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Mapping gender. Old images ; new figures

Breaking Racial and Ethnic Stereotypes on the American Stage: National Asian American Theatre Company's 25th Anniversary

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of NAATCO)

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Breaking Racial and Ethnic Stereotypes on the American Stage: National Asian American Theatre Company's 25th Anniversary

Interview with Mia Katigbak (co-founder and artistic producing director
of NAATCO)

Rovie Herrera Medalle

NAATCO: Website

¹ <http://naatco.org/>

[Figure 1]



Logo NAATCO

Credits : NAATCO

Biography of the Interviewee:

- 2 Mia Katigbak is the Artistic Producing Director and co-founder of NAATCO (National Asian American Theatre Company). She is the recipient of an Obie Award for performance (2014), the 2012-13 Lucille Lortel and the 2008 Lee Reynolds Awards (League of Professional Theatre Women); the Actors Equity's Rosetta LeNoire Award, in recognition of her "artistic contribution to the universality of the human experience in the American theater"; New Dramatists' Charles Bowden Actor Award; Distinguished Award for Artistic Excellence from Ma-Yi Theater. She is a founding director of CAATA (Consortium of Asian American Theaters & Artists) and served as the president of its board from 2011-15. She was one of the organizers of the 1st and 2nd National Asian American Theater Festivals in 2007 and 2009 in New York City. She is on the advisory boards of Ma-Yi Theatre and Fulcrum Theater.
- 3 She has acted in NYC with Women's Project (having just recently finished portraying Elizabeth Bishop in Sarah Ruhl's *Dear Elizabeth*), the Public Theater, New York Theatre Workshop, The Foundry Theater, Soho Rep, The Civilians, Ma-Yi, Target Margin, New Georges, Clubbed Thumb, Intar, Pan Asian Rep; and extensively with NAATCO; regionally at Berkeley Repertory Theater (CA), Swine Palace (LA), and the Guthrie (MN); and internationally, in Manila, Philippines and Abu Dhabi, UAE. She has served in panels for the theatre programs of the New York State Council on the Arts, the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs, the Nancy Quinn Fund for Emerging Theaters and the

Fund for Small Theaters (both administered by ART/NY), and the Asian American Arts Alliance. She has been a guest speaker for forums sponsored by the New York Times, the Humana Festival, and Theater Communications Group.

- 4 She holds a BA from Barnard College and an MA from Columbia University.

The Interview

Rovie Herrera Medalle: Mia Katigbak, what is NAATCO? How would you define it?

Mia Katigbak: NAATCO, National Asian American Theatre Company, is a theatre company dedicated to the assertion of Asian American theatre artists and their integral contributions to American culture.

RHM: When and how did NAATCO start?

Mia Katigbak: NAATCO was founded in 1990 after two years of thinking about what kind of theatre would best serve Asian American artists in New York City, and eventually, in the rest of the country. Richard Eng (NAATCO's co-founder) and I met when we were both taking a Shakespeare workshop and found that we shared many personal disappointments.

I was classically trained, but whenever I showed up at auditions for productions of the western classical canon with prepared monologues ranging from Shakespeare to Tennessee Williams to Chekhov to Shaw, I would basically be met by blank stares and the occasional rationalization that despite my talent, I could not get cast because I wouldn't look like "part of the family". This was in the late 1980s, when diversification, "non-traditional", inter- and multicultural casting were being touted as the ideal practices for American theatre.

We found that the prevailing attitude towards Asian American actors was that the roles available to us were those in which Asian stereotypes were perpetuated. NAATCO was founded to counter this prevailing practice.

RHM: NAATCO is celebrating its 25th anniversary; did the organization achieve its goals throughout these years?

Mia Katigbak: Our most important goal is to give Asian American theatre artists opportunities to act in roles not available to us because of our ethnicities. We started with our first program: the presentation of plays from the European and American classical canon. We do this repertory without resetting them to Asian cultural contexts, not because this is an illegitimate practice, but because the expectation was that it was THE only way it made sense for us to do it. Over the years, we added two more programs: the adaptation of this canon by Asian American playwrights, and the production of plays not by, for, or about Asian Americans but performed by an all-Asian American cast. In all our productions, Asian American theatre artists are showcased in a multiplicity of cultures, styles, subject matter, historical contexts.

