

# AAPAC

## The Asian American Performers Action Coalition

### REPRESENTASIAN: THE CHANGING FACE OF NEW YORK THEATER SUMMARY OF ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION February 13, 2012 Pope Auditorium, Fordham University

#### ROUNDTABLE GUESTS:

Douglas Aibel – Artistic Dir., Vineyard Theatre & Casting Director  
Pun Bandhu – AAPAC Representative  
Douglas Carter Beane – Playwright  
Don Birge – Agent, Stewart Talent  
Stephen C. Byrd – Broadway Producer  
Trip Cullman – Director  
Angel Desai – AAPAC Representative  
Oskar Eustis – Artistic Dir., Public Theater  
Paul Hilepo – Agent, Hartig Hilepo Agency  
David Henry Hwang – Playwright

Christine Toy Johnson – AAPAC Representative  
Stephanie Klapper – Casting Director  
Mary McColl – Executive Dir., Actors' Equity Association  
Nelle Nugent – Broadway Producer  
Nancy Piccione – Casting Dir., Manhattan Theatre Club  
Tara Rubin – Casting Director  
Mark Schlegel – Agent, Cornerstone Talent Agency  
Ken Rus Schmoll – Director  
Bartlett Sher – Director

#### Opening Remarks by Christine Toy Johnson

"Background of why AAPAC was formed: Facebook started it all. An Asian American actor with an MFA from one of our top acting programs posted that, after over 10 years in the city, he was being seen by one of our top Off-Broadway companies for the very first time. This sparked many responses and propelled a group of us to see if and why Asian American actors were not being given a level amount of access. In August of 2011, a group of 15 of us got together to start planning a series of three forums to address issues of access, representation and to find actionable solutions for change. Our first forum was in September with over 100 Asian American actors. Our second was in October with over 135 actors, writers and directors. And the third is tonight, attended by over 400 of you and

of course, including some of our esteemed industry stakeholders. On the shoulders of those who have come before us, especially our friends at Pan Asian Rep, Ma-Yi, NAATCO and 2G, this community has become so galvanized in a positive and pro-active way and we hope that this is just the beginning of conversations we have with each other as the collaborators that we are."

#### Statistics Presentation by Pun Bandhu

See document:

*ETHNIC REPRESENTATION ON NYC STAGES*

#### Statement by David Henry Hwang

"It's an interesting time because an amazing thing is happening right now, not in theater: Jeremy Lin. Very good example of two things: the insidiousness and banality of the glass ceiling. All these articles saying, Why didn't they see him? What were they thinking? Assumptions were made. When you have a glass ceiling, it doesn't only hurt the people who are being discriminated, it hurts the institutions that are doing the discriminating. So it didn't help the Warriors to cut him, it didn't help Stanford not to give him a scholarship and the Knicks would've been better off if they'd let him play sooner."

# HOW DID WE GET HERE?

## Generational

- The face of the world is changing and some are a little slower to accept and celebrate that.

## Directors

- There are still directors who do not believe in the idea of members of a biologically related family being cast with different races. Race is such a central category that seeing a black parent with a white child does not feel real to them.
- In commercial theater, the director has casting approval along with the playwright and producer. If anyone of them closes the door on non-traditional casting, then the discussion is over.

## Playwrights

- A playwright who is getting his/her play produced for the first time often wants to put their family or people from their lives onstage. Playwrights have said, "I'm much more open to [non-traditional casting] for future productions, but for this first outing, I'm bringing my family to life and I want it to reflect exactly who they were."
- Playwrights fear what their plays may start to say if certain roles are cast with minority actors. For instance, what would the play be saying if they cast the only non-white actor as the villain of the play? Too politically dangerous.

## The Perpetual Foreigner & Perception

- Asian Americans are not perceived as American but as the "perpetual foreigner." This is a prevalent perception not

only in the industry, but also in society at large. Therefore, Asian Americans are not routinely considered when looking to populate American landscapes.

