

Between Immigration and Hyphenation: The Problems of Theorizing Asian American Theater

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Current interest in developing a more “multicultural” view of American theater has also renewed interest in theatrical performances by immigrants to the United States. Sometimes classified as “immigrant theater,” these performances are frequently mentioned within the context of what is sometimes called the “ethnic” American theater, a category that includes theater by later generations of “hyphenated” Americans. Such framings and namings, I would suggest, deserve to be investigated as carefully as the theatrical works and communities to which they allude.

Several past encounters, both academic and theatrical, inform this particular investigation. I wrote the first version of this essay for a conference titled *Immigrant Cultures and the Performing Arts*, which was sponsored by the Immigration History Research Center at the University of Minnesota in March of 1996. I had been invited to present what was to be the only paper on non-European immigrant culture. Knowing this, I gave myself a “theoretical” as well as “informational” agenda. I set out to discuss and problematize existing models of “immigrant theater”—the subject of most of the papers at this conference—in light of particular assumptions about immigrant experience. These assumptions are worrisome, insofar as they manifest certain essentialist notions of “culture” and norms of assimilation that can be used to marginalize those who do not fit such patterns.

But other issues soon complicated this enjoyable task. In pointing out how theories of “immigrant theater” might in fact be exclusionary, I realized that this particular exclusion, while perhaps the most obvious, was not alone. Immigrant experience can be itself rendered marginal even in presumably more progressive scholarship on “hyphenated” identities and the artistic productions that try to express them. This problem of inclusive representation was painfully clear to me in a choice I made for my recent book *Performing Asian America: Race and Ethnicity on the Contemporary Stage*.¹ During the fall of 1994, I went to see three

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Twin Cities productions: Theater Mu's *River of Dreams*, *Musika!*, a revue staged by a Filipino-American community group, and Ping Chong's *Undesirable Elements* at the Illusion Theater. Although I thought long and hard about each of these three productions while working on *Performing Asian America*, I did not include my readings of them—which comprise the second part of this present essay—in that book. Now, in retrospect, this decision brings up some vexing questions. What were some of the reasons behind my separating these productions from the rest of my book project despite the fact that I worked on both concurrently? Did these productions demand a somewhat different theoretical apparatus than other Asian American plays? Why did a book ostensibly about Asian American performance include so little on the theatrical work of first generation immigrants, and why was I led myself to separate “immigration” from “hyphenation”?

This article attempts to outline these concerns: first, how previous scholarship in theater history has framed terms such as “immigrant theater” or “ethnic theater” in very particular ways; and second, how more recent work on Asian American theater and drama, which sets out to inform and move us towards a much more inclusive version of American theater, might encounter its own problems of naming and exclusion. I will then discuss those three productions, in hopes of generating some insight into the particular challenges of understanding Asian American immigrant theater.

One of the most comprehensive recent studies addressing “immigrant” theater is Maxine Schwartz Seller's 1983 collection *Ethnic Theatre in the United States*.² Seller's book contains a wealth of information on amateur and professional theater productions by and for communities defined by their “ethnic” difference. The book includes numerous essays on “immigrant theater” by first- and second-generation performers from a variety of countries: both traditional and contemporary theater works composed in the country of origin and imported to the United States, and plays written in the United States, including those that more specifically address the experiences of immigration and settlement.

Seller's book also presents material on plays and performances by later generations of “hyphenated” ethnic Americans. Her inclusion of both “immigrant” and “ethnic theater” raises the possibility of tantalizing connections, both between these different “generations” of theatrical practice, and among theaters of different immigrant and ethnic communities. Some general comparisons might in fact be made, insofar as so many of the plays mentioned address experiences of cultural difference, alienation, and marginality. Accounts of both “immigrant theaters” and “ethnic theaters” specifically highlight the distinctive ways in which human bodies can take on significance in terms of cultural difference. They suggest how each of the bodies performing in the theater, those of amateur actors in community

theaters, of visiting artists from the “old country,” or of later-generation “ethnics,” were marked—“ethnicized,” so to speak—within the context of their performances. This emphasis on the “ethnic” signification of performance and performers is apparent, for instance, in the terms used to praise Olle I Skarathult (Hjalmar Peterson), a Swedish-American comic actor who toured the United States in the first half of the century:

What I above all wish to say about Olle I Skarathult is that the performances by himself and his company strengthen the ties between the Swedes out here and the Swedish soil. The millions of smiles and perhaps ten thousand tears evoked by him were all born under the sign of Swedishness.³

Audiences might be thought of as marked in comparable ways, through the very act of witnessing. Thus, whether through an appeal to a common language, a vocabulary of gesture and spectacle, or a pattern of narrative, both “immigrant” and “hyphenated” theaters produce theaters of “difference” and “sameness,” which are concerned with the prospect of inclusion or exclusion from larger communities defined in national, social, economic, and political terms.

Yet even in making these general comments, we may be aware that the connections between “immigrant” and “ethnic” theater, and the comparisons among different “ethnic theaters,” are not as straightforward as they’re often made out to be. Seller’s collection makes especially evident how discussions of “immigrant” theater do not scrutinize carefully enough the disjunctions between what might be considered “immigrant” theater and “hyphenated” theater, thus risking the perils inherent in collapsing so much into the category of “ethnic” theater. In this, of course, Seller’s collection is not alone. A recent edition of *The Cambridge Guide to Theatre*, for instance, describes both “immigrant theatre” and “ethnic theatre” in the United States as “theatre by and for minority communities, whose cultural heritages distinguish them from the Anglo-American mainstream.”⁴ By leaving unexamined certain premises regarding “immigrant” and “ethnic” experience, these scholarly accounts unwittingly reinforce certain historical fallacies and dangerously limiting notions of culture, ethnicity, and race.

Ethnic Theatre in the United States concerns itself primarily with immigration from Europe, with the exception of essays on “Black Theatre,” “Mexican-American Theatre,” “Native American Theatre” and “Puerto Rican Theatre on the Mainland.” What is perhaps even more troubling, however, are not only the noticeable absences inherent in the selection of topics, but also the unexamined models of culture, community, and assimilation that are maintained within many of the essays on “immigrant theater.” Most of the essays focus on,

for the most part, nineteenth and early- to mid-twentieth century immigration, thus reinforcing a particular impression of immigration to the United States as having taken place primarily in the past. Only a few essays give prolonged attention to recent theatrical works by immigrants.⁵ Furthermore, immigrant communities seemed to be defined in ways that emphasize cultural boundaries—particularly as enacted through the theater—as rigid rather than fluid. Descriptions of different audiences and venues, whether of traditional performances brought over from the “old country” or newer plays, suggest only those performed in the context of “ethnic enclaves.” (“Immigrant theater” is theorized mainly insofar as it promotes in-group relationships—business organizations, friendships, marriages, and other social ties, language instruction—rather than as it exemplifies or enacts the crossing of cultural boundaries.)