RHM: I was impressed by the wide range of productions that NAATCO has; including contemporary British playwrights such as Caryl Churchill, Harold Pinter, together with American 20th century dramatists like Tennessee Williams, Eugene O'Neill, Clifford Odets, or other prominent figures in the history of theatre such as Brecht, Chekhov, Garcia Lorca, or

Shakespeare. It makes me wonder about the process to select the plays...who chooses the plays and how?

Mia Katigbak: For a very long time, I chose all our plays. I went to grad school (Columbia University) to further educate myself in the western canon and to get to know the plays we were reading in more depth. As our work became more known and well regarded in the theatre community, actors, playwrights, and directors came to me with suggestions. NAATCO has profited from these collaborations. We produced Chekhov's *Ivanov* after actor Joel de la Fuente and director Jonathan Bank of the Mint Theater came to me wanting to work together again. They had both worked in NAATCO's successful production of *Othello*. All three of us compiled a reading list, from which we made the choice. Actor Peter Kim suggested *The Seagull* and *Awake and Sing!*

I am attracted to plays that will challenge the misperception of Asian Americans, productions that explore a different approach to a classic, that have stylistic innovations, and works that are imaginative examinations of identity.

RHM: Waiting for Lefty (1935) is probably Clifford Odets's most well known play; did NAATCO choose to stage another of his play to break conventional expectations perhaps? Why is NAATCO performing *Awake and Sing!* (1935)?

Mia Katigbak: It falls under our programming as explained above, the production of an American classic with an all-Asian American cast. And I would say that everything we do is in the service of breaking the stereotypic expectations of "what" or "who" Asian Americans are. It is a great play and Asian Americans portraying Jewish Americans of Russian descent during the depression in the Bronx underscores our mission. It is a play about an immigrant family struggling with economic, familial, social challenges. These themes are common to the many disparate groups of immigrants who have made this country what it is.

RHM: The play belongs to the realist tradition: to what extent do you consider NAATCO's performance realistic?

Mia Katigbak: We adhered to the traditional presentation of the play. Only the casting was "non-traditional".

RHM: It seems to be challenging to play the matriarch Bessie Berger in the play, surprisingly, not because of the role *per se* but because of her ethnicity. I have seen quite a few recent interviews in which the interviewer is somehow surprised that an Asian American actress plays the Jewish mother. Why such a fuss? When I read Odets' description of Bessie the first thing that came to my mind was that his description is suited to some strong women from my own family, who coincidentally are from the Philippines as you are. How do you feel when you have to justify your closeness to the character?

Mia Katigbak: It's a constant challenge. I am often asked how I prepared for the role, and my response is that I prepared for it in the same way I do for any role. I have to understand the character, I have to know how she relates to every single person in the play, I have to know how she walks and talks. Bessie is very familiar to me. Strong, determined, at times insufferable in her intense single-mindedness to protect her family's welfare and her children's futures. Sometimes selfish because of that intense focus. She is also like Mother Courage and shares traits with Arkadina, both roles I have played. But interestingly, I was not asked about how I prepared for these last two roles. Perhaps because our version of Mother Courage was very abstract and perhaps because our *Seagull* was highly stylized. Perhaps because our production of *Awake and Sing!* was "traditional," it was harder to grasp an Asian American being able to successfully

portray Bessie. Perhaps because how I look is very different from how Bessie is supposed to look like. So it is frustrating that we are still stuck in that mindset, that looks are everything.

RHM: Your OBIE acceptance speech in 2014 for *Awake and Sing!* was very moving. You commented on the good reception but you also expressed your discomfort, stating: “the resistance came from the way we look”. This fact, from our European viewpoint which sees New York as a multicultural megalopolis, is really shocking. Personally, I was thinking about those Asian American performers going for casting in New York City. What are their feelings when they become part of NAATCO? Do they have the opportunity to play the roles that they imagined as unreachable for them?

Mia Katigbak: So many actors who have performed with NAATCO say that they would never in a million years have imagined that they could ever get to play these roles. When Sanjit De Silva, who played Moe in *Awake and Sing!* came in to audition, the first thing he said was that he might never get the opportunity to play Moe so he might as well go for broke in the audition. Later on, he told me that one of his acting teachers in grad school had assigned him that role and he was resistant, saying he’d never get the chance to do it when he got to the outside world anyway. It is precisely why NAATCO was founded, to reinforce in Asian American actors what I believe all actors deeply hope for: the chance to assay absolutely any role that attracts them, that is meaningful to them. To divest them of feeling restricted in their ambitions because of the limitations of casting practices today. Restrictions that they may have imposed on themselves because of the belief that no one would cast them as Jewish or Russian or Spanish Americans, despite, as you say, the fact that we live in a multicultural megalopolis.

