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Fewer Asian-American roles on Rialto

Thesp org sponsors revealing Gotham survey

By GORDON COX

The current theater season brought us not one but two plays -- "Chinglish" and "Outside People" - - about expats in China. But a detailed employment analysis of New York actors over the past five seasons has revealed that thespians of Asian descent were the only minority group to see a decline in total gigs during that period.

The study, from the recently formed grassroots advocacy org Asian American Performers Action Coalition (AAPAC), added hard numbers to anecdotal reports.

The research compiled figures on the casting of all races, broken down into categories for Broadway and the major nonprofits. It was further subdivided on a theater-by-theater basis and includes details yielded by few other studies of New York actor employment.

The findings made legiters sit up and take notice.

A Feb. 13 roundtable attracted close to 20 industry movers and shakers as panelists, including producers Stephen Byrd ("A Streetcar Named Desire") and Nelle Nugent ("Stick Fly"), artistic directors Oskar Eustis (the Public) and Douglas Aibel (the Vineyard), casting directors Tara Rubin and Nancy Piccione, scribes Douglas Carter Beane and David Henry Hwang (who moderated) and helmer Bartlett Sher, among others. Approximately 450 people attended, according to AAPAC.

"Nontraditional casting and providing access to people who are not Caucasian is something that's in our minds all the time," says Rubin, who's cast tuners including "How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying" and "Mary Poppins." "The idea that we're not doing better is staggering."

Overall casting of Asian-American thespians stood at 3% of all roles five years ago, saw a slight rise, then slumped to negligible levels prior to last season, which came in at 2%.

By comparison, the number for African-American actors was 9% five years ago and peaked at 17% before dropping to 14% last season. The group was also the most likely among actors of color to be tapped for nontraditional casting.

Latino thespians saw employment rise a bit; their numbers stood at 2% five years ago, and reached a high of 6%, but last season came in at 3%.

Taken together, numbers of all other minority groups barely registered.

The total number of minority thespians employed started at 15% five years ago, and hovered at around 22% for the past four seasons. White actors played an average of 80% of all roles during the five-year span.

With the numbers in hand, AAPAC and legiters are now planning their next steps. One of them is to explore the issue of equal opportunity employment, which Actors' Equity Assn. exec director Mary McColl, who was present at the panel, said Equity works to ensure. "What we're able to do is bargain equal employment opportunity language into the contracts," McColl said. "It's our job to have the debate about access with producers, and keep having it."

But despite the idealism expressed at the panel, the fact remains that much of the power in determining what gets onstage lies in the checkbook.

Byrd, the producer of the all-black-cast "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof" and the upcoming mixed-race production of "Streetcar," who is one of the few black producers on Broadway, notes it can be hard to attract a high enough level of investment from fellow African-Americans for legit endeavors.

"Overall, there's a lot of pushback in the community because they don't know a lot about investing in theater," he says. "It's a challenge, although some still do want to be supportive, usually for smaller investments."

Perhaps investors of color will be persuaded to take the plunge in greater numbers as more Broadway plays attract consistently diverse auds, as has recently been the case with "The Color Purple" and "Fences."

Producer Jeffrey Richards estimates that, on average, one-quarter to one-third of the audience is black at the current revival of "Porgy and Bess," a musical to which African-American auds have not always been friendly. Richards also produced "Chinglish," which he says pulled in houses that were about one-third Asian-American.

While that wasn't enough to keep the show from closing at a loss (a fate that befalls many productions, no matter who's acting) Richards says that like the African-American audience, the Asian-American audience is growing.

For AAPAC, the study and the roundtable -- the third and largest of a series of events begun in the fall -- reps the first step in raising awareness in every area of the industry. "This is definitely a part of us raising our voices," says thesp Pun Bandhu ("Wit"), one of the group's organizers.

Several legiters noted that diversifying casts could bring more people into the theater. "As a producer, I'll take a full house," Byrd says. "I don't care what color they are."

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