



David Henry Hwang leads the AAPAC roundtable on Asian-American casting.

BRUCE ALAN JOHNSON

Colors of Change

NEW YORK CITY: Where are all the Asians? That was the question behind a study by the **Asian American Performers Action Coalition (AAPAC)**, unveiled and considered in a roundtable in February at **Fordham University**,

moderated by playwright **David Henry Hwang**.

The numbers from the study were gleaned from the past five seasons in New York, including 400 productions on Broadway and at the 16 largest nonprofit companies. The results showed that, despite an

increase in actors of color in that time, from 14 to 22 percent, Caucasian actors still occupied 80 percent of all roles. In 2010–11, Asian-Americans played just 2 percent of roles, down from 3 percent five years ago.

“Asian Americans were

the only ethnic minority to actually decline,” said AAPAC steering committee member and actor **Pun Bandhu**, as he led the audience through the study. Out of the companies represented, **Signature Theatre** had the highest percentage of



Melissa Engle, Peter Esposito in Bekah Brunstetter's *Oohrah!*, by LiveWire Chicago, at the Garage Theatre through April 8.

RYAN BORQUE/COURTESY OF STEPPENWOLF

THE NOT-SO-EMPTY SPACE

CHICAGO: It's easy to forget that the **Steppenwolf Theatre Company's** Garage Theatre is ensconced in an actual parking garage. With its newly renovated lobby, complete with eclectic furniture and an art installation made entirely of stacked paper playscripts, the place has come a long way since its first production, *Wolf Lullaby* by Hillary Bell, directed by ensemble member **Anna D. Shapiro** almost 14 years ago.

“We basically had this set of four risers and a sheet of luan on the floor, and we did the first play there with just that and probably \$500,” Shapiro recalls of the space's beginnings in 1998. Now the Garage Theatre is nothing short of a theatre company inside a theatre company, elegantly combining some of the most creative programming models in the field under one roof (also newly remodeled).

In its third year there is the **Garage Rep**, the newest incarnation of Steppenwolf's long tradition of presenting the work of fellow Chicago theatre companies. “There are over 400 storefront theatre companies in Chicago,” says **Jacob Padrón**, newly appointed associate producer of the Garage Rep. “We want to be a part of shaping that ecology.”

This year, the Rep, which runs through April 8, will present *Hit the Wall* by the **Inconvenience**, *He Who* by **Theatre Zarko**, and *Oohrah!* by **LiveWire Chicago**. The companies were selected not only for the quality of their work and their desire for the opportunity, but also for their proven ability to attract millennial audiences. Garage Rep, in fact, is funded by a grant supporting Steppenwolf's research on the cultivation of new theatre audiences, so attracting young theatregoers is a core value of the program.

Meanwhile, **First Look Repertory of New Work** is presented annually at the Garage Theatre. Fall 2011 was its seventh iteration, and the lineup included three new plays by **Christina Anderson**, **Zayd Dohrn** and **Carly Mensch**. “The hope is that First Look acts as a springboard for the plays to go somewhere else,” says artistic producer **Rebecca Rugg**.

Since its first season, 11 of the 18 plays presented at First Look have had premieres at New York City theatres, including *When the Messenger Is Hot* by **Laura Eason** (at **59E59 Theaters**), *Butcher of Baraboo* by **Marisa Wegrzyn** (at **Second Stage Theatre**) and *100 Saints You Should Know* by **Kate Fodor** (at **Playwrights Horizons**). The next First Look will be held in summer 2013.

Finally, **Next Up**—co-sponsored by **Northwestern University** with Steppenwolf staff members, including Shapiro, acting as mentors—presents the work of Northwestern directing and design graduate students, who get to experience a production process inside an institution with professional actors and a professional shop as their culminating project. Next Up will run June 5–24.

“For us, having those three sets of artists, the visiting companies, the new playwrights, and the new directors and designers breathing the same air—it's life-giving for all of us,” says Shapiro proudly of the once-empty space that now houses so much more than cars. —*Hannah Greene*

non-Caucasian actors (60), while **Atlantic Theater Company** had the lowest (7), with the **New Group** boasting the highest proportion of Asian-American actors (8 percent).