- It's difficult for Caucasian playwrights and directors to understand what it means to imagine an Asian American playing a role that they thought of as Caucasian. It's easier to contextualize where an African American would fit in.
- Asian American actors were cast mostly in musicals and Shakespeare productions. Is it because these types of shows are more fantastical and "unrealistic"?

## Less Work

- The trend in the theater is to do shows with smaller casts to save money. With the general decrease in employment, those actors already on the margins will be the first ones to fall off.

## Casting

- Casting agents are not as conversant about the Asian American talent pool.

## Subscribers

- Artistic Directors and boards of theaters may be assuming what types of shows their subscribers want. Perhaps subscribers are actually more open to different types of stories than they are being offered?

## Observations

- The Film & TV world has afforded more opportunities to ethnic actors. Why hasn't the theater done the same? People

are watching film and TV with an open mind. Why not the same in theater, especially in NYC, one of the most diverse cities in the world?

- Regional theaters tend to be more open to non-traditional casting than NYC theaters.
- The term "Asian American" includes a number of ethnicities, cultures, races, languages and religions. Because of this, finding unity is trickier challenging than say, the African American community.

# WHAT CAN WE DO?

## Change Perception

- A mentality shift is needed. There's no such thing as a 4<sup>th</sup> wall. There are a million ways that we suspend our belief when we go to theater. And racial diversity is yet another.
- It is important to reflect the world as it is on the stage. We do not live in an all-white world, especially not NYC.
- Playwrights must open their minds. One way is to look at historic photos and see the types of people that actually lived then. The Wild West was full of different looking people. New York was full different types of people.

## Make Noise

- Get out and protest theaters. The more they hear and the more they are challenged to think about their casting choices will be incredibly helpful.
- Not-for-profit theaters are supposed to be mission-driven. If enough people are screaming that they are not fulfilling their mission, they will listen. They are moved by moral suasure, not by pleasing investors.
- Whenever you see a play where everyone is white, say to your seatmate really loudly, "Did you happen to notice that everyone on that stage was white?"
- Shift the equation of non-traditional casting being seen as a risk to making it more risky to have a completely white cast.
- More forums and discussions like this event.

## Theaters

- Produce more plays with Asian American characters in them.

- Commission Asian American playwrights.
- Especially with new plays, it is important to cast non-traditionally because that will become the template for future productions. Even if it is never said, future productions will look at the photos of past productions and cast the same race.
- Partner and develop with the organizations that have been producing Asian American productions, such as 2G, Ma-Yi, NAATCO and Pan Asian Rep.
- Not-for-profit theaters are meant to serve their communities. Their programming has not changed while the communities have. If they present and develop work that speaks to their diverse communities, they could fulfill their mission as well as gain a new audience.
- When a theater casts a play non-traditionally, the audience will be more diverse.

## Directors

- Casting decisions are very complex. Sometimes a director preserves the family structure because he/she has strong reasons, but if he/she does not have to, then he/she must actively choose to diversify the cast.
- When directors begin the casting process, specifically tell casting directors to look beyond an all white cast and audition as many different types as possible.

## Money

- Ask board members of the not-for-profit theaters who are

Asian and/or other ethnicities to demand to see more people like them on stage.

- Get a patron to create a fund with a not-for-profit theater company to do one play or musical a year dealing with Asian American themes.
- Find an Asian "Oprah Winfrey" who can lend support and influence.

## Audience

- Get more Asians and Asian Americans to buy tickets and see theater.
- If you want a particular kind of theater and it comes along, buy tickets and see it.

## Observations

- We need more Asian American directors, playwrights, art administrators, casting agents, talent agents, etc. to bring more awareness and visibility to the industry.
- What does it mean when so many of the stories being told are about one specific segment of the population, i.e. the Caucasian perspective? A recent study found that most of the funding for not-for-profits are going to theaters with shrinking subscriber bases and that theaters that are doing diverse work, actually reaching out to underserved communities, are not getting adequate funding. The future generation of artists and what they'll look like depends on the funding of today.