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Asian-Americans missing from Broadway, study finds

Minorities' share of stage roles in prominent city productions has grown, but Asians are stuck at 2%, despite comprising 13% of the population.

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Despite record numbers of new productions being mounted on Broadway in recent years, some minority performers feel left out in the cold.

A report released Tuesday by the Asian American Performers Action Coalition shows that the number of Asian-Americans cast in productions on Broadway and by the 16 largest not-for-profit theaters in the city is dropping.

Though Asian-Americans comprise 12.9% of New York City, Asian-American actors accounted for only 1.6% of available roles in new productions on Broadway, 3.2% of roles at nonprofit companies and 2.3% of the roles industry-wide. Already minuscule, the number of Asian-Americans on stage is below what it was five years ago—making them the only minority group not experiencing an increase.

“There are Asian-Americans who have dedicated their lives to theater who have never been seen by mainstream audiences,” said Pun Bandhu, an actor and member of the Asian American Performers Action Coalition steering committee. “We really feel invisible.”

Overall, the percentage of minority actors in relation to the total number of roles has increased, hovering at around 21% for the past four years compared to 14% five years ago, the report found. And the number of minority actors cast in non-minority specific roles grew year to year.

But much of those gains came from an increase in productions about minority groups. Only 10.6% of all roles this past year were cast without regard to race.

African-Americans fared the best of all the minority groups. The percentage of African-American performers of the total number of roles jumped to 14% this past year from 8% five years ago. Latino performers doubled their visibility, accounting for 4% of total roles this past season, compared to 2% five years ago.

In contrast, Asian-American performers saw their numbers drop, from 3% of all roles five years ago to 1% in the 2008-2009 and 2009-2010 seasons with a slight uptick to 2% last season. There were only 18 principal Broadway contracts for Asian-American actors in the last five years.

Mr. Bandhu said the impetus for the study started with a Facebook post. An Asian-American actor posted a message about getting his first audition at a certain theater in 10 years, and it created an outpouring of similar experiences.

“We had to take a hard look at the facts to see whether our fears can be validated or not,” Mr. Bandhu said.

The Asian American Performers Action Coalition is holding an industry roundtable on Feb. 13 to discuss how to make casting more inclusive.

Maria Somma, a spokeswoman for Actors Equity, said, “We hope this study will encourage producers to re-imagine their hiring practices and to embrace non-traditional casting.”