

# ***The Brothers Paranormal***

**By Prince Gomolvilas  
Directed by Lou Bellamy**

**A Penumbra Theatre Company and Theater Mu  
co-production  
May 2 - May 26, 2019**

Penumbra Theatre Company Study Guide

## **About Penumbra Theatre**

The Penumbra Theatre was founded in 1976 by Artistic Director Lou Bellamy to create a forum for African-American voices in the Twin Cities' well-respected theater community. Through its commitment to provide realistic, inspirational works that redefine the consciousness of its audience, the Penumbra quickly garnered praise and a loyal following.

Over the years that followed, Penumbra Theatre Company lived up to its mission of presenting artistically excellent productions that depict emotional, relevant, and valuable experiences from an African American perspective. It has achieved national recognition for its quality productions and leadership role in launching the career of many respected playwrights, including two-time Pulitzer Prize winner August Wilson.

As Penumbra has grown, so has our impact on the community. In addition to performing before 40,000 people of all backgrounds every year, our Educational and Outreach activities impact more than 5,000 students each year. We employ more actors, choreographers, dancers, directors, and administrators of color than all other theatres in Minnesota combined.

Penumbra remains an active member of the Selby/Dale neighborhood and surrounding community. By maintaining a strong physical link to our environment, Penumbra fulfills one of its main objectives: to serve as an educator, employer and inspirational model for the community whose stories we tell.

Our role was recognized in January of 2000, when Danny Glover presented us with the Jujamcyn Award in New York City. As a recipient of the national award for the development of artistic talent, we join an exclusive list of top regional theaters that includes the Yale Repertory Theater and The Mark Taper Forum. Penumbra has also been named "Best Theatre for Drama" by City Pages and "One of Ten Companies that Make a Difference" by Stage Directions Magazine.

Today, Penumbra Theatre Company is Minnesota's only professional African American theatre, and is one of only three professional African American theaters in the nation to offer a full season of performances. Under Bellamy's quarter century of continuous leadership, Penumbra has stayed on the cutting edge of the national theatre scene and continues to present groundbreaking productions.

## **Mission**

Penumbra Theatre creates professional productions that are artistically excellent, thought-provoking, and relevant and illuminates the human condition through the prism of the African American experience.

Penumbra's goals are:

- To increase public awareness of the significant contributions of African Americans in creating a diversified American theatrical tradition.
- To encourage and facilitate a culturally diverse and all-inclusive America by using theatre to teach, criticize, comment and model.
- To use theatre to create an American mythology that includes African Americans and other peoples of color in every thread of the fabric of our society.
- To continue to maintain and stabilize a black performing arts community.

## **About Theater Mu**

Theater Mu was founded in 1992 as an arts organization dedicated to bringing Asian American voices to the Twin Cities theater community. This came at a time when Asian American theater did not exist in the area, and the Asian American community was rarely recognized. After forming a taiko drumming ensemble, Mu Daiko, the company rebranded itself as Mu Performing Arts, reflecting its broad artistic base of theater, taiko, and artist development.

Mu remains Minnesota's only pan-Asian performing arts organizations, and has grown to be one of the largest Asian American theater companies in the United States. Through performance and community outreach, Mu provides an unparalleled resource for Asian American artists, introduces Asian American stories and issues to audiences of all backgrounds, and gives Asian Americans of all ages and ethnicities a place to connect and belong.

Mu has become a leader in the local and national development of Asian American theater. Mu has helped to develop and support the work of local and national playwrights, actors, directors, and musicians by premiering many new works, fostering a new generation of Asian American artists, and bringing Asian American voices to Twin Cities audiences. Through educational, community, and corporate outreach programs, Mu provides theater throughout the upper Midwest, providing access to Asian American culture and arts to communities who otherwise may not have the opportunity to experience it.

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## **CHARACTER DESCRIPTIONS**

**MAX:** 25 Thai American; born in the U.S. Got his M.B.A., a suave-talking, Americanized man.

**DELIA:** 50s African American; born in the U.S.; her name is pronounced “DEE-LEE-UH,” a religious woman

**FELIX:** 50s African American; born in the U.S.; Delia’s husband and a former paramedic.

**VISARUT:** 39 Thai American; born in Thailand; immigrated to the U.S. at the age of 13; speaks with a Thai accent; Max’s brother; his name is pronounced “VIS-UH-ROODT”

**TASANEE:** 60 Thai American; born in Thailand; immigrated to the U.S. at the age of 33; speaks with a Thai accent; Max and Visarut’s mother; her name is pronounced “DTAH-SAH-NEE”

**JAI:** 20s a Thai woman

## **SETTING**

### **A. The Place**

- a. “Somewhere in the Midwestern United States.” It’s likely that we are in St. Paul, MN. The scenes switch between the home of Max, Visarut and Tasanee and the home of Delia and Felix. We begin in the office for Act I and for Act II, we begin in the hospital.

### **B. The Time**

- a. “Sometime around 2007”
- b. What was happening in 2007?
  - i. Virginia Tech shooting, April 16<sup>th</sup>
  - ii. I35W Bridge collapses, 13 dead
  - iii. Very first iPhone announced
  - iv. Phoenix Mars Lander launched
  - v. Barack Obama in the midst of running for president.
  - vi. Burma, military Junta shut off access to the outside world and stopped a protest by Buddhist monks with violence, 1000 dead.

## Themes That Just Won't Die in *The Brothers Paranormal*

By Saymoukda Duangphouxay Vongsay

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I got sucked into the world of Prince Gomolvilas' *The Brothers Paranormal* immediately. Other than my interests in the paranormal, I felt connected to the Thai characters: Max, Visarut, and Tasanee (and even Jai and her rage). As a former refugee and a not-so-new American (I was naturalized in the 90s) who grew up in historic Rondo, Frogtown, and the East Side, I had to navigate through the messiness of languages (Lao, Thai, English, Hmong, Black Vernacular English), cultures, politics, and histories - my family's and America's. There were times where I didn't feel Lao enough or American enough. The only examples I had of Americanness were either from popular culture (Madonna, Salt N Pepa) or the people in my immediate life. So I was confused, a lot.

All of my friends were either from families of refugees from Southeast Asia or from ancestors who were forced into slavery. Because my family was the only ethnic Lao in the housing, people had a lot of questions.

*How come your name has 28 letters and Gao only has seven?*

*Are you all communists?*

*Why does your rice look like that?*

*Can you say "hello" in your language?*

*Can I try that soup your mom made?*

*Where is the rest of your family?*

The more my friends and I talked about what brought the Southeast Asian half of us to Saint Paul, the more connections we were able to make between SEA and Black communities: loss, displacement, rebuilding, resistance, brutality, poverty, otherness, exotification, trauma, pain, healing, chemical abuse, family separation.

In *The Brothers Paranormal*, characters are connected by loss and displacement. They have to figure out where the blessings lay in the circumstances that were passed down to them. They have to figure out how to forgive, too. How to heal themselves and how their special gifts and experiences can heal others. Below are some of the themes that linger within me.

### DISPLACEMENT

One of my favorite sentiments from the play comes from Tasanee, mother of Max and Visarut. She says that people do not have to necessarily come from disaster to feel like their lives are a disaster. Tasanee and Visarut immigrated to the United States when she was in her thirties and Visarut a young teenager; Max was born in the United States. Outside of her family, she was unable to find meaningful connections. Were there other Thais in her community? Was she part of a faith community? Did she make friends at work? Were her family back in Thailand still part of her life? She didn't have the connections, support, and resources that she needed to address feelings of isolation and in many ways, the inability to assimilate completely. I know dozens of Tasanee's. I see her in my mother, my aunts, cousins, and neighbors. Sometimes they tell me that they feel like failures because of their accents when speaking English. The truth is, they are survivors. Sometimes they tell me that they do not feel like they belong here and I tell them they are water - they are exactly where they are supposed to be, giving life and nutrients. Sometimes, this is not enough.

Felix and Delia left New Orleans because of Hurricane Katrina. In their haste, they packed what they could. After the hurricane, they found that they could no longer return home because there was nothing to return to. They had to rebuild. They had to leave a place where they grew up and got married. They could only hope to return

there someday to once again rebuild their lives, live it to the fullest, and hopefully, have it be a final resting place.

These characters, all experiencing displacement, bare scars that are internal. There is unaddressed depression and melancholy with Tasanee and Visarut. Even Max, who was probably a yuppie in Los Angeles with a whole relationship, felt displaced in the midwest.

#### LOSS

Tasanee loses her husband. Loses her ability to continue fighting her depression. Loses pieces of her identity and understanding of self. Visarut loses his mother and his father. Loses his capacity to healthily mourn. Loses the friends he made in Thailand. Loses his childhood because he had to grow up and take care of his family. Max loses his mind, parts of his culture, his mother, his brother, his father. His relationship with a woman and a life in Los Angeles that was disrupted by filial responsibilities. He also loses out on the payment from Delia and Felix. Delia loses her mother. She loses her home from the hurricane. Loses her husband, the love of her life. Felix loses his place on his moral compass. He loses his home. Loses his life. Jai loses her life and her ability to haunt Felix and Delia.

#### MOTHERS and the THINGS THAT THEY PASS DOWN

We learned about Delia's mother without having to see her on stage. We know that she is a tremendous songstress whose talents (and possible schizophrenia) did not get passed down to Delia. We also know that in her struggle with mental illness, seeing hallucinations and shadows, her monsters caused her to jump out of a five-story building. She loved to gamble and was superstitious. One of the best bits of advice she gave her daughter was about luck and love and patience.

For Max and Tasanee, we see a relationship that is both strained and full of love. She's passed down bits of Thai traditions, beliefs, and language to him - even subconsciously. Max also has trauma passed unto him from his mother - from her suicide, her depression, and inability to communicate her struggles with her boys.

What other themes do you see floating for you in this play?



## MY RELATIONSHIP WITH GHOSTS OF THE LAO AND THAI VARIETY

Saymoukda Duangphouxay Vongsay  
with illustrations by Dennis Madamba  
and a poem by Bryan Thao Worra

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Five Flavors  
Bryan Thao Worra

On a good day, a good Lao meal  
Can be all you need, whether in Cairo  
Or Sacramento, Minnetonka or Houayxay.

So many hungry ghosts in our traditions  
Make me ask, "Don't they feed you in the underworld?"

*Phi Kongkoi, Phi Kasu and Phi Ya Wom.*  
*Phi Phaed, Phi Pob, Phi Dip* and more.  
Just a fraction of those legendary for  
Their paranormal appetites.  
It may surprise you, the hungriest of all  
Can't eat more than vapors  
During Boun Khao Padab Din,  
Wrapped pity strewn about the ground  
By strangers who understand  
The regular routines of Hell.