RHM: Returning to your OBIE speech, you stated: “the world just looks differently now”. This reminded me of Diana Son’s comments about her Shakespearean Festival premiere of *Stop Kiss*, for which she chose the actress Sandra Oh (both of them are Korean-American). She said: “I go to the theatre sometimes and I see plays that take place in New York and everybody’s white. I think ‘What New York do you live in?’ It’s very different from the one that I live in.” I assume that NAATCO is one of those places in New York where one can—borrowing your words—make noise in a “beautiful, living, Technicolor” right?

Mia Katigbak: That is certainly what I aspire for NAATCO to be and “make noise” has been my mantra for the last couple of years. *Awake and Sing!* made some beautiful noise, I think. The play that we just closed, the world premiere of Lloyd Suh’s *Charles Francis Chan, Jr.’s Exotic Oriental Murder Mystery*, which took its inspiration from Agatha Christie’s novel *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, made a really raucous gorgeous noise, in my opinion. It was recently hailed as an Editor’s Pick for one of The Most Impactful Plays of 2015 by Playbill. I’m very proud of it.

RHM: How is NAATCO’s casting process?

Mia Katigbak: We are required by Actors Equity to hold auditions for all our seasons and this is always a very good way to get to know who’s out there. It used to be that the community of Asian American actors was pretty small and I felt I pretty much knew everyone. That’s changed a lot in the last few years and there are more and more folks who are new to me. I notice that all our casts tend to be about half “old timers,” folks we’ve worked with before, and the other half new to NAATCO, although not necessarily new to the scene. I also try as much as possible to see any show that has Asian American actors.

RHM: NAATCO is also premiering and producing new plays like Jorge Cortiñas's *Blind Mouth Singing*. Could you come back on NAATCO's staging of new plays?

Mia Katigbak: Our two subsequent programs focus on new plays. Lloyd's play (*Chan*, above) falls under the program of the adaptation of a western classic by an Asian American playwright. We also produced Michael Golamco's *Cowboy versus Samurai*, an adaptation of *Cyrano de Bergerac*.

Jorge approached me with the idea to produce his play after he saw our production of *Antigone* and as he put it, he thought it would be a long shot for me to agree since he's not Asian American. But I told him I'd do it if he agreed to an all-Asian American cast. Brilliant man that he is, he readily accepted the terms and we've produced other plays under this program. We've also produced Jordan Harrison (*Futura*) and Karen Hartman (*Leah's Train*).

RHM: Do you feel that there had been any changes for Asian American artists? Do you think that the Asian American artists are finding their places?

Mia Katigbak: Every time huge Broadway musicals that feature large Asian American casts get mounted, there is a big deal made of it by the press, extolling the wonderful representation of Asian Americans on stage. But I lament because for one thing, they are remounts of the same shows that were meant to have changed the landscape the first time around. I think it was more than 20 years ago when there were three almost simultaneous productions happening: *Miss Saigon*, *The King and I*, and *Shogun*. After they all closed, Asian American actors found that they were expected to reprise the kinds of roles they played in those three musicals. For the most part the usual stereotypic and exoticized roles. There was a plethora of amazing Asian American talent available, but persistently rare opportunity on American stages. AAPAC (Asian American Performing Artists Coalition) has been compiling data that show that in terms of representation of non-white performers, Asian Americans are constantly at the bottom.

RHM: You explained to the New York Times that at the beginning of your career it was very difficult to cast and "mostly got to play maids and hookers." Obviously, the roles you play today are more diverse and complex, from your current perspective, what would be your advice to the next generation of performers?

Mia Katigbak: Well, now our repertory has expanded to grocers, madams, gangster moms, and nannies. Sadly those days are not at all far behind us, although more casting directors are willing to submit us for parts that are designated "ethnically unspecific." Rarely are those parts major ones, though.

I'm a big proponent of education and would encourage theatre artists to get to know as diverse a repertory as possible: dramatic literature from around the world, different performance theories and techniques. I wish I had the time to continually gather this kind of intelligence. Theatre history is important as well. I think knowing what it's like to be in productions of different budget levels is valuable experience. Being well-armed, artistically, intellectually, technically, experientially is important because I believe we will have to continue to demand to be considered for more diverse roles and being articulate about our demands is crucial. It is then very important to be able to follow through, to be as versatile as possible, to demonstrate that we can demand and deliver.