Rather than envisioning immigration as continuing an already-existing dynamic process of hybridity within the United States, this idea of culture as distinctly bounded promotes the pattern of immigrants as first trying “to establish and maintain an ethnic identity,”⁶ then becoming inevitably absorbed by the “mainstream.” Theater is positioned as the demonstration and continued fortification of a coherent, continuous, recognizable culture, and examined only in terms of how it helps a community preserve that culture—its history, language, and bloodlines—against the onslaught of Americanization. The chronological structure of many of these accounts of both “immigrant” and “ethnic” theaters reinforce the impression that the transition from “immigrant” to “minority” theater might be thought of as a natural temporal process, where an earlier “immigrant” theater evolves into a later “hyphenated” theater, and subsequently disappears as assimilation occurred. M. Martina Tybor, blames “cultural erosion” for the decline of the Slovak-American theater: “Over the decades, the inevitable pressures of assimilation succeeded in reducing identity with some aspect of the ancestral heritage, especially in newer generations.”⁷ Similarly, Arthur Leonard Waldo sees “the Anglicization of all ethnic groups” as contributing to the demise of Polish theatre in America,⁸ and Christa Carvajal speculates that the failure of German-Americans to leave a lasting influence on the emerging American theater of the same time might be due to the nature of German immigrants, who “adjusted well to the New World, met its challenges with great enthusiasm, and became American patriots and English-speaking citizens much faster than most other immigrant ethnic groups.”⁹ Such descriptions suggest a model of immigration and ethnicity that assumes an inevitable process of assimilation into the “melting pot” of mainstream American life, in which the “immigrant theater” subsequently dies a natural death.

These descriptions of theater history affirm, rather than contest, the pervasive ideologies envisioning cultures, whether “ethnic” or “American,” as

bounded states of being, and assimilation as a characteristic pattern. Though in her introduction, Seller refers to the “‘new ethnicity’ of the 1960s and 1970s, which encouraged cultural pluralism rather than the ‘melting pot’ as the model for American society,” most of the individual essays included still maintain the impression that there might some quintessential “immigrant” experience, which establishes the norms for American identity and ultimately levels out differences among different ethnic and racial groups. Celebrating a past “ethnic heritage” as part of some authentically “American” experience—to which everyone, immigrant or native, has equal access—renders more profound differences meaningless.

One unfortunate consequence of the desire to include so many groups under the rubric of “ethnic” theater is the effacement of racialization as a significant historical determinant. The larger forces that enabled many European Americans (some more easily than others) to become “American” rather than “ethnic American,” and that prohibited non-white groups from doing so, remain unconsidered. What is instead suggested by the preponderance of essays which assume a typical process of immigration and gradual adaptation, is the subsequent puzzling “failure” of peoples of color to assimilate, to move past, even after numerous generations, their own marginalization as hyphenated ethnics.¹⁰ As Ronald Takaki has suggested, the myth of inevitable assimilation into whiteness pervades public policy as well as accounts of U.S. history; it rationalizes efforts against affirmative action, anti-discrimination laws, and collective action, dismissing social stratification and racial division as incidental rather than lasting conditions.¹¹ By suggesting that all immigrants confront a similar set of (temporary) barriers, through which they and successive generations pass with some exfoliation of their “Old World” customs and language, is to mask both past and present racial inequality. It is worth remembering that assimilation was made impossible for many immigrants from Asia, Africa, and the Americas, as well as for Native Americans, because of a racist legal and institutional history—including slavery, genocide, and exclusionary laws and policy—as well as because of individual acts of prejudice and ignorance.

The conditions under which Asians came to and settled in the United States have been markedly different from those affecting European immigrant groups. Like African-Americans, Asian Americans have been historically excluded from the full status of “American” by the barring of citizenship and voting rights, unequal access to education, laws prohibiting land ownership and miscegenation, as well as by anti-immigration restrictions and oppressive labor practices. That, for instance, both Japanese immigrants and native-born Japanese Americans were considered unassimilable is painfully evident in the rationale given for their internment during WWII by General John DeWitt:

In the war in which we are now engaged racial affinities are not severed by migration. The Japanese race is an enemy race and while many second and third generation Japanese born on United States soil, possessed of United States citizenship, have become 'Americanized,' the racial strains are undiluted . . . It, therefore, follows that along the vital Pacific Coast over 112,000 potential enemies, of Japanese extraction, are at large today.¹²

From the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act until after WWII, anti-immigration laws and other forms of institutionalized discrimination severely limited the numbers of Asian immigrants, changed the nature of their respective communities, and marked their status as Americans. Even with the easing of the restrictions on immigration and naturalization within the past several decades, and the substantial increase of new immigration from Asia since 1965, one might well argue that these "strangers from a different shore"¹³ cannot fit easily into models based on European immigration and assimilation.

Thus, is it not surprising that trying to understand the various dimensions of Asian immigrant and Asian American participation in the theater is a complicated task. The patterns and experiences of Asians immigrating to the United States cannot be encompassed by those paradigms suggested in accounts of "immigrant theater" by European groups. But by and large, these are the paradigms that are currently relied upon in describing the theatrical activity of Asian immigrants. When Asian immigrant drama is mentioned, it is most usually only in terms of nineteenth or early-twentieth century performances of traditional Chinese opera, or perhaps Japanese Noh or Kabuki. What little scholarship there is on this past work is used to suggest a development or evolutionary paradigm that locates the "immigrant drama" firmly in the past history of Asian Americans, a step en route to a more mature and fully realized Asian American sensibility.¹⁴

Trying to establish one set of "Asian American" paradigms for theater by Asian immigrants and later generation Asian Americans also presents a problem, when one considers how immigrants are presented in better-known theater works by Asian Americans. The relative success of Asian Americans within American theater produces an idea of "Asian American theater" that not only overshadows "immigrant" theater, but also lends an uneasy status to immigrant experience, placing such experience rather tenuously within the place of what is "Asian American." A survey of recent anthologies such as Misha Berson's *Between Worlds*, Velina Houston's *The Politics of Life*, and Roberta Uno's *Unbroken Thread*, and single author collections recently published by Frank Chin, David Henry Hwang, and Philip Gotanda, suggest a very particular idea of what is "Asian American": primarily Chinese and Japanese American, upper-middle

class, college-educated, and English-speaking. Though theater seasons are themselves often more diverse, what becomes known and more broadly disseminated as “Asian American theater” can be nonetheless only partially representative of the diverse backgrounds that constitute Asian Americans themselves. (Of course, the term “Asian American” covers an enormous range of cultural backgrounds, countries of origin, ethnicities, languages, religions, and economic statuses. Even more “ethnically” specific designations, such as “Chinese American,” span many generations of immigrants from a variety of countries of origin; terms such as “Asian American” are even broader in their designation.)