I suppose we should be grateful  
Most red-mouthed *phi* who kill  
Will make a full meal of you, *saep*,  
Wasting little, barely a drop.

At the Sabaidee Thai Grille, if you ask nicely,  
Madame Boualai and Chef Dythavon might make  
A special dish of *tom mak hung*, atomic and dirty.  
Dr. Ketmani and I don't have the guts to try.

Visiting our niece on break from the university,  
We settle for coffee and talk of the old country,  
Our land of smiling mysteries we're not meant to know.  
Some are benign:  
If you sleep among the black gibbons of Bokeo,  
A simian *Phi Poang Khang* passing by might catch you  
To slooowly lick salt from your big toe. Nothing more.  
Hardly fearsome, but ponder: "Why just the salt?"  
Or what would really happen if you interrupt.

Maybe you'll see  
The young *Phi Kowpoon* as a sweet phi,  
Weeping by her banyan tree, selling soup to strangers.  
Alas, her vermicelli is always cold as a dead white worm  
But you can taste a marvelous hint of mint green as jade,  
Juice from coconuts pale as a ghost's forgotten bones  
And red, red curry reminding you of doting Mae.  
Be kind, tip a few extra *kip*,  
It's how she spends her afterlife.

Certain spirits are sour as a mango with *jaew*,  
Or cling to tall, tall trees, slender as a dried man  
Full of mischief, letting down their hair from twisted  
Branches  
Daring you  
To touch  
Beneath a full moon,  
When monks and babies aren't watching.  
Some come after you  
For eating the flesh of pregnant animals,  
Others for breaking a law,  
A rule older than humanity you can't possibly know.  
But when the wind blows just right,  
They'll remind you.

There's probably none more bitter  
Than a jilted *Phi Tai Thong Klom*,  
Pissed as shit at the world, her unborn baby in tow,  
More bile than a screaming hot bowl of *gaeng kee laek*,  
Big as your head.  
Never suggest she brought it on herself.  
*Phet* is a subjective continuum of hot.  
A drunk coot once ate a salad  
More peppers than papaya, (60+ !)  
And lived. It was unreal to witness.

They say certain elder spirits come as a tiny fireball.  
Drifting through the night like a dandelion seed,  
Slipping past your snoring lips without a sound  
To dine,  
Your innards tastier than a volcanic *ping gai*.

They'll wear you like a tipsy puppet between furtive bites,  
Appraise your children and loved ones for the next meal,  
Inviting them closer, closer,  
Smiling warm.

My niece leans in to hear how you stop any of them.

Born in America,  
She thinks there's a solution for everything.  
Silver bullets, a stake, a prayer, a bit of water or fire,  
Running an oddball errand.  
I hug her for her optimism, and simply tell her,

"We'll pay, this time."  
Over her objections, I remind her,  
Everyone gets their turn.

*-reprinted with permission from the author*

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I don't have a relationship with ghosts and the supernatural. Although I am ethnic Lao and a former refugee and from a family with a history of mental illness and from a people who are Buddhists (with a sprinkle of animism and ancestral worshipping), I am not sensitive to the presence of occupants from a world not of this one. I don't know if I believe in them anymore.

You'd think that I would have at least one ghostly incident, a haunting from the afterlives of an undocumented war in Southeast Asia, at least, right?! Well, those ghosts are a different kind of ghosts. Those ghosts, I cannot exorcise. Cannot expel. Not in the play-spells that I've cast or in the poem-chants that I've uttered or in the shaman warrior-blessings I've performed.

To be transparent, I have never seen a ghost or as the Lao and Thai say, *phi*. *Phi* is complicated. When we talk about *phi*, we might be referring to everything from ghosts to monsters to spirits to demons. I've never seen a *phi*. I have, however, had endless/relentless dreams about them, about her:

Some nights my mae would tuck me in, other nights, my pahw. Because brother and I had separate bedrooms, we never got both of our parents to say "Nohn luhp, fuhn dee" to us at the same time. On nights when they had third shift seasonal work - Christmas wreath-making factory, canning factory, custodial work inside highrises - brother and I had to tuck ourselves into bed. He could sleep without any assistance. I always used books. My favorite was a children's picture dictionary, a treasure I received from the Red Balloon Bookstore on Grand Avenue. It was the only book that could keep me awake for as long as possible. But I always fell asleep way too soon.

She usually hovered in a corner. Long hair that looked like it was constantly being blown by a silent windstorm. Some nights her dress was red, other nights it was white. I never saw her feet. I don't remember if she had them. She never parted her lips but I knew she said, "Come to the red door." While in-dream, I didn't know fear, just knew that I could get in trouble with mae if I went to a stranger's house without her, without pahw, brother, or any of my uncles. That fear was what kept the red door closed.

Shoranda said that a Hmong family used to live in our unit and the room I slept in belonged to the second wife. Gao said that that was ridiculous because she's lived all her life in the housing and she's never even met anyone that remotely looked or claimed to be a second wife. Shoranda then offered a shrug. It was a contested matter. A mystery unsolved to this day.

On the fifth day of my first week at my residential hall in college, a floormate came up to me and told me that I have a few *phi* hanging around me. She handed me an angel pin. I kept the pin out of courtesy. I never got around to asking what their names were. I tell myself that I can feel their presence, but some would say that I'm just trying to have all the fun.

In the 80s my family lived in government housing, occupying one of the four-bedroom units, a side-by-side duplex that is on Carroll Avenue and St. Albans Street. Two blocks from Penumbra Theater. Behind the housing, a parking lot. Behind that parking lot, our playground. Behind that playground, the backyard park of a five-story assisted-living facility. We, us black and brown kids, used to tell each other that the park was haunted by the spirits of neglected grandparents. Adjacent to the facility, the Lutheran Church of the Redeemer. As a child who grew up Buddhist, churches were a mystery to me. Our family was semi-converted once but then we found our squad of Southeast Asians at an oriental store one day, learned that there was a makeshift Buddhist temple in Minneapolis, and never looked back at our sponsor family and their church.

About churches, what I did know, was that churches held space for the dead - front and center! And because the facility was connected to the church, I always believed that *phi* moved freely between those two spaces. My greatest fear - our greatest fear (my coterie of Hmong and Black kids from the housing) - was the possibility of those *phi* crossing over the chain link fence that kept the facility's backyard park safe from our litter. We imagined blonde-haired Lutheran *phi* swinging next to us, its chains creaking long after the last pump, long after the streetlights came on. Or, long-limbed Lutheran *phi* chasing us as we play freeze tag and lava tag. We told each other that if we stayed frozen for too long, our bodies would be possessed by one of the Lutheran *phi*.

When we could no longer adequately scare each other with Lutheran *phi* tales, we turned to *phi* lore from our own people. Gao told us about dab from the Hmong traditions. Shoranda parroted misremembered tales her older sisters read to her from Scary Stories to Tell in the Dark.

Growing up in a Lao home, we spoke mostly in Lao language but would sing along to songs in both Lao and Thai language. Occasionally we'll bust out some Crystal Gale and sing in broken English. The *phi* lore, however, could only be told prodigiously in our mother tongues.

The following are some of my favorite *phi* from Thai and Lao traditions.

### Phi Ahm



Heavy in weight, the *phi ahm* sits on your chest and lower torso while you sleep. You cannot move or make a sound as *ahm* means to keep secret or to keep silent. Many westerners would explain away a visit from the *phi ahm* simply as sleep paralysis. Here's a fact: Wes Craven's *Nightmare on Elm Street* was inspired by the unexplained death of a Khmer former refugee from Cambodia's killing fields genocide. The phenomenon known as Sudden Nocturnal Death Syndrome (SUNDS) was primarily affecting Southeast Asian men of Vietnamese, Laotian, and Cambodian descent (former refugees of war).

### Phi Pret



The phi pret has been known to be more than two-stories tall. They are the never-to-be-reincarnated afterlives of Buddhists who were materialistic and ungrateful when they were alive. Their bodies are full of tiny mouths, forever hungering (so hangry!) for forgiveness. In southern Thailand these phi have a festival where the living create opportunities for the pret to practice compassion.



### Phi Mae Nak

Mae Nak, the *phi* that launched a thousand horror films.

She died giving birth while her husband was conscripted to fight in the King's war. She haunts the village, roaming the dirt paths between her broken dilapidated home and the village, waiting for a child lost, waiting for her estranged husband.

When he returns to their village, she cast a veil or glamour and so he is unaware of the truth. Villagers who try to warn him face violent deaths.

One day, in her carelessness, Mae Nak momentarily lifts the veil and her husband catches a glimpse of her arm stretching from the dining room into the ground floor kitchen, her arm flattening to fit between a slit of the bamboo floor. To grab a lime. A lime.

In fear and shock, he runs from her. The veil lifts completely.

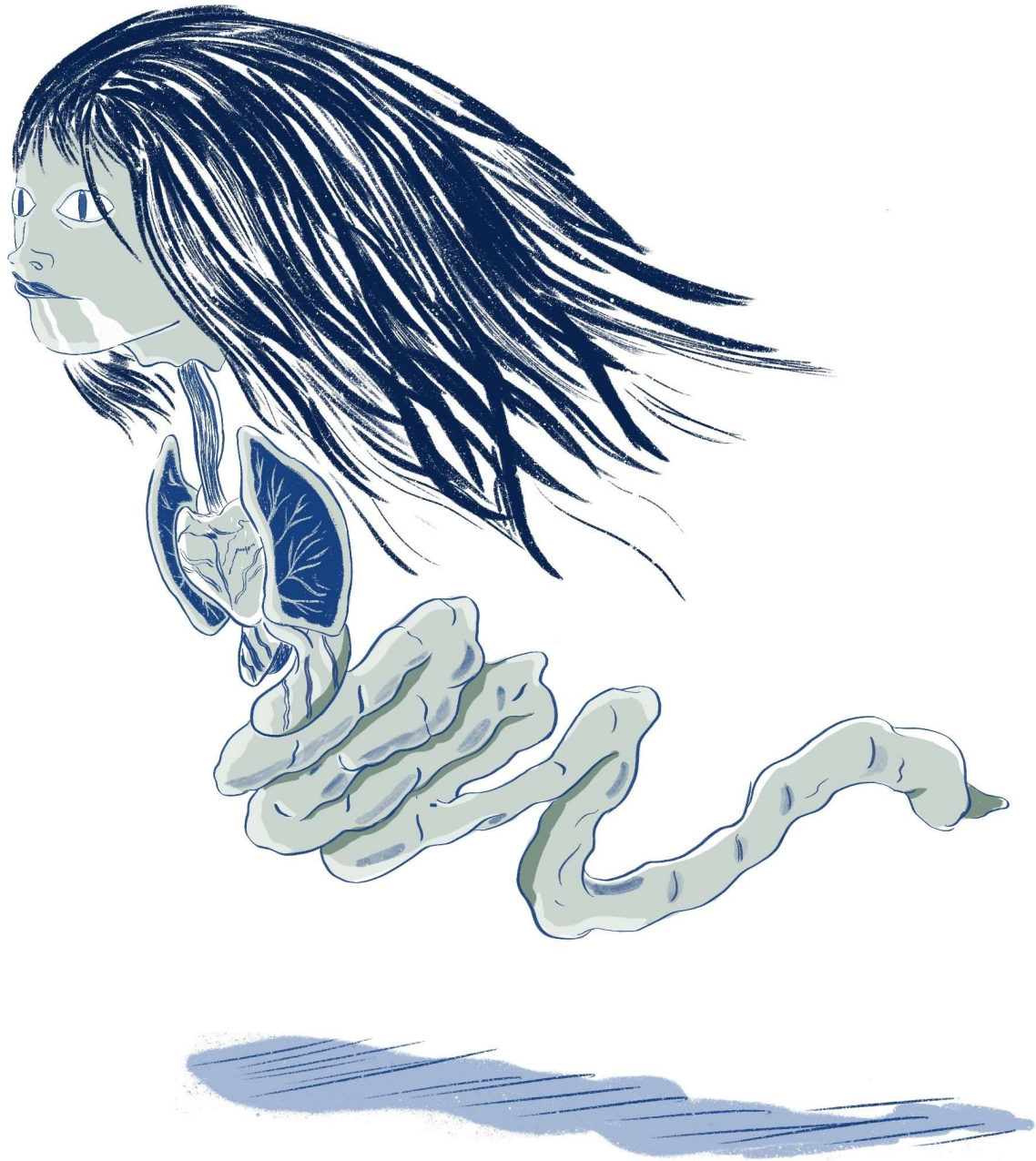
Buddhist monks exorcize her, binding her spirit to an amulet made from a piece of her skull.

