has made and which he presents in his work. The emphasis in this theatre is on the American experience of being Asian, an assumption of Western education and attitude. The assumed audience of second- and third-generation Asian Americans recognize the stereotypes, and can be brought to laugh, as the playwright intends, when confronted with the types, the tokens, the members of the "model minority." Shiomi captures a subplot in a phrase ascribed to the lead character: "Call your own shots; then you don't have to smile for a living." In some sense Asian American Theatre productions are issue-oriented by the very fact that they are Asian-oriented. This is theatre both in and on behalf of its community. Its issues are of allegiance, involvement, and independence, as well of artistic expression.



Smokey Leung, Helen Plensart, Dennis Myers, Bobby Horiuchi

Stereotype

In 1980 Asian American graduated from workshop status to that of Theatre—"theatre in the large sense," as Dennis Myers says. ACT continues to loan rehearsal space and similar services, continues to support San Francisco's version of Off Broadway—"Off Geary." Asian American Theatre is now one of four such Asian theatre arts groups nationwide.

"It's changing the stereotype so we're no longer just tourists," Smokey Leung says. Her reference has allusions to World War II internment of coastal Asian Americans, as though they lacked specific citizenship. The Asian American theatre network—from New York to Los Angeles, Seattle to San Francisco—maintains continuity, a non-transient solidarity. "The theatre generates enthusiasm—role models—a new pool," Leung continues. "And we keep growing off each other."

Growing indeed. Bobby Horiuchi, volunteer building supervisor, scooped the lobby space from office bits, lowering the ceiling with geometric lath and an approximation of oiled paper. Equally volunter permits ten seats more than the California Street theatre now can physically contain, and Horiuchi fiercely contemplates the walls for possibilities of cantilevered or stilted box seats.

Tech work, lighting—they're volunteer enterprises, community activism and self-expression on behalf of the group. Many of the volunteers are impressively credentialed in media "mainstream"; their involvement with Asian American Theatre's tributary illustrates sansei levels of identity. In *Yellow Fever* the girl reporter, played by June Mesina, attaches herself to Art Lai's detective hero; the detective's role in the community has the definition for which she feels a need. In the epilogue she leaves him and the place, choosing to move parallel to her own ethnicity.

Stephanie Mischak, in the audience, is a Richmond District political activist. She notes this theatre's integrity to its neighborhood, comparing its function with street corner voter registration; both endeavors encourage the definition and control of the community by its citizens. *Yellow Fever*'s detective protagonist is accused by his friend of running his business like a community service. Within the relatively traditionalist role he serves, such orientation is expected; other generations serve a monied economy.

The traditions are in transition within the community, defining new roles. Even within the theatre, on stage there's not the expectation of glamour once associated with theatre work. "We stay here for other reasons," says Kent Hori, chairman of Asian American's Board of Directors. The theatre's an organizing principle, a model, a community center. Dennis Myers' college degree, in fact, is in social welfare. Hori volunteers his efforts to establish a social institution, which takes a theatre's form.

It's a laboratory of the stage. Asian American's formal program includes Mainstage Production, Resident Acting Company, Theatre Crafts Training Program, Playwrights Workshop and Community Outreach & Support. The alchemical process would bond individual elements to the purposes of the group, and of art. Art isn't an ethnic issue. For all the dedication to broad social issues, the preponderance of the effort is art's purpose: heightened perception, the recognition of patterning, both phenomenal and social, which is cleansing and clarifying, and which makes perceptions accurate and gives them universal scale. Stereotype is a method of that clarification; the artistic goal is to compose the type within the whole. Myths and fairy tales deal with types in a simple framework. Asian American Theatre's crew speaks of the popular success of *Yellow Fever* as a 'Cinderella Story,' meaning a prototype of overnight accomplishment, while wryly remembering the long effort that established the group and the threatening proximity of the ashes of dissolution. The detective genre is close to a folk mode. The overlapping element of art in a story's presentation, which reaches an apex of language and characterization in the tragic classics, is what theatre is ultimately concerned with. That is its goal on whatever the level attempted, within a small community or as a conscious, national, ethnic or pan-ethnic expression—even as an expression of mortality.

"It's our humanness that counts," Kent Mori says.

Asian American Theatre extends *Yellow Fever* through May 23 at 4344 California Street. 752-8324.