One might make the argument that as newer Asian immigrants and refugees, particularly those from South and Southeast Asia, increase in numbers, there will be greater visibility for these cultural and ethnic groups as well. One might also argue that the term “Asian American” applies more readily to later generations who have already been “partially assimilated” rather than immigrants. The larger political and cultural work of the Asian American movement was from the beginning dominated by second and third generation Chinese and Japanese Americans.¹⁵ Perhaps the distinction between “Asian American” and “immigrant theater”—and the erasure of the latter in the visibility of the former—is a function of the historical circumstances of immigration and settlement, rather than any willful desire to suppress certain cultural groups in favor of others.

But, there is a way in which the selective nature of Asian American visibility—and the exclusion of “immigrant theater” in the canons of “Asian American theater”—can be read in terms of ideology as well as demographics. As Sau-Ling Wong has suggested, the cultural nationalist project of Asian America has insisted on a long-term but continually repressed historical presence, thus creating “a certain ossification of identity politics”:

Early Asian American cultural criticism was spearheaded by American-born and -raised, Anglophone, mostly male, Asians; it featured certain premises—anti-Orientalism, valorization of working-class ethnic enclaves, “claiming America”—that explicitly or implicitly discourage, if not preclude attention on things Asian. . . . In fact, it seems anything that threatens to undermine the demonstration of the “indigenization” (the “becoming American”) of Asian Americans must be scrupulously avoided. Thus subscription to an indigenization model of Asian American experiences, whereby a person of Asian ancestry has to earn the designation of “Asian American” by acquiring “American” credentials on “American” soil (e.g.,

railroad-building, writing in English), informs the cultural nationalist project even as it seeks to critique and resist the model's assimilationist teleology.¹⁶

This insistence on the long-term presence of Asians in the United States is strategic, insofar as it emphasizes the historic erasure of Asians as Americans and the systematic racism against Asians that has affected law and policy, both domestically and overseas. It establishes Asian Americans as crucial players within the history of the United States, and discounts the myth of the sojourner who can be dismissed or expelled as a temporary presence.

In her introduction to the anthology of Asian American plays, *The Politics of Life*, Velina Hasu Houston makes strong distinctions: "An *Asian* is someone who is native Asian. An *Asian American*, on the other hand, is *not* Asian. An Asian American is an American of Asian descent, born and reared in the United States."¹⁷ But to validate an idea of Asian American in such a manner excludes other distinctions, newer histories, thus creating a homogenizing idea of "American Asians."¹⁸ As the term "Asian American" is claimed less to describe the immigrant experience, and more for a native-born voice that has been long suppressed, this idea of experience cannot account for more recent immigrants and foreign nationals, thus neglecting the changing nature of immigration. The historical experiences of later immigrants, notably recent refugees from Southeast Asia, are radically different from the histories depicted in better known plays by Asian Americans such as David Henry Hwang's *The Dance and the Railroad*, Wakako Yamauchi's *The Music Lessons* or Genny Lim's *Paper Angels*, which are set in West Coast Chinese American and Japanese American communities during the nineteenth or first half of the twentieth century.

As certain instances of "Asian American theater" define themselves in relation to a mainstream American theater, they tend to reinforce such a model. Playwrights, performers, and critics often distinguish the so-called Asian American sensibility against the classical Asian theater, so as to contest the exoticization of *orientalia* by a white audience. Yen Lu Wong describes differences between the work of theater artists trained in classical Chinese theater, whose serious work is nonetheless in danger of becoming "a museum piece or a decorative *divertissement*" and a Chinese American theatre that emphasizes "an identity rooted in being Chinese American . . . not a clinging to a *mystique* of heritage or the nostalgic holding to a faded memory . . . a theatre that genuinely speaks of our lives and to them."¹⁹ Notably, plays by American-born Asian Americans often reinforce a figurative distance created between later generations of American-born Asians and immigrants. David Henry Hwang's *FOB* establishes an antagonistic relationship between the American born Dale and the "fresh off

the boat" Steve, who must be drawn into the humbling experience of Asian American life. In his notes to the play, Hwang affirms that his use of the figures of Fa Mu Lan and Gwan Gung borrows less from Chinese mythology than it does from the fiction of Maxine Hong Kingston and the plays of Frank Chin. By insisting that the "roots of *FOB* are thoroughly American," Hwang explicitly evokes "the existence of an Asian American literary tradition" in which he places himself.²⁰ This figurative distance is also born out in other plays; immigrant figures such as China Mama in Frank Chin's *Year of the Dragon*, or Mrs. Chang in Han Ong's work, are elusive or cryptic; it is their American-born descendants who are left in charge of their articulation. In Darrell Lum's *Oranges are Lucky*, personal stories about immigration recalled by a Chinese grandmother remain unintelligible to her Hawaiian grandchildren. In most of these plays, generational gaps are accentuated by cultural distance.²¹

Theater by immigrant Asians thus tends to receive only a passing mention as a past historical activity, one that is for the most part excluded from both the canons of so-called "American drama" and "Asian American drama."²² This erasure is reinforced by a variety of factors. The standards that guide the publishing and dissemination of play texts still insist on a notion of literary value that privileges text-centered, single-author plays written in English. Both publishing houses and theater companies still maintain the distinction between theater as high art or dramatic literature and community theater. With such an emphasis on validation by mainstream theatrical institutions, it is not surprising that any claim that theatrical production can make for having value for a specific local community is discounted when plays are re-measured as "dramatic literature." Theater that is directed at specific communities is automatically counted out by virtue of its very specific and topical nature. Much of the theatrical work by Asian Americans of all generations falls into this category: traditional performances of Asian theater, music- and dance-based dramas, popular performances such as shows, pageants, or displays in local Asian American communities. Such performances are weeded out in this selection process.

But, theater history must find ways of interpreting, of theorizing, as well as recording such works: particularly in their use of spectacle, music, and movement. Likewise, it must reconceptualize assumptions about what functions such works serve both for their "ethnic" and "outsider" audiences, and how they present immigrant experience, American identities, and modes of cultural exchange.

To examine more closely recent theater by Asian immigrants is both to find a different perspective on what is "Asian American" and to challenge the tendency of existing theater scholarship to collapse both "immigrant" and "hyphenated" theaters into a notion of "ethnic" theater. It is also to search for a

more precise vocabulary of terms by which to describe highly different instances of “immigrant theater.” Such challenges present themselves in several recent performances: the Theater Mu production of *River of Dreams*, the musical revue *Musika!*, and Ping Chong’s *Undesirable Elements*. Each of these works is highly different in its original venue, circumstances of performance, and audience. Yet what they hold in common is their challenge to assumptions often made in describing the history of “immigrant” and “ethnic” theater. Each of them shows that immigration from Asia is very much a present activity, whose circumstances must be carefully distinguished from earlier immigration both from Asia and elsewhere. Whether through dance, music, or narrative, each shows us how complex the expression of different “American” ethnic and racial identities might be.