Iconic, for sure.

### Phi Krasu



Phi Krasu



This *phi* was once a beautiful young woman who was violently killed. It is said that she exists amongst us and is as normal as your local librarian. When night falls, in her quest for revenge, she detaches her head from her body and becomes a floating head with hanging organs in search of flesh and blood of pregnant women and newborn babies. If she is unsuccessful in her search, she settles for dining on feces.



### Phi Gongoi



This phi is a hungry one-legged hopping pest that parents use to scare their children into behaving. It hops around saying its own name. With this phi, the farther it is from you the louder you'll hear gongoi. It's when you hear a whispered gongoi that you should be afraid.

## SO THERE'S PHI IN YOUR LIFE...NOW WHAT

It's a popular belief that the mere mention of *phi* will invite *phi* to materialize. If this ever happens to you, know that there are tricks, tools, and resources available to detect, dispel, and protect against *phi*.

### TRICKS TO DETECT PHI

- Wondering if you're in the presence of a *phi* but can't be sure? Try these tricks for peace of mind:
- Bend down and look between your legs, making sure that the target in question is behind you. Upside down and between your legs, you will see its true form.
- Burn incense. *Phi* cannot stand the fragrance. Try Nag Champa as the living enjoys this smell and it will make it easy to filter out the dead. Do not use Patchouli as no one - alive or dead - can stand it. Or, yes, use Patchouli and get rid of everyone so you can finally get that nap in.
- Say its name out loud. If it answers in a voice unfamiliar to you, then you know its *phi*.
- Do nothing. Eventually, something will move on its own and then you'll know.
- Not in the presence of *phi* but still want to call upon *phi* for fun? Collect chopsticks in a cup and shake it. The sound will act as *phi* dispatch.

### TOOLS TO FIGHT PHI

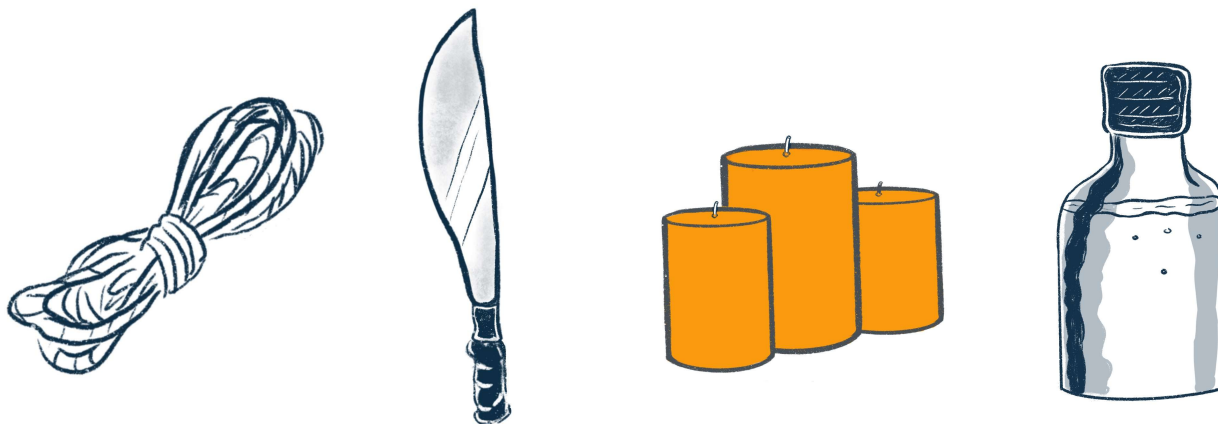


**Blessed String:** Wrap around the area needing protection making sure string ends connect.

**Knife:** Sleep with it underneath your pillow to ward away any lurking *phi*.

**Candles:** *Phi* do not like fire.

**Blessed Water:** Douse, dab, spray (but do not drink!) as needed.



#### ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Find the nearest Buddhist temple in your area and enlist the help of a compassionate monk to exorcise and bind the phi.
- Call The Brothers Paranormal investigators Max and Visarut.

## ASIAN AMERICAN THEATER CHRONOLOGY

by Saymoukda Vongsay

Forward by Sun Mee Chomet, assistant director of *Brothers Paranormal*

With contributions from Roger Tang, Kim Park Nelson, Leslie Ishii, Cristeta Boarini, Leilani Chan, May Lee-Yang, Velina Hasu Houston, Karen Huie, and Stephanie Lein Walseth

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We are proud to find ourselves in a moment to reflect on the dynamic history of Asian American theater that spans more than a century. From Onoto Watanna's *A Japanese Nightingale* on Broadway in 1903 to the rolling national premier of Prince Gomolvilas' *Brothers Paranormal* in the ground-breaking co-production between Theater Mu and Penumbra Theatre in 2019: it is a rich, complex, and vast canon of work.

Below is a working timeline of our journey as Asian American theater-makers. It is not, by any means, comprehensive. It is a springboard to opening the door to our history: paying homage to those who have come before us, to moments that cracked glass ceilings, and to leaders that created community among us through the medium of theater.

It is essential to recognize that Asian American theater gained momentum via the example of African American theater. It was the trailblazers of the Black Arts Movement in the 1960s, insisting that black plays should be written by, for and about black people (rather than to appease white producers, audiences, etc.), that inspired Asian American playwrights today. The audacity, vibrancy, and activism of African American theater set the bar for other theaters of color to model themselves. We are forever grateful for this collaborative effort to more fully represent the expansive American experience.

Asian American playwrights are now giving themselves permission to write outside of the box, telling our stories in ways that are experimental, non-linear, absurdist, and intersectional. After all, the Asian American experience encompasses diaspora, immigration, internment, the refugee experience, adoption, and being "other" in a country that we call our own. How can we tell our stories anywhere but outside of the box? We have arrived in a moment where we no longer long for the approval of white audiences, producers, or reviewers. It is through this liberation that diverse audiences are now flocking to see Asian American plays because we are *out there*. We write unhinged, first and foremost, to tell our stories to audiences of the future and to explore a perspective that oftentimes makes more sense in our imaginations than reality. Our ancestors are with us, always, holding our hands to the pen. This is for them.

Signed, Sun Mee Chomet

### 1903

*A Japanese Nightingale* written by Onoto Watanna, who is also known as Winnifred Eaton, becomes the first Asian American author produced on Broadway at Daly's Theater.

### 1920s-1930s

Asian American student playwrights begin writing at the University of Hawaii. Ling-Ai Li & Wai Chee Chun Yee become pioneering Asian American women playwrights in Hawaii.

### 1940s-1950s

Dorothy Toy (born Dorothy Takahashi) and Paul Wing are the Chop Suey Circuit - the most successful Asian American dance duo at the time.

**1959**

*The Crimson Kimono* starring James Shigeta debuts. It's one of the first studio marketed films in which an Asian Pacific Islander American gets the girl.

Creation of the San Francisco Mime Troupe.

**1961**

Nancy Kwan stars in *Flower Drum Song*, the first televised performance of Asian American actors and becomes the first time that Asian Pacific Islander Americans saw themselves featured so prominently in popular culture.

**1965**

East West Players is founded in Los Angeles by Makoto Iwamatsu (Artistic Director), Rae Creevey, Beulah Quo, Soon-Tek Oh, James Hong, Pat Li, June Kim, Guy Lee, and Yet Lock. Their "black box" theater seated 99.

**1969**

There is a demonstration at Los Angeles Music Center regarding *Lovely Ladies, Kind Gentlemen*, a musical about an American military officer assigned to Americanize the village of Tobiki on Okinawa following World War II.

**Late 60s, Early 70s**

Talented Asian American actors audition but no roles were given or made available for Asians.

**1970s**

The first courses in Asian American Theatre are taught at the University of California Los Angeles.

Poet, visual artist, community + cultural activist Fay Chiang becomes the Executive Director of Asian Writers Basement Workshop, the first Asian American multidisciplinary cultural organization in New York City.

Asian Americans protest Broadway as parts are given to non-Asian American actors.

**1970**

Momoko Iko's *Gold Watch*, a play recounting Japanese incarceration experiences, won an East West Players playwriting contest.

**1971**

Kumu Kahua Theatre in Honolulu is founded by graduate students at the University of Hawai'i because there previously wasn't a local theater devoted to telling the stories of island communities.

Frank Chin's *The Chickencoop Chinaman* wins East West Player's playwriting contest.

**1972**

Ping Chong's *Lazarus*, "an interdisciplinary, imagistic meditation on the resurrected man transplanted from its biblical setting to the surreal urban purgatory of NYC in the 1970's," premieres at Meredith Monk's Studio.

Frank Chin's *The Chickencoop Chinaman* premieres at The American Place Theatre on May 27th. It is the first Asian American play produced in New York.

The Theatrical Ensemble of Asians is formed by an instructor named Stanley Asis and a group of students of Asian and Hispanic descent at the University of Washington. After graduating, the group adopted the name of Asian Exclusive Act. The Theatrical Ensemble of Asians is considered a flagship Asian American theatre company in the Pacific Northwest.