RHM: In NAATCO's productions the cast is Asian American, what about the audience? Do you have a good reception from Asian American spectators? Do you have positive feedback in general?

Mia Katigbak: Our audiences are still predominantly Asian American and I believe that is a good thing. At first there was a bit of resistance, some challenge to why we were doing "dead white men" when we should be producing Asian and Asian American work. But I felt those areas were covered very well by other Asian American theatres and I wanted maximum range for us, as it were. I know that some of our earlier critics have come around and our reception is generally excellent. A recent Asian American attendee of *Chan* wrote to me to say he emailed and called everyone he knew in New York after he saw a performance. He identified with the play on so many levels saying he was a "70-year-old Chinaman" who was around in the '60s when men were being drafted to Vietnam and he was deathly afraid of being a yellow man being shot at from both sides.

RHM: You stated that one of the missions of NAATCO is "to change audience perception and just people's (in general) perception" and that "the way you now how to do that is theater". Personally, I find your statement deeply wholehearted; can you recall any particular experience concerning this matter?

Mia Katigbak: Three experiences come to mind. When we presented *The House of Bernarda Alba* in 2000, Rene Buch, the founding artistic director of Repertorio Español, came to a performance. His company was also performing the play, in the original Spanish. He brought his cast with him, and after the show, he expressed with both surprise and delight: "But this was Spanish!" He said this is how the play should be performed and it didn't matter that the whole cast was Asian American and that it was in English.

During our remount of *Awake and Sing!* This summer, a young, white, Jewish woman spoke to me after the show. She said she knew of NAATCO's mission and was a bit skeptical we could pull it off. About five minutes into the play, however, all she could think about was that my Bessie was exactly like her aunt. She said she asked herself how this could be, that an Asian woman could very well be her own aunt, and then said that by the time the play ended it was no longer a preoccupation. She saw her own family onstage and it was a marvel that this could be so.

After a performance of *Chan*, an audience member who'd seen about three other NAATCO productions exclaimed in the lobby, "you guys can do anything!" Whether she meant as actors or as people, I wasn't sure, but I'll take one or both.

RHM: How would you describe your personal journey in NAATCO since its foundation until the present?

Mia Katigbak: When NAATCO was founded, it was to address a very personal, perhaps selfish, disappointment: I couldn't get cast in plays considered part of the classical canon. As the lack of Asian American representation onstage persisted, I began to question how it was that American theatre failed to even imagine onstage what was so obviously real in our everyday lives. Could this failure of imagination eventually erode, degrade American culture? Or prevent its advancement? Our productions will continue to be dedicated to Asian American artists, but of equal importance is how they innovate the field, how they experiment with the myriad aspects of the discipline, how they reach as wide a range of audiences as possible.

I am a founding director of CAATA, the Consortium of Asian American Theaters & Artists, a national organization that was formed when artistic directors of six Asian American theatre companies from around the country took part in a convening of theatres of color sponsored by Theater Communications Group (TCG). I served as the president of its board from 2011-15. I am committed to Asian American theatre and NAATCO's part in its advancement.

RHM: Can you tell us something about your future productions and projects in NAATCO?

Next up for us is MJ Kaufman's *Sagittarius Ponderosa*, a beautiful play about, in essence, how things and people are named. At least that is what moves me most about it. It is about Archer, who goes home to Oregon to care for his ailing father. His family still knows him as Angela, and they still treat him as Angela although no one ever says anything about what seems to be different. There is a section in the play that talks about how the Ponderosa pine tree was named by a Scottish colonizer to mean heavy. But the character talking about it says it makes him think of the word "ponder," "to think." And that he is sure that the native Americans who lived in the area would have named it something else. Archer's father decides to rename himself, following a Jewish practice of changing one's name when one is very sick so that the Angel of Death will not be able to find him. Is how we are called our destiny?

We are also exploring a partnership with New York Theatre Workshop on O'Neill's *Marco Millions*. The entire cast, including Marco Polo, will Asian American.

RHM: Mia Katigbak, thanks a lot!

ABSTRACTS

Interview with Mia Katigbak, co-founder and Artistic Producing Director of NAATCO (National Asian American Theatre Company). The interview was conducted by emails in August 2015

Entretien avec Mia Katigbak, co-fondatrice et directrice artistique de NAATCO (National Asian American Theatre Company). L'entretien, réalisé en août 2015, consistaient en un échange de courriels

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