River of Dreams

In presenting *River of Dreams*, a set of three one-acts featuring stories and performances by and about recent Southeast Asian immigrants,²³ Theater Mu opens up the “canon” of Asian American theater in a number of ways. These plays are significant both ethnically and regionally; not only do they offer the perspectives of immigrants from ethnic groups often excluded from discussions of Asian American theater, but they also address the growing numbers of such immigrants whose point of entry is not the East or West coast. Midwestern states, including Minnesota, have become the landing-sites of new arrivees, particularly those from Southeast Asia, whose experiences as political refugees differ greatly from those of other Asian American groups.

The emphasis on dance and movement in all three pieces raises crucial issues in their interpretation. At least two of the plays use their semi-autobiographical narratives as frames to display the considerable talents of individual dancers. The first work, *Land of a Million Elephants*, is based on the life of Laotian dancer Pone Suryadhay (as the heroine Mali), who performs several of the featured traditional dances. A narrator and other actors reenact her youth in Laos, her difficult marriage, and her eventual immigration to the United States. The final piece, *River of Life*, recounts the 1990 defection of Thonnara Hing and his sister, both principal dancers in a Cambodian dance company. The play literally revisits the scene of their escape from the Ordway Theatre four years earlier, through a series of dialogues in which Hing (as the character Kemara) agonizes over his decision to defect. This dialogue is interspersed with dance sequences that present a history of Cambodia through a mixture of traditional and contemporary dance forms. Only the middle piece, *Consecration*, does not seem primarily a vehicle for featured dances, yet it too uses carefully choreographed and stylized movement to intensify the play’s storyline and flashbacks. Dance and

movement sequences intensify Luu Pham's harrowing story of a military officer who commits suicide after sending his family out of war-torn Vietnam.

The dance compositions, including folk and classical Laotian and Cambodian dances and set-pieces by Suryadhay and Hing in *River of Dreams*, might be described not only in terms of their formal excellence, but also in terms of their cultural significance: how they enact "ethnic" differences and identities for their audiences. These audiences, of course, themselves differ. Performed at the upscale Ordway Music Theater in St. Paul, *River of Dreams* was obviously staged in front of not only an "immigrant" community, but also a more general public. Thus, *River of Dreams* might be interpreted as having different yet related functions for each of these audiences.

In both *Land of a Million Elephants* and *River of Life*, the dancer's aesthetic is explicitly tied to national identity and cultural pride; for instance, Mali's skills as a dancer are much in demand in the Thai refugee camp, where they are used not only to further a sense of community among refugees, but also to demonstrate that Laotians are not simply "refugees and rough peasants . . . [and] to show them our art . . . culture . . . and beauty."²⁴ *River of Life* also articulates this view: that dance, particularly traditional folk and classical dance, affirms the sense of a unified Cambodian people in a country colonized and ravaged by civil war and violence.

And through our performance . . .
 Let us share the River of Life
 that flows through
 The Cambodian people.²⁵

To see the dancer's art as emblematic of cultural heritage suggests a familiar rationale for the "immigrant theater." These descriptions recall the suggestion so often made in Seller's collection, that for the "ethnic" audience, traditional dance might serve to articulate a nostalgic connection to the old world, and to foster a sense of pride against the marginalization of being foreign in America.

These spectacular dance performances also might suggest an alternative—and much more worrisome—interpretation that centers around their appeal to non-Asian audience members. Scholars such as James Moy have suggested that the popularity of traditional Asian performance for non-Asian as well as Asian immigrant audiences might in fact be the result of colonial mentality that is invested in viewing the "Orient."²⁶ Because these performances took place at the Ordway, a venue primarily serving a non-Asian, upper-middle-class audience, one might well be aware of this more insidious aspect of reception: where the Asian

dancer might become an easily consumable version of the “Other,” an exotic spectacle displayed for the curiosity of non-Asian audiences.

Given Theater Mu’s status as an Asian American theater company, both of these interpretations are problematic. The production’s multi-generational and pan-ethnic casting (characteristic of many Asian American theater companies, for whom pan-ethnicity marks political and racial solidarity) does not lend itself to reading the plays as the products of homogeneous cultures. The noticeable presence in the audience of many Asian Americans of diverse ethnicities and backgrounds also complicates any preconceptions about immigrant communities as “ethnic enclaves” with restricted cultural boundaries. The pan-ethnic casting of these immigrant stories also presents another interpretive difficulty with regard to potentially Orientalist viewers. It might, in fact, be viewed as a liability that risks blurring the distinctions among Asian ethnicities and reinforcing the impression of Asian Americans as perpetual foreigners.

Perhaps, interestingly enough, both of these over-generalized interpretative models are related, insofar as both imagine ethnic and cultural categories, whether “Asian” or “American,” as fixed and discernible. Whether dance fulfills a nostalgic impulse for “ethnic” audiences, or serves to fetishize the “Orient” for non-Asian viewers, the dancer’s body becomes the embodiment of an authentic “ethnic” identity, emblematic of an essential “culture.” I would like to suggest how more subtle aspects of *River of Dreams*—in consort with the pan-ethnic and multi-generational casting of the production—might in fact insist on another reading strategy, one that refuses to allow the dancer’s body to act solely as either a sentimentalized symbol for the “old country” or as “decorative *divertissement*.” *River of Dreams* in fact contextualizes its traditional Asian dance sequences in order to complicate how the body is marked as an “ethnic” emblem. Particular moments may indeed tempt audience members to read the performance of traditional Southeast Asian dance forms—such as the Laotian folk dance the *lam wong* (“circle dance”) or the intricate Cambodian *ram vong*—as the rendering of culture as fixed, coherent, and knowable. This view figures an essentialized culture as outside of history, a “river of life” connecting immigrants and their descendants to their “roots” and transcending geographical and experiential distance. Yet, these plays also disrupt this reading, framing their dancers in ways that highlight a blurring of cultural boundaries and remind audiences of the material and political nature of all art.