Frank Chin establishes The Asian American Theater Company in San Francisco in order to develop and present original works of theater by Americans of Asian and Pacific Islander descent.

**1973**

Harsh Nayya, the first South Asian American actor and Marion Yue, the first Japanese American actor gets admitted to New York University's graduate acting program.

**1974**

Kumu Kahua Theatre produces James Grant Benton's Shakespeare adaptation, *Twelfth Night O Wateva!*

Nicky Paraiso, the first Asian-Filipino-American gets admitted to New York University's graduate acting program.

**1975**

Ping Chong + Company is founded in New York by inter/multidisciplinary artist Ping Chong. The company produces works of theater with a close-knit ensemble and has a commitment to social justice.

**1977**

The Asian Exclusion Act's first production is Frank Chin's *The Year of the Dragon*.

Pan Asian Repertory is founded in New York by actor, dancer, and director Tisa Chang.

**1978**

Bea Kiyohara becomes Artistic Director of the Asian Exclusion Act.

Great Leap, an Asian American performing arts organization, is founded by Nobuko Miyamoto in Los Angeles.

Genny Lim's *Paper Angels* premieres at the Chinese Cultural Center in San Francisco.

**1979**

Ping Chong's *Lazarus* has a European premiere at the Mickey Theatre in Amsterdam.

New World Theatre is founded by Asian American women.

Pacific Asian Actors Ensemble in San Diego is founded by Thom Sesma, Gingerlily Lowe, David Tamayo, Kent Brisby, Ed You, and Janine Lowe.

Philip Kan Gotanda's *The Avocado Kid, or Zen in the Arts of Guacamole* has a world premiere at East West Players.

**1980**

Playwright Jaime Meyer worked with Hmong youth to produce *Hmong Tapestry: Voices from the Cloth*.

Pan Asian Repertory is designated as a Primary Organization of the New York State Council on the Arts.

Philip Kan Gotanda's *A Song for Nisei Fisherman* is presented at Stanford University.

### **1981**

The Asian Exclusion Act theater company changes its name to the Northwest Asian American Theatre to better reflect its regional and ethnic identity and performs out of a renovated garage.

Cold Tofu is founded by four women: Marilyn Tokuda, Denice Kumagai, Judy Momii, & Irma Escamilla.

Momoko Iko's *Flowers and Household Gods* is presented by Pan Asian Repertory Theater at La Mama theater in New York City's East Village.

### **1982**

Velina Hasu Houston receives the *National First Prize-Lorraine Hansberry Playwriting Award* and the *National First Prize-David Library Playwriting Award for American Freedom*, both from the John F. Kennedy Center/American College Theatre Festival.

Philip Kan Gotanda receives the Cable Car Award for his play *The Avocado Kid, or Zen in the Arts of Guacamole*. This same year, his play *The Dream of Kitamura* has a world premiere at the Asian American Theater Company in San Francisco.

### **1983**

The Aratani Japan American Theatre opens in Little Tokyo, Los Angeles. The 880-set theater is part of the Japanese American Cultural & Community Center.

### **1984**

Ernest Abuba, a senior artist with Pan Asian Repertory receives an Obie Award for his performance in *Yellow Fever* (written by Rick A. Shiomi).

The Asian Theatre Journal is created as an international organization of scholars and artists interested in the theater and theatrical performance traditions of Asian regions.

Velina Hasu Houston becomes a Rockefeller Foundation Playwriting Fellow.

### **1985**

Nikki Nojima Louis' oral histories play *Breaking the Silence* debuts at the University of Washington as a fundraiser for Gordon Hirabayashi's coram nobis court cases. Over \$10,000 was raised for Hirabayashi's defense fund and launched Louis' career in theater.

Philip Kan Gotanda's *The Wash* is first presented at the New Plays Festival at Mark Taper in Los Angeles.

### **1986**

The end of the Asian Writers Basement Workshop.

Philip Kan Gotanda's *The Dream of Kitamura* wins Bay Area Critics Award for *Best Play*.

**1987**

The Northwest Asian American Theatre opens the world premiere of Gary Iwamoto's *Miss Minidoka 1943*.

Tisa Chang receives a Seward Park Asian Community Leadership Award for her work as the Artistic/Producing Director at Pan Asian Repertory.

Velina Hasu Houston's *Tea* premieres Off-Broadway at the Manhattan Theatre Club. It was written in 1981 and had a Rockefeller Workshop Production in 1984.

**1988**

David Henry Hwang's *M. Butterfly* premieres at the National Theatre in Washington DC on February 10th. It opens on Broadway at the Eugene O'Neill Theatre on March 20th and won the Tony Award for Best Play that same year.

Velina Hasu Houston receives San Diego Drama Critics Circle Award for *Tea*.

Momoko Iko's *Boutique Living and Disposable Icons* is part of the First New York International Festival of the Arts and presented by the Pan Asian Repertory at the Perry Street Theater.

Philip Kan Gotanda's *Yankee Dawg You Die* is presented at the Berkeley Repertory Theatre.

**1989**

Ma-Yi Theatre Company is founded in New York to develop and present new plays and performance works that essay the Filipino-American experience.

Velina Hasu Houston receives DramaLogue Outstanding Achievement in Theatre Award for *Tea*.

The National Asian American Theatre Company (NAATCO) is formed in New York. The company specializes in adaptations of European and American classics as well as new plays by non-Asians - all being realized by an all Asian American cast. Its founders are Richard Eng and Mia Katigbak. To date, Mia Katigbak remains the Artistic Producing Director for the company.

**1990**

David Henry Hwang's *M. Butterfly* closes after 777 performances on January 27th.

Pom Siab Hmoob Theatre, the first Hmong theater in the world, was founded in St. Paul, Minnesota by Nkauj'lis Lyfoung and playwright Jaime Meyer. Pom Siab Hmoob Theatre can be interpreted as "Looking into the Heart of the Hmong Theatre or Looking up to Higher Horizons Theatre."

Korean graduate student Dong-il Lee saw a need for an Asian American theater in Minnesota (and the midwest) and proposed such an idea to Japanese Canadian playwright Rick A. Shiomi, who was visiting Minneapolis, Minnesota.

David Mura's reading of *After We Lost Our Way*.



Philip Kan Gotanda's *Ballad of Yachiyo* is commissioned by the South Coast Repertory Theatre in Costa Mesa, California. The same year, he receives the John Simon Guggenheim Fellowship Award for Theater Playwriting Artist.

Wakako Yamauchi's *The Chairman's Wife* opens at East West Players with Karen Huie playing the titular character.

Karen Huie's comedy, *Songs of Harmony* opens at East West Players as the company's Silver Anniversary Production. Huie later receives a pilot deal from CBS and Castle Rock Entertainment for *Songs of Harmony*.

### **1991**

Tisa Chang receives the Barnard Medal of Distinction. The same year, Pan Asian Repertory receives the Association for Asian Pacific Artists JIMMIE Award in Los Angeles.

Treasure in the House Asian Pacific American performance series is founded by Dan Kwong.

Velina Hasu Houston receives California Arts Council Performings Arts Fellowship.

### **1992**

Dong-il Lee and Rick Shiomi, along with Martha Johnson, a Euro-American theater professor at Augsburg College; Andrew Kim, a Korean American artist; and Diane Espaldon, a Filipina professional created Theater Mu - Minnesota's first professional Asian American theater company.

Kumu Kahua Theatre produces Edward Sakamoto's *Aloha Las Vegas*.

Women Herstory Month Tribute to Tisa Chang from the Borough of Manhattan President Ruth Messenger.

Asian American Renaissance, a conference and organization forms in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

The Public Theater forms an Asian American Playwrights Lab headed by Chiori Miyagawa with members Sung Rno, Lesli Jo Morizono, Diana Son, Eugenie Chan, Dawn Akemi Saito and Cary Wong. It is shut down a year later after Artistic Director JoAnne Atkalitis is replaced by George C. Wolfe.

Velina Hasu Houston becomes the inaugural recipient of the Remy Martin New Vision Award from Sidney Poitier and the American Film Institute for recognition of literary accomplishment and work that "contributes to the culture of our society and our world."

### **1993**

Rick Shiomi became Theater Mu's first Artistic Director and the company produced its first New Eyes Festival (a series of experimental works by emerging writers at the Playwrights' Center in Minneapolis) and *Masked Dance* (Mu's first full production, written + directed by Shiomi). The play explored Korean adoption and blended personal stories with traditional Asian art forms.

In Los Angeles, Club O'Noodle, a Vietnamese American dance and theater company is started by Vietnamese American college students who lived through the Vietnam War. Hung Nguyen is Artistic Director.

The Northwest Asian American Theatre moves into a permanent location in the Theatre Off Jackson in Seattle's Chinatown-International District under the leadership of creative director Beatrice Kiyohara. She later resigns in the year. Judi Nihei takes over as artistic director and Nobuko Miyamoto is Artistic Adviser.

Edited by Roberta Uno and Velina Hasu Houston, *Unbroken Thread: An Anthology of Plays by Asian American Women*, the first anthology of plays by Asian American women playwrights, is published by the University of Massachusetts Press.

#### **1994**

Dan Kwong's *Everything You Ever Wanted to Know About Asian Men – but Didn't Give Enough of a Shit to Ask* at Japanese American National Museum Los Angeles.

Roger Tang develops the Asian American Theatre Review website to link Asian Pacific Islander artists nationally through the world wide web.

#### **1995**

Pangea World Theater is founded in Minnesota by Keith Lee, Kathy Haddad, Luu Pham, and Dipankar Mukherjee and later joined by Meena Natarajan.

Asian American Repertory Theatre founded in San Diego by Andy Lowe, Vince Sobbrano, Jenn Wong, Donna Maglalang, and Jyl Kaneshiro.

*Laughter From the Children of War* by Club O'Noodles opens October 28th at the Irvine Barclay Theatre in Irvine, California.

*Peeling the Banana*, a writing and performing workshop at Asian American Writers Workshop is founded by Gary San Angel.

#### **1996**

RAW – *Real Asian Woman Talk* (performance art/dance) is held at the Walker Art Center with Denise Uyehara and Canyon Sam.

Co-produced by Berkeley Repertory, Mary Zimmerman's *Journey to the West* is performed by Nelson Mashita, Kim Miyori, Chyong-Hwa Chang, Jane C. Cho, Jennie S. Yee, Kelvin Han Yee, and others at the Zellerbach Playhouse on the University of California Berkeley campus.

Pangea World Theater mounts its first production, *Conference of the Birds*, a theatrical adaptation by Meena Natarajan of a twelfth century Sufi poem.

TeAda Productions is founded in Los Angeles by Leilani Chan and Ova Saopeng, beginning as a nomadic theater with a commitment to artists of color while focusing on highlighting marginalized stories for the purposes of public discourse.