The main issues addressed at the discussion were causes and what can be done. Hwang, in a disclaimer, said, "AAPAC doesn't necessarily seek equality of outcome. What we're talking about is equality of access." A key statistic along these lines: Among actors of color, Asian-Americans were least likely to be cast in non-racially-specific roles.

Public Theater artistic director **Oskar Eustis** said the obstacle may be pre-conceived notions of playwrights and directors, who still "stop cold at the idea of members of a biological family group being of different races." Broadway producer **Nelle Nugent** agreed that that's where the change needs to come, because, as she said, "The author and the director have final casting approval. It's a very foolish producer who forces an actor on a director." Who else might make a difference? "All of your friends [of color] who are writing big checks to boards," Nugent said.

For more information, or to request a copy of the report, visit AAPAC's page on Facebook.

Mind the Gap

PHILADELPHIA: "The conversation about plays getting developed to death is almost at the point of cliché," says **Edward Sobel**, associate artistic director of **Arden Theatre Company**. In an effort to cut down on the fuss, Arden



COURTESY OF WENDY MACLEOD

MacLeod

has launched the Writers' Room, a new initiative that puts a playwright in residence at the theatre for a total of four months.

The program begins with the writer making preliminary visits to the Arden to get to know the theatre and its audience. "Then the playwright will have six weeks to write a draft of a play," says Sobel, who will oversee the program. Rehearsals and two weeks of public performances culminate the residency.

Often during a play's development, considerable time passes between a writer's inspiration and the final product. "The Writers Room will allow for a production opportunity that's more closely connected to the initial generative impulse of the writer, and will close the gap between the writing stage of a play and the doing stage," says Sobel. "There's something holistic in what we're doing." He adds, "The relationship between an artist and a theatre can be hard, but the Writers' Room is designed so that the playwright gets to know the Philly talent pool and the Arden audience."

Playwright **Wendy MacLeod** (*The Water Children*, *The House of Yes*) is Arden's first Writers' Room resident with a room of her own. Affiliated Arden

artists such as playwright **Michael Hollinger**, actors **Grace Gonglewski** and **Melanye Finister**, and designers **Thom Weaver** and **Jorge Cousineau** will orient MacLeod to the Philly community. MacLeod's residency starts this month and will conclude with a showing of her work July 5–15. Go to www.ardentheatre.org.

Hatching a New Fest

CHATTANOOGA, TENN.: Charleston, S.C., has its **Spoleto Festival**; now Chattanooga, the fourth-largest city in Tennessee, has the **HATCH Festival**, an acronym that stands for "History Arts Technology Culture Happenings." Running April 12–22, HATCH will encompass a variety of visual art, performance art, technology, music and history events.

Coinciding with HATCH is the Biennial Festival of New Plays presented April 13–29 by the **Chattanooga Theatre Centre**. There will be a mainstage show, *Mr. & Mrs. M*, a fantasia on Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, as well as readings of new plays by local writers: **Hunter Rodgers's** *No Loitering*,

T.J. Carson's *Mr. Mundoo* and **Dakota Brown's** *Following Orion*. Also on tap is a workshop of *The Leopold Project* by storyteller **Jim Pfitzer**, about early environmentalist Aldo Leopold. "We're excited about these new plays coming together alongside HATCH," says CTC producing director **George Quick**.

HATCH, which has a whopping 20 (and counting) partner organizations, also coincides with the city's 4 Bridges Arts Festival, the Mid-South Sculpture Alliance Conference and several exhibits from the **Hunter Museum of American Art**, and 10x10, an exhibit that spans 10 city blocks. More info at www.hatchchatt.org.

A Theatre Sampler

CLINTON, MICH.: The term "golden ticket" may conjure visions of *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, but when the **Michigan Equity Theatre Alliance** held its META Golden Ticket contest this past autumn, the prize wasn't edible. Rather, the Golden Ticket entitles one lucky superfan to a pair of tickets for the entire 2011–12 season at seven of Michigan's



RODNEY STRONG

The cast of *The Primitive Streak*, which premiered at the Festival of New Plays at Chattanooga Theatre in 2010.