Land of a Million Elephants underscores, among other things, how the dancer does not represent culture in any pure way; rather, the dancer and the culture she supposedly embodies are both affected by political and historical changes. For one, dance is emphasized as highly disciplined, an acquired rather than “natural” part of the Laotian culture. The play dramatizes Mali’s different

levels of expertise, as well as attitudes towards her art. Played by several actor-dancers, she is shown as an untrained child, and as a student doing basic training exercises at the national dance school, as well as enacted by Suryadhay in the featured dances. More importantly, the narrative contextualizes how Mali's career is affected not only by her personal choices, but also by political changes, such as the Communist influence in Laos, and the large-scale flight of many Laotian refugees to countries such as Thailand. Each of the different dances that Mali performs has an overtly political context. The young Mali dances the "scarf dance" for her aunt's approval; in the exchange immediately following, we learn that her aunt has really come to talk to her father about the growing Communist presence and the war in Vietnam. In the refugee camp, Mali's dancing becomes both a source of personal solace and a form of public recognition with official consequences; under pressure from government bureaucrats, her dissolute husband forces her to appear in a Bangkok festival and beauty pageant, for which they then receive a visa to France. Her final dance is framed by overtly political acts as well; it is associated with both her decision to leave her husband in defiance of her role as a "good Laotian woman" and her immigration to the United States.



Scene from *Consecration*, in Theater Mu's 1994 production of *River of Dreams*. Photography by Wing Huie.

River of Life literally uses dance to enact political history in its “reenactment” of Kemara’s final performance with the American tour of the Royal Cambodian Dancers. Here dance serves as the primary vehicle for relating the past and recent history of Cambodia, including the “glorious years of Angkor,” followed by a succession of civil wars and European colonization; the “liberation” by the Khmer Rouge and its subsequent regime of terror; and the defeat of the Khmer Rouge by Vietnamese communists. Kemara’s personal history (Hing’s autobiography) is inflected and re-told through this pageant; the play shows him agonizing over his decision, as he enacts the larger history that will require it. Dancing enables, as well as reflects, political acts. Kemara’s success as a dancer becomes his means of escaping an authoritarian government that threatens him with “re-education”; his performances provide the opportunity for his defection and seeking of asylum in the United States.

In both *Land of a Million Elephants* and *River of Life*, the performance of dance forms representing “authentic” culture is complicated by reminders that culture is by necessity dynamic and hybrid. Traditional and contemporary dance, music, and costume are inextricably mixed with one another. Jarring renditions of popular songs, sung by Mali’s lounge-lizard husband in *Land of a Million Elephants*, interrupt the classical dances; similarly both Mali’s escape from Laos and her discovery of her husband’s adultery are depicted in modern dance sequences that contrast the classical and folk Laotian dances. Through his classical dance, Kemara expresses his ambivalence and adjustment to life in the United States; yet the final sequence of *River of Life* shows him bewildered by a chaotic, mechanized group of modern dancers who represent his new urban life, and then dancing a final solo as his character muses on the uncertain nature of his “home.” These fusions heighten the ways in which cultural purity and “real” ethnicity are contested.

There are, these plays remind us, painfully violent as well as more gentle forces behind the hybridity of contemporary cultures throughout the world. Studies of “immigrant theater” often imagine theatrical activity as in the service of the impossible task of translating and preserving a culture from contamination within a culturally-distinct “American” world. In each of the plays that comprise *River of Dreams*, any romanticized or exoticized notions of the old world and the new are soon exploded by reminders that these borders have been crossed long before any immigration ever occurred. Each play emphasizes how Laos, Vietnam, and Cambodia have long been cultural contact zones; for instance, the traumatic events leading to the massive dislocation of Laotians, Vietnamese, and Cambodians include numerous military and economic interventions in Southeast Asia by countries including the United States.

Yet hybridity notwithstanding, a more flexible interpretative strategy for the dance sequences in *River of Dreams* ultimately must acknowledge the compelling fascination, felt in each of these three plays, with the presence of “authentic” immigrant bodies. Not only the use of autobiographical plots, but also the performance of Suryadhay, Pham, and Hing in featured roles in these plays, seem to point to a continued desire to mark the actor’s body as an “ethnic” sign. This mode of signification intensifies the specific subject-matter of these immigrant plays; in light of the atrocities they depict—countries torn apart, family members tortured and killed, harrowing escapes—the featured appearances of these “real” immigrant performers takes on a particular symbolic force. The performances of Suryadhay, Pham, and Hing have impact perhaps because they act as material evidence, demonstrating through their “genuine” bodies the literal proof of history, the results of war, oppression, and genocide.

Nonetheless, the use of the actors’ and dancers’ bodies also complicates their “authentic” testimonies. The plays are far from realistic in their performance styles; they avoid the sensationalistic or melodramatic depiction of these events by translating the horror of these experiences into dance, movement, and poetic language. In the final poignant moments of Pham’s *Consecration*, for instance, the letter written from dead father to Americanized son transforms the story of his suicide into a fable. The father pictures his children as stars, drawn dangerously close to earth by his presence; his taking of poisoned honey allows the young stars to again fly heavenward. As the grandfather narrates the father’s letter, the other characters move through the gestures of their earlier flight from Vietnam. Their stylized movement allows these “true stories” a more restrained and retrospective turn, without necessarily softening the trauma they depict.

In *River of Dreams*, the use of dance, as well as fairy-tale and allegory, intervenes in the association of bodies with the very “realities” they present. These bodies provide markers of history, testify to the validity of autobiographies; yet, in their presentational style, they also provide some distance from these events. This profound interplay of stylized and “authentic,” artistic and “natural” body will complicate, as we shall see, the interpretation of two other productions—*Musika!* and *Undesirable Elements*—as well.

Musika!

At first, *Musika!*, a musical revue performed at the World Theater in St. Paul by the Fil-Minnesotan Association, might be read as clearly drawing on the cultural boundaries dividing Filipino from American; yet its use of song and spectacle also complicates this binary opposition. *Musika!* presented a collection of Broadway and traditional Filipino music, strung together by with a series of meditative discussions between a young man and his older “uncle” on the nature

of their “transplanted people.” These themes were continued in the narrative of the second act, a story about the generational differences between a mother, grandmother, and son who emigrate to the United States from the Philippines, in which the son is eventually killed in gang-related violence. The play seemed to affirm an essentialist notion of what it means to be “Filipino,” in moments such as a speech by Vilma, the mother:

Life has changed for me. I mean, life in its generic sense. But I have not changed. My main “self” is here, buried inside me. That’s why I remember, why I look back. In spite of myself, even if I know I shouldn’t. How can I separate myself from my past? My past has taught me to look for a certain color, a certain touch, a certain star. That is still my color, my touch, my star.²⁷

The “uncle” also teaches the young man that “we can alter our life but our substance remains the same.”²⁸

What complicates this straightforward reading of the production as “demonstrating” cultural purity is not only the main narrative: a generational conflict illustrating profound differences of attitude between the older Filipino immigrants and their “Americanized” children. *Musika!* also troubles notions of ethnicity as an “essential” quality through its use of music. On one level, the performance of musical numbers appeared to follow a similar binary logic, suggesting the difficult encounter of conflicting “Filipino” and “American” elements. The songs and dances seemed separated into two culturally-marked categories, “Filipino” songs and ballads and the more “American” selections from Broadway musicals such as *Cabaret* and *Hello Dolly!* Songs in Tagalog balanced out in an ending chorus of “God Bless America,” replete with lavish red, white, and blue sets.