Philip Kan Gotanda's *The Quilt Plays (a collection of plays about AIDS)* is presented at the Alma Delfina Project at Magic Theater in San Francisco. The same year, he receives a PEN CENTER/West *Best New Play Award* for *Ballad of Yachiyo* and a radio play version of *Ballad* is made possible by Los Angeles Theater Works.

### **1997**

Rick Shiomi began teaching Taiko drumming to Mu artists which led to the formation of Mu Daiko.

Between 1990 and 1997 Pom Siab Hmoob Theatre has written and produced eight successful plays in Saint Paul where five were community-based and three were professionally-staged.

Josephine Lee's publication of *Performing Asian America*.

### **1998**

East West Players moved from their 99-seat black box into the new 240-seat Union Center for the Arts located in Little Tokyo. Their mainstage is named the David Henry Hwang Theater.

Pom Siab Hmoob Theatre members expanded their focus beyond theater arts in order to serve more Hmong artists. They changed their organization's name to Center for Hmong Arts and Talent (CHAT).

Ma-Yi Theater Company expands its mission to include new works by Asian American writers. It has distinguished itself as a "leading incubator" of new work that shapes "the national discourse about what it means to be Asian American today."

Dan Kwong and Gary San Angel introduces an all Asian American performance workshop in Philadelphia.

Pork Filled Players (later Pork Filled Productions) is formed in Seattle, Washington.

World Premiere of acclaimed novelist Jessica Hagedorn's *Dogeaters* gets staged at La Jolla Playhouse.

*Something to Say* performance group at Asian Arts Initiative in Philadelphia.

East West Players produces first Thai-American play *Big Hunk O' Burnin' Love* by Prince Gomolvilas.

### **1999**

Generasian Next, a teen theater troupe starts its first season at the Asian Arts Initiative.

Asian American Theater commissions Philip Kan Gotanda to pen *Sisters Matsumoto*.

### **2000**

Philip Kan Gotanda's *Ballad of Yachiyo* is presented at The Royal National Theater/The Gate Theater in London, England.

SIS Productions is formed. The Sex in Seattle Series strives "to create, develop, and produce quality works that involve Asian American women, their themes, and Asian American issues."

Pangea World Theater wins the International Gardens of Peace Award.

Disha Theatre launches as the first South Asian theatre company in New York City at Dialectica Art Gallery.

Vampire Cowboys Theater Company begins with the first collaboration between artistic directors and then-graduate students Qui Nguyen and Robert Ross Parker at Ohio University.

## **2001**

Theater Mu became Mu Performing Arts and housed Theater Mu and Mu Daiko.

Pangea World Theater launches the Indigenous Voices program. A key value in their practice is in acknowledging that Pangea exists on the sacred and traditional lands of the Dakota people.

TeAda Productions presents *Native Immigrant* at Japanese American Theater in Little Tokyo.

Sun Mee Chomet receives the Sylvia Deutscher Kushner Award in Acting from New York University.

## **2002**

Silk Road Rising (originally Silk Road Theatre Project) is founded in Chicago, Illinois by husbands Malik Gillani and Jamil Khoury as an intentional and creative response to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.

The Lifetime Achievement award from the Organization of Chinese Americans L.I. Chapter is given to Tisa Chang.

Pangea World Theater wins the 3M Innovation of the Arts Award.

The 1st TeAda theater workshop features Kristina Wong, Ova Saopeng, & Robert Karimi.

Leadership shifts into a new direction at the Asian American Theater Company of San Francisco. Sean Lim starts as Artistic Director.

Sex in Seattle is the country's longest running serial drama for the stage.

Berkeley Symphony commissions Philip Kan Gotanda to pen *Manzanar: An American Story*.

## **2003**

The Consortium of Asian American Theaters and Artists (CAATA) is formed by Pan Asian Repertory Theatre, East West Players, Ma-Yi Theater, the National Asian American Theatre Company (NAATCO), Second Generation, and Mu Performing Arts.

Kumu Kahua Theatre produces Lee Cataluna's *Folks You Meet in Longs*.

Ma-Yi Theater Company's production of "The Romance of Magno Rubio" was honored with Obie Awards for Lonnie Carter (playwright), Loy Arcenas (director), the entire cast including Art Acuña, Ramon de Ocampo, Ron Domingo, Jojo Gonzalez, Orlando Pabotoy, and Ralph Peña (lyricist).

Jamil Khoury's *Precious Stones* receives a world premiere in Chicago.

Bombay Dreams produced on Broadway with mostly South Asian cast by Andrew Lloyd Weber.

Beau Sia, Stacey Ann Chinn, & Suheir Hamad receive Tony Award for Def Poetry Jam.

East West Players recognizes Philip Kan Gotanda with a *Visionary Award For Outstanding Achievement in the Asian Pacific Community*. Asian American Theater Company recognizes him with a *Life Time Achievement Award*.

## **2004**

The Northwest Asian American Theatre closes its doors.

Pangea World Theater wins the Excellence in the Arts Award from the Council of Asian Pacific Minnesotans. The same year, the Alternate Visions Series, launches and gives playwrights of color a chance to spend an extended period of time writing and developing new plays.

Theater Mu collaborates with Park Square Theater on the first all Asian American cast musical in Minnesota with *Pacific Overtures*.

*With Love from Ramallah*, co-written by Kathryn Haddad and Juliana Pegues, is the first Arab American production in the upper Midwest.

## **2005**

The world premiere of Michael Golamco's *Cowboy Versus Samurai* is produced by the National Asian American Theater Company in New York City.

TeAda Production creates *Refugee Nation*, the first nationally touring play about Laotian refugees in the United States.

Pangea World Theater receives a Special Recognition Award from The Advocates for Human Rights for its work in using arts to promote human rights.

Robert Karimi's *Self (the remix)* opens in Alaska.

SIS Productions establishes the SIS Writers Group to encourage and promote local Asian American playwrights in developing their craft. The work is then shared through Insatiable (playwright festival) and Revealed (site-specific theatrical tour).

## **2006**

The "Next Big Bang: The First Asian American Theater Conference" was held in Los Angeles at East West Players and was spearheaded by Tim Dang.

Aditi Kapil's *Deaf Duckling* debuts at the Mixed Blood Theatre in Minneapolis, Minnesota. The same year, *Gotama*, written at the request of director Andy Kim and designer Masanari Kawahara, opened at In the Heart of the Beast Puppet and Mask Theatre (also in Minneapolis).

SIS Productions produces *Cowboy Versus Samurai* by Michael Golamco.

Kristina Wong is awarded creative capital award in theatre to create new work on mental illness among Asian woman.

## **2007**

The first National Asian American Theater Festival was held at New York City and featured 25+ performances and companies.

Theater Mu presented *Circle Around the Island* in The Guthrie's brand-new Dowling Studio. *Circle* was conceived, performed, and directed entirely by Asian American artists at the Guthrie - a first since it was founded in 1963.

Dawning Dab Neeg Theatre produced the collectively created *Hmong-land*.

New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg declares March 5th "Pan Asian Repertory Theatre Day" at the theater's 30th Anniversary Gala.

Lauren Yee's *Ching Chong Chinaman* wins the Kumu Kahua Theatre's *Pacific Rim Prize*. The same year, it is presented at the Yale Playwrights Festival.

## **2008**

Mu Performing Arts co-hosted the second CAATA conference along with Pangea World Theater and held at The Guthrie Theater's new building (jokingly known as "the Ikea with an erection").

Pangea co-hosts the National Asian American Festival with Theater Mu, as well as Desi Drama, a gathering of South Asian American artists from across the country.

Sun Mee Chomet is named "Artist of the Year" by Minneapolis City Pages. The same year her play *Asiamnesia* is voted Best New Script by Minneapolis Star Tribune.

Lauren Yee's *Ching Chong Chinaman* is presented at Impact Theatre in Berkeley.

## **2009**

Mu Performing Arts made social justice an explicit goal in their organization's mission statement.

Center for Hmong Arts and Talent presented May Lee-Yang's *Sia(b)* at the Gremlin Theater.

Lauren Yee is awarded a *City Pages Top 10 Play* and recognized as a finalist for the PEN USA *Literary Award for Drama* for, *Ching Chong Chinaman*.

## **2010**

Asian Pacific American playwrights Eric "Pogi" Sumangil, Jessica Huang, Saymoukda Duangphouxay Vongsay, and May Lee-Yang become co-founding members of The Unit Collective of Playwrights Color. The 11-member collective sets up a base of operations at The Playwrights' Center in Minneapolis, Minnesota and produces The Madness Series of monthly new work play readings.

Qui Nguyen's geek theater company, Vampire Cowboys Theatre, wins a special Obie Award.

## **2011**

Katie Ka Vang's *WTF* opens Mu's 10/11 season at Mixed Blood Theater in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Mu published *Asian American Plays for a New Generation*, an anthology edited by Dr. Josephine Lee, Rick Shiomi, and Don Eitel and published by Temple University Press.

The Asian American Performers Action Coalition is formed in order to increase Asian American access and representation on New York City's stages.

Chay Yew named Artistic Director at Victory Garden Theatre, Chicago, Illinois.

## **2012**

Sun Mee Chomet's solo narrative *How to Be a Korean Woman* is named *Best Solo Performance* by Lavender Magazine and named *Top Ten Shows* by the Minneapolis Star Tribune.

After touring the country for five years, TeAda Productions' *Refugee Nation* premieres in Los Angeles.

Tisa Chang is honored with Mayor Bloomberg's American Dreamer "Visionary Award" for Pan Asian Repertory's visionary work and advocacy on behalf of New York City's immigrant communities.

Pangea World Theater collaborates with Art2Action to launch a program called The National Institute for Directing and Ensemble Creation. This pilot program grew into an annual summer institute dedicated to peer exchange and training for directors of color and women directors. The same year, Pangea wins the Joyce Foundation award for the collaboration between Pangea World Theater and Teatro in developing the Latino Asian Fusion series.

Philip Kan Gotanda receives the *Flora Roberts Award in Recognition of Distinguished Work in Theater* from the Dramatists Guild.

## **2013**

Don't Buy Miss Saigon coalition of activists and theater-makers protested the Ordway Center for Performing Arts' production of *Miss Saigon*. Mu facilitated a series of forums about the controversy (example: yellow-face casting, Asian American stereotypes in popular media, employment equity).

Rick Shiomi wins an Ivey Award for *Lifetime Achievement*. After 20 years Rick Shiomi retired from Theater Mu. Randy Reyes becomes the new Artistic Director.

Aditi Kapil receives a three-year residency grant from the Mellon Foundation supporting her work as the resident playwright at Mixed Blood Theatre.

Saymoukda Duangphouxay Vongsay's *Kung Fu Zombies vs Cannibals* becomes Theater Mu's highest grossing world premiere with its three-week run at The Southern Theatre in Minneapolis.

Katie Ka Vang returns to the stage with her one-woman show *Hmong Bollywood* after beating cancer. The show opens at Intermedia Arts and was developed with support from Pangea.

Nikki Nojima Louis' *Breaking the Silence* is staged at the Hiroshima Prefectural Art Museum in Hiroshima, Japan. The performance coincided with the 68th Anniversary of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima.

*Reenactment of the Vincent Chin Murder Trial*, written by U.S. Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit Judge Denny Chin and Dean and Chancellor of UC Hastings College of Law, Frank Wu, the play is directed by Philip Kan Gotanda is presented at the Asian Pacific American Law Faculty Conference in San Francisco.

## **2014**

Mu and Pangea becomes a founding member of the Twin Cities Theatres of Color Coalition (TCTOCC) alongside Penumbra Theater Company, New Native Theatre, and Teatro del Pueblo. The Coalition's goals include influencing foundation-giving practices and fighting for equity in theater.

TeAda Productions' *Global Taxi Driver* premieres at Intermedia Arts in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

Eric Sharp's *Middle Brother* premieres at the Southern Theatre in Minneapolis. Developed through Theater Mu's New Eyes program.

Lauren Yee's *King of the Yees* gets workshopped at Goodman Theatre in Chicago.

## **2015**

Eric Ting named Artistic Director at California Shakespeare.

Rick Shiomi is honored with a McKnight Distinguished Artist award by the McKnight Foundation.

SIS Productions brings Genny Lim's *Paper Angels* to the Dukesby Theater in Tacoma including a short run at a former Immigration and Naturalization Service facility in Seattle.

TeAda Productions' *Global Taxi Driver* premieres at East West Players in Los Angeles.

Asian American Set Designer, Mimi Lien, wins a MacArthur Genius Award Fellow

## **2016**

Mu Performing Arts celebrates 25 years and produces its 55th world premiere production. To date, Mu has produced more than 50 world premieres and cultivated hundreds of Asian American actors, directors, musicians, and designers since 1992.

Eric "Pogi" Sumangil's *tot: The Untold Yet Spectacular Story of (a Filipino) Hulk Hogan* premieres at Park Square Theater in Saint Paul, Minnesota.

East West Players honors Tisa Chang with a Visionary Award.

*Vietgone*, by Qui Nguyen, opens at Oregon Shakespeare Festival (with first all Asian American cast at OSF). It receives a standing ovation.

Fifth National Asian American Theatre Conference in Ashland, Oregon with Oregon Shakespeare Festival.

*Beyond Orientalism* cohort is launched by Theatre Communications Group.

Lauren Yee's *Cambodian Rock Band* gets workshopped at Berkeley Repertory's Ground Floor. The same year, *King of the Yees* receives a full production at Gateway Theatre in Richmond, British Columbia, Canada.

## **2017**

As part of Lake Street Arts!, Pangea World Theater launches its first-ever Arts Organizing Institute, dedicated increasing the role of artist organizers in community and city development work. Pangea, along with five



national organizations, is chosen to join the National Performance Network Leveraging and Networking Equity cohort.

TeAda Productions' *Masters of the Currents* premieres at the Honolulu Theatre for Youth, Tenney Theatre.

Christopher Chen's *Caught* wins Obie Award for Playwriting.

Mu Performing Arts' theater and taiko entities separated. Mu Daiko became Taiko Arts Midwest under the ongoing leadership of Jennifer Weir and the theater returned to being Theater Mu under artistic director Randy Reyes.

Flordelino Lagundino is named Park Square Theater's new John W. Harris Family Artistic Director.

## **2018**

Theater Mu relieves Randy Reyes as the Artistic Director.

Pangea welcomed local, national, and international directors and director mentees to Minneapolis for the fourth incarnation of The National Institute for Directing and Ensemble Creation Institute.

Young Jean Lee's *Straight White Men* opens on Broadway. She's the first Asian American female playwright to do so.

The Sixth National Asian American Theater Conference and Festival in Chicago, Illinois, co-hosted with Victory Gardens Theatre, Silk Road Rising, and the Theatre School at DePaul University.

Maarte Theatre Collective establishes in San Diego, California.

Midnight Rice establishes in Seattle, Washington.

Ming Peiffer's *Usual Girls* receives its world premiere at Roundabout Theatre Company and becomes a New York Times Critics' Pick. The twice-extended production sold out each time with rave reviews.

Lauren Yee's *Cambodian Rock Band* receives a production at South Coast Rep in Costa Mesa.

## **2019**

Lauren Yee's *The Great Leap* (directed by Desdemona Chiang) is produced at the Guthrie. The same year, *Cambodian Rock Band* is up at Victory Gardens Theatre in Chicago, Illinois.

Prince Gomvilas's *Brothers Paranormal* premieres at Penumbra Theater as a co-production between Mu and Penumbra.

The Wing Luke Museum receives a grant from 4Culture to catalog the Northwest Asian American Theatre's materials as they had a rare and unique collection of tapes from the Theatre. The collection includes oral histories, videos, plays, dances, and conferences.

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## INTERVIEW WITH PRINCE GOMOLVILAS

(April 25, 2019 Interview and Transcription)

**(M)atthew Boerst** (assistant dramaturg) Some of the questions we have.. we're kind of trying to do sort of a profile, sort of an interview specific to the show... When you wrote this play, what was happening in your life, in the world, what prompted you into telling this story.

**(P)rince Gomolvilas** (playwright) Well, I started writing the play in 2011. The play is like a synthesis of my lifelong personal and profession obsessions. My interests in the supernatural and the genre of horror has been something that's been with me since I was a kid. So when I was growing up, I read a lot of Stephen King books, watch a lot of Twilight Zone, I was obsessed with really weird topics like alien abduction and just, just strange phenomenon. So that's something that's been with me since I was very young. And all of my, most of my plays can be described as comedies with a supernatural twist. But this is the first time I'm dealing with ghosts. In the past, I've dealt with UFOs, aliens, invisibility, superheroes and superpowers, spontaneous combustion. This is the first time I'm dealing with paranormal activity.

**M:** What was like the... chronology of, like you wrote the play and then it was workshopped and then produced.. What was the timeline of that all?

**P:** Yeah, so I was invited to be a part of Center Theatre Group's Writers Workshop (google this) and I was part of the 2011 - 2012 group and uh, you know, its a group of... Center Theatre Group, in LA, invites I believe about 7 local writers based in LA to develop a play over the course of the season in a workshop format. So, I was one of the 7 that year, and I decided to develop this particular play over the course of that year and part of that process is, everything caved off with all writers being able to interview experts who might contribute to the development of the play. So I was able to sit and talk with people from the LA Paranormal Association, and also David Kessler, who is a leading expert on death, dying and grief. So those were my two sets of experts. And then I continued to write the play from there, then over the course of the last 8 years, it's been workshopping in numerous places. So I think I've had at least half a dozen if not almost ten 10 workshops or readings of the play in various places around the country. And so it's finally as you know premiering now, 8 years later, in NY and then opening the day after with you all in Minnesota.

**M:** How did you come to playwriting, what got you there, where did you start, were you always a theatre artist?

**P:** I've always been interested in writing and the idea of wanting to be a writer was something that came natural to me when I was very young. When I was in elementary school, I was writing comic books and things but I also remember at a young age playing a lot with stuffed animals and actually making them put on shows, which is you know a form of theater. Then when I got into middle school, I started writing short stories, short fiction. So middle school, high school started writing short stories and transitioned into script writing when I got into college.

And then discovered playwriting in college, then eventually went to get my MFA in playwriting specifically. Theatre is not something I grew up with, you know, I'm the son of Thai immigrants and my parents, like most Asian people's parents, are not the typical theatre going audience. So it's not something I was really exposed to until I got to college.

**M:** Do you have any mentors that have helped you on that journey of playwriting, do you have people that you follow or read a lot of their work?

**P:** Yeah, my greatest mentor is Brighde Mullins, so she is also a playwright and a poet. She was teaching in the MFA in Playwriting at San Francisco State University when I was working on my graduate degree. And she was a big champion of my work from the very beginning and I'd go to her for advice and advisement and she has become a really great friend. And she is a remarkable playwright as well, I really admire some of what she does.

And in terms of my playwriting influences, in terms of who I enjoy watching and reading...when I first started out, I was really looking to [David] Mamet, [Anton] Chekhov, and [George Bernard] Shaw, those classic Western writers. Now-a-days, I'm more interested in Julia Cho and Annie Baker. And of course, I'm thankful for really great writers like David Henry Hwang and Philip Kan Gotanda, who paved the way for other Asian American writers.

**M:** Thinking about two sets of families in the play, what was it like to write Felix and Delia in particular when you're coming from the Thai-American culture, interpreting that and bringing them into the story?

**P:** It came pretty naturally, y'know I enjoy writing about the world that I live in. So you know, there's been sort of... at least in my lifetime, a constant struggle for representation in the mass media, representation of people of color and other underrepresented voices. But the world that I live in is populated by people of color and underrepresented voices. Especially living out in LA, which is a melting pot in a way that some places in the US are not, you know, I'm exposed to a lot of different cultures all the time. So it's not difficult for me to be able to hook into other people's experiences.

And also, I was born and raised in Indiana, Indianapolis, and when I was going to school, during elementary school, it was interesting because I was the only Asian kid in the school full of white kids and black kids. So you know this nexus point you talk about of the Asian and the black, it's not necessarily this thing that is so unusual, right?

Of course, I had to do some amount of due diligence to try to learn about these particular characters, emotionally?, I've been to NOLA [New Orleans, Louisiana] multiple times so I feel I have a section of knowledge to draw from when talking about characters from that region.

**M:** I was curious because I come from an urban planning / urban studies background, so there are lots of case studies about what that catastrophe and the lack of response did to the people there. Glad to know you went there and got to experience it on a personal level when thinking about those characters!

**P:** Definitely just being there, in that environment where you're surrounded by minorities (which are becoming the majority, by the way) you just kind of naturally think about things (and the people) in different ways.

Being in New Orleans, you can't help noticing things that are different there as opposed to if you're in San Francisco or LA, you know it's a different part of the country and you're experiencing very different things.

You know it's interesting, a lot of people who are from other countries, their concept of America a lot of the time is this idea of America as this very homogenous place. I think there's a significant amount of people who haven't been to the United States before who aren't aware at how diverse the US is as you move from state to

state. You could be in one state where its majority white and then move to LA, where its majority POC [people of color]. I think that's so interesting!

**M:** Another question that I have related to that... in our talks with the production team, we're setting it inside the neighborhood of Rondo/St. Paul. Do you have any thoughts about places where its been done, especially with this dichotomy of working on it in NY and here, what does that conception of midwestern neighborhood feel like to you?