Yet the musical choices, as it turned out, were far from neatly divided. The range of numbers included a rousing chorus of “Wilkommen,” half in English and half in Tagalog, from *Cabaret*, a demonstration of tangos, a modern dance duet to Gershwin piano preludes, three bridal pageants with love songs identified as “Igorot,” “Muslim” and “Christian,” as well as arrangements of traditional and modern Filipino music, and original songs by members of the Filipino American ensemble.

Most interesting, perhaps, was the choice of particular Broadway songs. As suggested in the dialogue, this to some degree could be seen as promoting ideals of music as the “universal language.” It is tempting to interpret these renditions by Filipino Americans as being no different from the versions done by

most amateur groups, where ethnicity is superimposed simply as a stylistic overlay on situations that might transcend cultural difference. Songs such as “Sunrise, Sunset” from *Fiddler on the Roof*, and “Bring Him Home” from *Les Miserables* were appropriated, ostensibly without regard for any specific ethnic references, in order to highlight emotional moments in the narrative. For instance, a version of “Go Greased Lightning,” from *Grease* illustrated the rebellion of the teenage Alex before his death in a gang-related shooting.

At the same time, the specific choice of selections could not but emphasize how even the universal language is ethnically marked. Most of these selections were drawn from successful musicals that employ ethnic marking in performance style as well as characterization: Jewish in *Hello Dolly!* and *Fiddler on the Roof*, Puerto Rican in *West Side Story*, Italian in *Grease!* and so on. Moreover, the playful reminders of the necessity of translation, such as changing the names in “Hello Dolly!” and modifying other song lyrics, serve to highlight the production’s self-consciousness about ethnic difference. Even while it suggested the neutrality of the actor’s body—the ability of Filipino American actors to play a range of ethnically-marked characters, to wear prayer shawls and to pass as Jewish, or to wear the leather jackets of 1950s greasers—this selection exposed this neutrality as false. This undid impressions that music could be a so-called universal language, or that the actor’s body could take on any kind of cultural significance at will. Instead, what was highlighted was the choice of allowing these actors to play a range of ethnicities and classes, but only those marked out as ethnically specific, usually “non-American” or “non-white.”

There are several ways in which one may read this choice to reinforce the ethnic signification already inherent in these musical numbers. Most obviously, one can see an affinity between the Filipino American experience and other expressions of disenfranchisement, such as in the use of “I Like To Be in America” from *West Side Story*. This choice suggests the ease of taking on the status of the already accepted “Other”; that, for these Filipino American performers, what is best represented as “American” is in fact already marked by ethnicity. That the Fil-Minnesotan Association might choose selections affirming that “American” is also already “ethnic” suggests, on the one hand, an optimistic vision of America as a land of immigrants, gradually making various “ethnic” signatures part of its larger “national” repertoire. On the other hand, the conspicuous choice of numbers from those musicals that sell “ethnicity” as a particular kind of entertainment on the Broadway stage can also be viewed as troubling. To what extent do such acts perpetuate stereotypes, the public display of commodified “others” marked by their ethnicity and class? Are these musicals a kind of oppression into which marginalized others become complicit? To see Filipino American performers enacting stereotypes, whether of their own or other

racial and ethnic groups, is reminiscent of the ways in which actors of color have always been contained within pre-packaged ethnic roles. (One considers how Lena Horne, for instance, refused MGM's attempts to pass her off as Latin American, MGM even devised a special makeup—Egyptian Blend Number 5—which she subsequently refused to wear.)²⁹

The nature of the audience (largely from the Filipino American community in the Twin Cities) and the apparent lack of self-consciousness about these ethnic embodiments makes *Musika!* hard to read. These ethnic stereotypes— if this is indeed what these are—are played without any sense of irony or, on the other hand, malicious intent. What's suggested here is a certain loosening of the ethnic signifiers of costume, gesture, and characterization. This might well be related to what Fredric Jameson calls postmodern "pastiche," a kind of "blank parody, parody that has lost its sense of humor":

Pastiche is, like parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique style, the wearing of stylistic mask, speech in a dead language: but it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without parody's ulterior motive, without the satirical impulse, without laughter, without that still latent feeling that there exists something normal compared to which what is being imitated is rather comic.³⁰

The proliferation of different significations indicates a certain stylization of such "ethnic" codes. In other words, the playing undoes any authentic value the code of ethnicity in the Broadway might have; it is suggested that these ethnicities are only styles, to be appropriated as easily by Filipino as they are by white actors. Some aspects of this musical "ethnicity," one might insist, are simply matters of dress, costume, and gesture. This is reinforced by the choices of musical selection. Notably, these are not "Oriental" musicals such as *The King and I* or *South Pacific*; they play with "ethnicity" but only insofar as it can be easily abstracted from the actual body of the actor. Yet this idea of "color-blind casting" has an insidious dimension, acts as a perverse form of empowerment; these roles take upon themselves the traditional power of the white actor as the "colonizer" of the roles he or she plays, as if to say "I, too, can perform racial and ethnic stereotypes." Yet the distinctively campy nature of the Broadway and Hollywood musical also comes into play; the use of cultural stereotypes is highly stylized, which implies a pointed separation of the theater from any reality that it might represent. In other words, there is a dimension of the self-consciously spectacular in musical theater that urges us not to take its cultural commentary too seriously.

But even in such a fantasy form, the amount of free play that can be imagined is limited.

Although I would not say that any of the interpretations I've suggested here indicate conscious intent on the part of the performers of *Musika!*, I would insist that a multitude of conflicting representations are offered in this performance. The bodies in *Musika!* signify their ethnicity in ways that call for attention not only to the status of the Filipino immigrant in the United States, but also the history of colonization in the Philippines. This colonization, first by Spain and the United States, takes place not only through physical dominance, but also on the level of the cultural imagination. Jessica Hagedorn describes her childhood in the Philippines, where, she recalls, "In order to be acknowledged, we had to strive to be as American as possible" and where "American" in fact meant a kind of cinematic ideal: "It was a David Lynch movie cliché without the perverse undertones":

Even though we also studied Tagalog, one of our native languages (now known as Filipino), and read some of the native literature . . . it was pretty clear to most of us growing up in the fifties and early sixties that what was really important, what was inevitably preferred, was the aping of our mythologized Hollywood universe. Everywhere we turned, the images held up did not match our own.³¹

Reading the uncomfortable politics of this musical theater reminds us of the multiple levels of contact that have already taken place. The fascination in *Musika!* with the Broadway musical must indeed be related to the popularity within the Philippines of musicals from Broadway and London, and the active participation of Filipino actors in musicals such as *Miss Saigon*, a show that has been protested by Asian American activist groups for its promotion of racial stereotypes.