**P:** I think sort of my upbringing in Indiana is a direct influence on where to set this play. In the script, I think I specify its just somewhere in the Midwest. Were you born in the Midwest?

**M:** Yeah, I'm from Wisconsin.

**P:** Yeah, so as you move around the Midwest, there's a lot of similarities as you move from state to state around the midwest. So I think choosing somewhere around the Midwest is fine, I think that your choosing to set it in that place is great because I think it connects to people on a more personal level.

I think that once this play hits Indianapolis, I think that after NY and St. Paul, the next production, the strongest choice would be to set that production in Indianapolis.

**M:** How did you craft the separation of scenes and the spectacle of the play that sits inside of the horror genre, how did you go about that to make the play feel scary?

**P:** So yeah, structurally before I started writing it, I had a general outline in my mind of how the story would unfold. When I start a play, I almost always already know the ending so I knew where the play had to end up. So everything that comes before it is a process of justifying that ending. I'm very interested in great endings, so any play I love or movie or book usually has a spectacular ending, like an ending that is really impactful. Whether that's intellectually impactful or emotionally impactful. So I had a very definite ending in mind for this, and working with the rough outline that I had, I knew that I was shaping everything not only in terms of the narrative but in terms of the character, to move towards that ending.

**M:** That's an interesting perspective, I don't know many people that go into it looking for the ending. I know people who write characters that play what the play wants to say. I like that, because I think it really does make for spectacular endings! But yeah...

Another question that I do have is... I was earlier today transcribing an interview between Lou and Rick Shiomi, who was one of the founders of Theatre Mu, and they were talking about the history of their collaboration and the history of what theatres of color in the Twin Cities look like and how do they interact?

So I was wondering, based on your background being in so many different places, you know, working as a writer in residence or going to grad school or living in LA, was there anything you say over your career about theatres of color co-producing or working together.

**P:** Wait, so your question was about "what have my experiences been with theatres of color in different cities that I've worked in?"

**M:** Yeah, that and how theatres of color have collaborated?

**P:** How theatres of color collaborate... let me think about that, I need to think back a bit. I would have to go back into my history a bit. But I believe that this is the first collaboration between two theatre companies that I can remember. Most of my plays have been produced in theatres of color or generally LGBTQ theatres. So it's usually like politically minority theatres that have produced my work, so this is the first collaboration between two different theatres, be they theatres of color or not.

**M:** Final question that I have, and this one I've got to ask, when I was doing my research early on, I happened upon your Youtube channel... and I saw the "Walking for Kisses" video. I just wanted to know, what ... you seem like a very light-hearted, very funny and engaging person... in the way you present yourself and your work, it's funny and it's heartwarming and it's amazingly spectacular... what are the things you really find joy in, like your cat where you're making songs and videos about him...

**P:** Yeah, so is your question where does that come from?

**M:** Yeah, where do you get your creative energy and your light-heartedness from, like where do you see that coming from in your life?

**P:** Yeah, I think part of it is just kind of in my DNA. I just tend to like to laugh a lot and make other people laugh. So that's a thing. I mean, you could kind of maybe draw some type of cultural connection to that... you know, my parents are from Thailand, they were born in Bangkok, and you know Thailand is known as the land of smiles and Thailand also has what can be called a sort of collective philosophy that could be summed up in a word and that word is 'sanuk' that very roughly translates to 'fun' so that is a word that is very emblematic of life in Thailand and what people are trying to pursue, trying to have fun. But I also don't like to take life too seriously, and even my work, in the past and now. I deal with a lot of big issues, sometimes big social issues, and I never want to hammer people over the head with messages like that. But I do want to tackle things in a way that people will listen, and I think that a way to do that is disarming them with humor. And humor as a device for healing, for breaking down defenses, as a device to help people feel more at ease, has always been a great tool for me in playwriting and also in life.

## **INTERVIEW WITH LOU BELLAMY AND R.A. SHIOMI**

(April 20, 2019 Interview; April 24, 2019 Transcription)

**S(aymoukda Vongsay):** How did you both meet?

**R(ick Shiomi):** We met here, I don't think I met you at a conference or anything?

**L(ou Bellamy):** No, no. What sort of provoked this meeting... I was telling Mooks about how after August had done that speech - and you came over here and blew me away, you came over and you said that we were more established and therefore able to take advantage of that new ground that he sort of plowed for us and you said "I'll help." It was one of the more generous things that I've experienced ever. The most wonderful thing.

**R:** And that was really, I recognized the pioneering work you'd done here. Because I've been here a few years but our paths hadn't crossed. And as you say, that groundbreaking speech was such an important speech and I wanted to let you know that we were supporting of that.

**L:** I know, but I've never had anybody come do that before. Cause you're used to this posture, that you're up against it all and here comes a guy saying "I'll help," and that was something special for me. And then we tried to find work to produce together for years, we were looking and looking....

**R:** But there weren't a lot of plays that had both sides involved in key ways. And I thought that your production, that first one... now we're both having a senior moment.

**L:** Ching directed it, I can't say the name.

**R:** I don't remember the play. Can you remember the playwright?

**L:** No

**R:** A Korean Storefront.

**L:** Oh yeah, the one... I was in that. Claude directed it. And Soon-Tek Oh came here for it. That's when I first met all these Korean kids that would come out, these girls that would be waiting for Soon-Tek Oh when he would come out.

**R:** He was like a movie star! What was [it]... the Korean Storefront [?], because Soon-Tek Oh was in that.

**L:** That's the one, it was called *Canned Goods* [written by Silas Jones]. And he and I played opposite each other. And then we did another one that Ching directed with a black man and an Asian woman, I don't remember...

**R:** Yeah, I remember that! That was Susan Stanton Murakoshi. But yeah, she was here and that's the one that Ching directed?

**S:** Were these coproductions?

**L:** No, no.

**R:** Lou picked them out, so it was great.

**L:** After August [Wilson] had this thing called *On Golden Pond* and we all met there, 40-some theatre artists, well Ntozake Shange went there and I used to get up and have breakfast with her mother every morning because she brought her mother. I got to know the whole family, but 'Zake called me a xenophobe. And she really just rode me like I was a horse, and she was saying "you've gotta move and see more things and see people of color where they are. And there's black people speaking Spanish. And you're missing those." So then I came back and I did that first *for colored girls* with Sun Mee and had Sun Mee say "nigga" onstage. And it was deep. You know, because I had been sort of directed and sensitized but still we never found anything.

**R:** But there's so many plays that, directly, you know in the field that you're in, you want to do justice for those plays. Same thing for me. But this is great that you're doing this official collaboration.

**L:** I remember some of those plays, Kimchi and Chili...?

**R:** Yeah, so we go back a long way and we had a great start. We've stayed in touch all this time, but post Penumbra, you're a freelance director...

**L:** Sure is a thing to get used to.

**R:** I've been to Philadelphia pretty regularly because of my grant, but...

**L:** But you don't have the kind of control, you're the outsider.

**S:** We make the joke that you're both semi-retired but not really retired.

**L:** But you know what I do whenever I go somewhere? I make sure I've reached out to black theatre practitioners. Because I know what it was like for me when the Guthrie would bring in some star and we'd never see em in the neighborhood so I try to make sure that I connect with them.

**S:** What did the landscape of Black and Asian American theatre look like back then?

**R:** Your back then was earlier in the Twin Cities, mine was back then in San Francisco. I'm Canadian and there was no Asian American theatre in Canada so I got my start in the early 80s in SF.

**L:** We started in '76 and we started because the perceptions of African Americans and they were portrayed on area stages were skewed. They never told the real story about my grandmother, my father, yknow these characters and I know it's true for Asians as well... they come in and are representative of the whole group and you've got a whole white world that is full and developed but we've got one ....

**R:** And he's gotta do everything.

**L:** Yeah, yeah so we wanted to do something and tell that whole story. And then as you know, it was angry at first, really angry. I had black people (who are very conservative) and you'd come in here and say "motherfucker" or "nigger" and those old folks would say "I didn't come in here and pay my dollar to hear this..." and they'd leave so... but it was angry. And then after we sort of got our feet under ourselves, then we



looked around and got hip to the game that the larger society was playing on you by separating you artificially. And that's what you perceived when you came over, that we got more in common than we do... and that's a powerful position to be in.

**R:** For me, it's odd because I've had multiple starts. I had my start in the Bay Area in the early 80s but it was with a group that had already existed, they had done that groundwork for 5-7 years but still largely unrecognized... the outsiders. Did you know Ed Hastings [from] ACT [American Conservatory Theater] for a long time? Partly because of Frank Chin, one of the early playwrights, he brought some resources that supported the coming together of an Asian American theatre group in San Francisco - this is early 70s, early 60s and then I came along in the early 80s. They were still struggling, but still relatively young but tons of talented people - the Asian American Theatre Workshop when I got there. Then after my play, *Yellow Fever*, got done. Then....

So then it became a company and started on a path of half a dozen years of making an impression on the theatre community of the Bay Area. But one of the interesting things that happened, because I felt fortunate to be part of that wave, but once we started having that success, then the individual actors started getting work outside. The bigger companies said, oh this guy can act, we'll hire him over here" and they can pay them more so then the company fell on hard times and wasn't prepared to deal with that loss of talent. But people like Philip and David Hwang were part of that. Then actors were going to LA, bigger companies and movie stars, partly because SF is so close to LA but from here it's a big leap. But that kind of talent drain happens there.

So when I came in the early 90s, so then I was looking around and I had just made my career in the Asian-American theatre and then there was nothing here.... And funny thing, it wasn't me that had the idea to start an Asian-American theatre company, it was Dong-il Lee, he was a graduate student at the U of M. It takes somebody without experience and understanding to decide to do something. And me, who knew so much, said "oh you want to start something? I'll help." I wasn't permanent here so I was coming and going so I couldn't imagine starting a company. He wanted to start a company, so I helped but then within a year of starting the company he left so then I took over.

And then that was starting from the ground up, finding and training people. Building something, and then more people started coming. People with training, they started coming. People like Sun Mee, Kurt... it was a process of constant recruitment bc when you're starting something out you don't have trained people with experience.

**L:** I tried to help out with the training, I did some workshops. Sun Mee was a graduate student that I taught. In fact, I told her to leave because there's no opportunity here. Get out, run girl!

**S:** But she didn't listen!

**L:** No, no she did. She graduated from NYU and came back.

**R:** And by then, we were starting to form this company so there was a hook. But because of her training she was already starting to get work.

**L:** I wrote an essay about that called *The Colonization of Black Theatre in America*, what it is, it's exactly what you described. I wrote about it as a vacuum that they create, that our brightest and most talented push in to fill, leaving us to retrain and regroup. I had Jon Cranney and he had his assistants sitting beside him, and he'd be pointing out people he wanted to cast - he'd be shopping.