In many ways, the community production of *Musika!* was neither surprising nor revolutionary. Though the abilities of the actors was mixed, the performances were warmly received by its audience, composed of mostly family and friends. Yet this work brings to mind the difficulties of looking at even the most seemingly unsophisticated manifestations of an "immigrant" theater, and how such spectacles inform us as to how communities might see themselves or display themselves to others.

Undesirable Elements

Ping Chong has created versions of *Undesirable Elements* in New York, Cleveland, Seattle, and San Francisco, as well as Minneapolis and St. Paul. In each, he collaborates with performers of different cultural backgrounds, to create a rich collage of personal narratives and family histories. The Twin Cities performers in the fall of 1994 were Filipina (Elsa Batica), Ojibwe (Sharon Day), African American (Dennis Hines), Russian Jewish (Ariada Magaril), Laotian Hmong (Mai Moua), Somalian (Mustafe Musse), Puerto Rican (Alberto Panelli), and Turkish (Nilgun Tuna). According to Ping Chong, the initial idea for this series of community-specific plays came out of an art installation entitled "A Facility for the Channeling and Containment of Undesirable Elements," in which visitors, channeled into various catwalks, were encouraged to think about how cultures contain their "undesirables." The stories told by the performers clearly addressed how cultures marginalize certain groups of people through racism, violence, or expulsion.

Undesirable Elements not only presents multiple narratives of immigration and an overview of immigration history, but also uses—as do the other plays mentioned here—the body of the "immigrant" performer as the "authentic" emblem of culture and ethnicity. The different performers are "ethnicized" within this performance; they and their stories become representatives of cultures and invested with a multitude of signifying meanings. Yet Chong's presentation of this "immigrant experience" and "immigrant body" works differently from what some might expect.

On one level, the play creates compelling parallels between different stories of "immigrant" and "hyphenated" experience. The performers for the most part sit in a semicircle of black chairs with microphones, against a white background; their emotional stories are carefully arranged within constrictive frames of language, gesture, and movement. A careful textual choreography prevails, enhancing the experience of common ground. Personal histories invariably tell accounts of systematic racism and instances of other painful cultural adjustments, in turns humorous, endearing, and poignant. African American Dennis Hines relates how he was denied jobs for which he was well qualified, even by a government quick to draft him for military service. Turkish American Nilgun Tuna recalls that as a child, she mouthed Christmas carols in an effort to reconcile the demands of American schools and her Moslem faith; as an adult, she faces both sexism and racism in her efforts to become an architect. The play weaves together these stories within a chronological structure spanning 150 years, that includes dates of personal and historical significance: the Treaty of Paris in 1898, in which the Philippines is ceded to the United States; the 1934 Indian reorganization act; the 1967 covert formation of an army of Hmong soldiers,

employed by the United States against the communist Vietnamese and abandoned to their fate at the end of the Vietnam war. By giving these contexts, the play continually emphasizes that the presence of its performers is inseparable from the larger motion of history. In one story, Ariada Magaril tells of her family's escape from war-torn Odessa, barely missing a boat that was later bombed and destroyed; if her sick sister had not forced their delay, she says, "I would not be here now." That phrase, "I would not be here now," repeated several times in different stories, emphasizes the complex circumstances—larger economic and social forces, individual actions, and the touch of the miraculous—by which these performers now inhabit their present status in the United States.

But while the different organizing structures of the play—the historical chronology, the repetition of names and phrases in many languages, the spatial setting and the choreographed gestures—asks the audience to make comparisons, it also reminds them of the specific historical differences among immigrant, ethnic and racial minority groups. Though the play suggests strong parallels between the situations of the characters, particularly in the racism directed at all of them, it does not assume a normal pattern of arrival and assimilation into a melting pot. In fact, the very opposite is suggested; the play makes clear how assimilation into American culture is prohibited for certain groups, and tacitly restricted for others.



Theater Mu's 1994 production of *River of Dreams*. Photograph by Wing Huie.

Ojibwe Sharon Day relates how, in her childhood, a schoolmate introduces her with the explanation that “she’s Indian. But she’s becoming American.” Alberto Panelli describes a conversation in which an Anglo-American man asks Alberto what he is. When Panelli replies that he is part Spanish and part Corsican, the surprised man retorts “But you are Puerto Rican.” Panelli then tells him “I am Puerto Rican the way you are American.”

The play moves away from asserting the distinctive terms of any one experience of immigration or contact—Native American, European, Asian, African, or otherwise. Yet what it moves towards is not a homogenization of these experiences (“we are all immigrants and were once all marginalized”), but rather towards an awareness of a shared racialized status (“some of us remain so”). Perhaps the most interesting consideration of this play in terms of “immigrant theater” lies in its valuation of alliances among marginalized peoples, ethnic identities that recognize the parallels between their sensibilities and those of others. Elsa Batica, for instance, recalls how she was warned about blacks before emigrating from Manila; upon her arrival in a freezing Minneapolis airport, the only one who notices her shivering is a sympathetic African American man. Somalian Mustafe Musse recalls one of his ESL classmates who at first alienates him by her fascination with his hair, but with whom he later makes a guarded moment of contact. *Undesirable Elements*, in these tentative moments of contact, extends the possibility of pan-ethnic and pan-racial alliances, strategic communities formed across the borders of race and ethnicity.

Undesirable Elements forces a reassessment of the ideas of “immigrant,” “ethnic” and “hyphenated” theater in profound ways. The Illusion Theater’s production, played to a racially and ethnically diverse audience, questioned the assumptions scholars make about both “immigrant” and “ethnic” theater as playing to “ethnic enclaves.” This is not to deny that *Undesirable Elements*—and other works which similarly play off the need for contact with bodies that are ethnically “authentic”—does at times serve a nostalgic function, serving to bond members of particular communities by affirming ethnic identity; it is only to suggest that this notion of ethnic identification need not be the only purpose of “immigrant drama.” *Undesirable Elements* thus exemplifies a different, more mutable notion of ethnic communities, one that also testifies to the need to re-examine larger notions of culture, race, and ethnicity. It suggests how “immigrant” theater might be envisioned as a category that allows for the porousness of these boundaries; yet it does not erase the larger issues of racism, assimilation and power in favor of celebratory notions of difference.

The study of these three productions gives us some sense of how both to use—but also to expand—the category of “Asian American theater” by means of looking at “immigrant theater.” It might also provide some cautionary notes that

might guide any investigation of “immigrant” theater, particularly in its relationship to so called “ethnic” theater.

First, we need to understand immigration—and with it, changing racial politics in the United States—as very much a present activity, whose circumstances must be more carefully defined against the terms of both earlier immigration and present notions of later-generation “hyphenated” minorities. Simple models relying on assumptions about ethnic enclaves or natural processes of assimilation can no longer exist unquestioned. Though undeniably many plays by immigrants do express preoccupations with apparent divisions between old and new worlds, or nostalgic loyalty versus Americanization, such tropes cannot govern our interpretation of all “immigrant theater.” Also, “immigrant” and “ethnic” theater can no longer be unthinkingly conflated, implying that a “hyphenated” theater might develop organically out of an “immigrant” theater.

Second, the new challenges of self-representation for people of color are compounded in this age of multicultural initiatives; one must negotiate not just the search for visibility, but also the power of these “hyphenated” identities as they become more visible. We must be especially aware of the ways in which categories—such as “Asian American,” for instance—might be self-constructed in ways that repudiate immigrant identity. There are of course many positive and progressive aspects of the cultural nationalisms that grew out of the 1960s civil rights movements. These projects helped combat the notion of American as monolithically white, in part by changing history so as to “prove” the Americanness of others, through their historic presence and contributions. Yet, those strategies that are rooted in ideals of historical ownership through habitation and work (“my family has been here for generations”; “we worked this land”) are sometimes conceptions that can be turned against recent immigrants. Aspiring to the status of the “fully American” in these ways does not allow us to problematize American identity, both inside and outside the borders of the United States.

Finally, we must continue to look at works by immigrants to the United States, both past and present, knowing that doing so does help us redefine and critique the ideology of American identity as any one stable entity, to explode the monoculturalism so often assumed as “American culture.” In this knowledge, we find a larger motivation for looking at these often-neglected theater works: we might be able to understand better how immigration has radically changed—and continues to change—how race and ethnicity are formed and performed in the United States.

Notes

1. *Performing Asian America: Race and Ethnicity on the Contemporary Stage* (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1997).

2. Maxine Schwartz Seller, *Ethnic Theatre in the United States* (Westport, CT: Greenwood P, 1983).

3. Richter Erland, "Olle och Olga: Några små funderingar rundt Olle I Skratthult ock hans sällskap," *Svea*, Worcester, MA (spring 1924). Quoted in Anne-Charlotte Hanes Harvey, "Swedish-American Theatre" in Seller 512.

4. Martin Banham, ed., *The Cambridge Guide to Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1992) 327.

5. Notable exceptions are the essays on "Byelorussian-American Theatre" by Vitaut Kipel and Zora Kipel, "Hungarian-American Theatre" by Thomas Szendrey, and "Latvian-American Theater" by Alfreds Straumanis, as well as essays on "Mexican-American Theatre" by John W. Brokaw, and "Puerto-Rican Theatre on the Mainland," by Rosa Luisa Márquez and Lowell A. Fiet.

6. Christa Carvajal, "German-American Theatre," in Seller 186.

7. M. Martina Tybor, "Slovak-American Theatre," in Seller 472.

8. Arthur Leonard Waldo, "Polish-American Theatre," in Seller 414.

9. Carvajal 186.

10. While the majority of essays on the theater of European immigrants cite "assimilation" as one of the major factors in their decline of these immigrant theaters, individual pieces on Black, Puerto-Rican, Mexican-American, and Native-American theaters do not. David S. Lifson's essay on Yiddish theater is an interesting exception; it cites new restrictions in immigration, the movement of Jews from the city to the suburbs, and the new opportunities for actors in the mainstream as reasons for the decline in Yiddish theater, but doesn't use the term "assimilation."

11. Ronald Takaki, "Reflections on Racial Patterns in America," in *From Different Shores*, ed. Ronald Takaki (New York: Oxford UP, 1987).

12. United States, Army Western Defense Command and Fourth Army. *Japanese in the United States, Final Report: Japanese Evacuation from the West Coast*. Washington: Government Printing Office, 1943: 33–34. Quoted in Ronald Takaki, *Strangers from a Different Shore: A History of Asian Americans* (New York: Penguin, 1989) 391.

13. See Takaki's *Strangers from a Different Shore: A History of Asian Americans* (New York: Penguin, 1989).

14. For example, in her introduction to *Between Worlds: Contemporary Asian-American Plays*, Misha Berson mentions "the rich Asian traditions of dance, drama, and music," the "amateur performance groups and clubs in their own communities" and the performance of Chinese opera in Chinatowns.

15. See William Wei, *The Asian American Movement* (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1993).

16. Sau-Ling C. Wong, "Denaturalization Reconsidered: Asian American Cultural Criticism at a Theoretical Crossroads," *Amerasia* 21.1 & 2 (1995): 3–4.

17. Velina Hasu Houston, ed., *The Politics of Life: Four Plays by Asian American Women* (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1993) 9.

18. See Lisa Lowe, "Heterogeneity, Hybridity, Multiplicity: Marking Asian American Differences," *Diaspora* 1.1 (Spring 1991): 24–44.

19. Yen Lu Wong, "Chinese-American Theatre," *TDR* 20.2 (June 1976): 15, 18.

20. David Henry Hwang, *FOB and Other Plays* (New York: Penguin, 1990) 3.

21. *Year of the Dragon* appears in *Two Plays by Frank Chin* (Seattle: U of Washington P, 1981). *Oranges are Lucky* appears in *Kumu Kahua Plays* edited by Dennis Carroll (Honolulu: U of Hawaii P, 1983). Han Ong's *Mrs. Chang* appears in *Conjunctions 25: The New American Theater*, ed. John Guare (New York: Bard College, 1995).

22. An exception might be Jessica Hagedorn's character of Bongbong in her *Tenement Lover*, in *Between Worlds*, ed. Misha Berson (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1990).

23. *River of Dreams* includes *Land of a Million Elephants* by R.A. Shiomi, based upon the story of Pone Suryadhay; *Consecration* by Luu Pham; and *River of Life* by Thonnara Hing and R.A. Shiomi.
24. Shiomi, *Land of a Million Elephants*. Unpublished manuscript 12.
25. Shiomi and Thonnara Hing, *River of Life*. Unpublished manuscript 5.
26. James Moy, *Marginal Sights: Staging the Chinese in America*. Iowa City: U of Iowa P, 1993.
27. Program notes, *Musika!*
28. Program notes, *Musika!*
29. John Kobal, *Gotta Sing Gotta Dance: A Pictorial History of Film Musicals* (London: Hamlyn, 1972) 273.
30. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke UP, 1991) 17.
31. Jessica Hagedorn, *Charlie Chan Is Dead: An Anthology of Contemporary Asian American Fiction* (New York: Penguin, 1993) xxiii.



Pone Suryadhay in *Land of Million Elephants*, from Theater Mu's 1994 production of *River of Dreams*. Photo by Wing Huie.



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