**R:** On the other side of that, understanding that, I actually encourage people to ...

As important as it was for us at Mu to have a sort of hothouse development process, training and developing all these people when no one else would, at a certain point I felt like it was important for those people, the best of who we were developing, to get out to those other companies. If we stayed a hothouse development company, we would become a niche place. And more so for Asian American than black American theatre is that Asian Americans were viewed even more as outsiders. They'd say "go home to your own country" and so that kind of infiltration became important to me as well. And there is a deficit... and you won't always get your best actors, because your best actors will sometimes get work outside, but that obligation for developing new talent becomes a constant imperative. Sometimes the danger I feel with some companies - they are an emerging group of people but it's the same group and they don't realize that 20 years later you're old and you don't have people coming in behind you. And I'm excited that now, even 20 years after, even though we have lots of actors getting work outside, we're still developing new people. If you don't, it'll start shriveling.

**L:** What I have always wanted and was never successful in doing, is when those people go... perhaps Mu has been more successful... I see that Sun Mee is still working hard, I can always envision something like Steppenwolf where that alumni goes out and begins to feed. We were never successful, whenever someone would make it they were gone. It's difficult. It's one of the reasons why I stayed. Everyone was out making movies.

**R:** But you're still developing talent. And you have some regulars.

**L:** There were people that would move to the TC to be part of Penumbra.

**R:** Because it wasn't a common phenomenon, there wasn't a Black/African theatre company in every city...

**L:** So they'd come and I'd tell 'em you're not ready, but I know some places where you can work, where just because of your color they're gonna hire you and get your craft together.

**R:** There are opportunities around now, now that didn't exist 10-15-20 years ago. I'm actually amazed at how much the scene here as changed in the last 20 years. You couldn't imagine that this would be the situation now twenty years ago. It just felt like.... Wow, even when you were established, you were kind of like a silo. Most of the African American artists were working in your company. But in the last 20 years it has evolved tremendously.

**L:** Rick, I wanted to ask you about the way in which... because we're doing cultural work.. The way in which we bring our culture along. They're some of the toughest ones to play for. It's like you drag 'em kicking and screaming into the theater. White people view this, they see the quality of the art and they're there and they're paying. And you've got to go grab black folks and say "come here, look at this." Do you share that?

**R:** For some of the same reasons, some different reasons. Asian American culture, first and even second generation of immigrants or people born here, there's such priority on survival... but then there's a second one that Western theatre is actually not their thing. Chinese music, traditional Chinese dance, every community has its own traditions specific to that community. So they say, where are our disposable cultural dollars going to go? To those things. So it's a huge reprogramming of their cultural taste, to say come and see a Western play in English about people who have been here for 2 or 3 or 4 generations. Sometimes they're immigrant stories, so there's tie ins, but it's not a common experience. It's not generations of, you know, you take your kids to see *A Christmas Carol* and then they grow up and take their kids to see *A Christmas Carol* and those generations of tradition. So all of that, we've always been struggling with.

But even, when I look at the board of Mu over the 20 years I was there. Two things happened: the first ten years, the board most largely white and women. The second ten years, the board was largely Asian American and largely male. In all the time it was white and female, predominantly, I was trying to get more Asians and more men on the board. They didn't come until, to a certain degree, Mu established itself. At a certain point, Theater Mu became an entity in their minds and thus something they could be a part of. Early on, it was like Theater Who?

**S:** Theater Who? Theater MU!

**R:** So yeah, that process is part of our struggle... and then within our struggle, all these different groups, Chinese, Korean, Japanese, Southeast Asian, South Asian - Asian - all these different groups, they have to find that there is value in the commonality. Trying to create a pan-Asian sensibility rather than a specific... if you're Japanese, come see this Japanese American play. What about the Chinese American play? What about the other? Even as an artistic director, how do we share all these things so no one gets left out but no one gets too dominant?

When I was in San Francisco (that happened because San Francisco for the longest time), [there] was predominantly Japanese American and Chinese American so all the Filipino Americans, Korean Americans, and Southeast Asians didn't get their stories told, so that all had to evolve.

**L:** For us, it becomes a deprogramming sort of effort.

**R:** Decolonializing!

**L:** Yeah, yeah, washing those minds and stuff. Even getting them ready to see it, and even for the artists themselves. Because the artists themselves will perceive excellence as doing Shakespeare and you're saying no, it's just as hard to do an August Wilson, believe me, so that teaching has to happen and if you're expecting that to come easily, you're going to be disappointed.

**S:** When *Refugee Nation* came at Intermedia Arts, I brought my family to go see. And my aunt, she goes to Lao theatre - she went to Lao theatre back in Laos. Like you said, it's very different - Lao theatre is very different from American theatre because its participatory, you can talk at the actors and they'll just play along. There's a lot of improv happening, and dancing and singing.

**R:** Multiple forms, rather than straight theatre as we know it.

**S:** So my aunt was responding to the actors, you know one of the characters was saying "you know what I mean right, when we say the younger generation don't understand?" and she goes "oh yeah I totally understand," she said it out loud in Lao language and she got shushed by someone. Ever since then, she's just like "I don't wanna go to theatre in these white spaces."

**L:** We had a reviewer come here and review the audience rather than the play, talking about the way that they all talked back and how they weren't ready for Western theatre, oh it was ugly.

**S:** Maybe Western theatre needs to change?

**L:** Well these folks do talk back, you'll see.

**S:** I think it's beautiful, the actors were totally cool with it. They're used to it.

**R:** Yeah, they're used to it. They actually listed that as part of their performance.

**S:** I tried to bring her back to see other stuff, but she's just traumatized, I guess.

So our communities are often perceived as the other. How can our communities support each others' voices in the work that we do?

**R:** Collaboration is one step, but I think the whole TCTOCC [Twin Cities Theater of Color Coalition].

**L:** That's a beautiful thing, isn't it?

**R:** That whole group, that whole coming together of those groups is great and has created a powerful voice in this community. I think that the foundations, even though their individual sentiments were supportive in many ways, the realization of something larger happening has really had an impact on them. And they were ready for it. That was part of it when I consider the 20 year transformation happening here. I'm not sure where it's going, but it's from the 1990s to here has been huge, a huge change.

**L:** I agree totally, there's rather than being sort of split into different groups, they're perceiving, and I tried to address this with plays, that colonial philosophy and method is the same for all of us, and we don't...we're going, "we're unique and this is ours." But then you get in there and you start talking, then you say "oh damn, that's the same shit that..." and it begins to give you power in a different kind of way.

**R:** [With] individual companies there are always these limitations, budgetary limitations, but when you have a larger group, they see it as a larger entity that takes on responsibility for a bigger change. Rather than no one company or artist can oftentimes make that big of a change.

**L:** We were just in survival mode.

**R:** It's all about the timing, that is, ten years ago we weren't ready for that. In the last four or five years, that has changed and that evolution and development of that group is to me clearly one of those positive steps along the way.

**L:** Sarah [Bellamy] told me about a meeting where Dipankar [Mukherjee] said "Lou Bellamy was saying this same thing 40 years ago, I'll be damned if we're saying it today." So there's a sense of looking back and carrying forward and learning from each other and helping each other

**R:** It's the changing of the power dynamic, because so much of it is about power. Colonial processes and systems are all about power and money. And unfortunately those things all impact the art-making. Because all along the art making is being done by the artist whether you have \$10K or \$100K budget, you know, the talent has to keep working.

**S:** So just to be clear, what are the 3 major changes you'd like to see.

**R:** The next 20 years? I'd like them to bring flowers?

**S:** How about the next 5 or 10 years?

**L:** I want to see the worth of who we are... it has no...it isn't monetized. And this is Marx... as long as it's inside the culture and it bubbles up, it's worth nothing. As it moves to the edges, it picks up material value and worth. I would like to see that worth, that comes out of a people, find worth inside of its community rather than having to go out. It only has worth because Sun Mee is in *As You Like It* at the Guthrie. And you go, well she's made it, but no she's made it a long time ago... you know, where we are capable as our community of valuing our own art and worth and taking care of it inside.

**R:** And rewarding that work, we're oftentimes... you do it and there's no much reward socially. You still have to go out and get a job, waiting tables. So yeah, that's a core goal. That more of our artists from the Black, Asian, Latino community can make a living at their art form in a way that the actors at the Guthrie make a living. And that's across the board... they should be able to make good money at Penumbra, at Mu, at the Guthrie, at Full Circle.

**L:** The other thing, these places that do work that smacks of cultural stuff... what they do is they pull it all out of shape, don't know what the hell they're doing, they put the wrong person in the role, they highlight the wrong thing, they end up doing way more damage--under the guise of being inclusive and so forth--than they help. I'd like to see that. But the way you do that is give those artists support.

**R:** Give the real artists support, [they're] the people doing the core work.

**L:** But they don't know what it is Rick, they pick the wrong people and the wrong projects. They're doing *Miss Saigon* and they're doing the wrong shit... and putting all those resources behind it. And here you are with your little 100 seat house and they're brainwashing 1200 people a night.

**R:** There's that challenge. I think that, next 5 or 10 years, [there'll be] even more playwrights coming out of this community. We've been very successful with actors, some success with directors but not nearly as much as we need, but we need even more success with playwrights. Playwrights to me, that voice... you need it. Without them you're still doing Shakespeare... as great as it is, you're still doing something else. In the next 5-10 years, I'd like to see a boom in playwrights of color.

**L:** Do you think The Playwrights' Center is doing that?

**R:** They're trying their best, but I'm not sure. It's gonna take something else. There's a couple very successful Black playwrights. There's one or two Asian Americans but no one is writing as regularly as we want them. But it's gonna take a proactive thing. It's different in New York because there's 5,000 Asian American theatre artists in NY all trying to get a break.

**L:** All unemployed.

**R:** All working in restaurants.... But there's a group there, Ma-Yi Company that has a playwright group and they've been very successful but because they were able to bring a certain kind of constituency of a dozen if not 20 playwrights working together. And I saw them about 5 years into their development as a group and I saw a little workshop presentation of their work, there was 1) tremendously room in the group and 2) you could tell that there was a lot of talent, but in an odd way Ma-Yi was not connected to that group in the sense that they

were sponsoring the group but then they weren't producing their work; everybody is workshopping their work. The smartest thing that Ralph Peña, the AD, did was he started committing to producing their work. The moment he did that, suddenly he started finding all these writers whose work in the workshop, "well it's alright," but now when he started producing it, "hey this play works." And suddenly all those writers are getting produced all around the country.

**L:** That's what has to happen, they've gotta be connected. That's what the Playwrights' Center cannot do, they don't produce, so those playwrights have to be connected to a theatre. Something that's gonna produce. But developmentally, we're just surviving... we don't have the...

**R:** Somehow if there was a relationship between the Playwrights' Center and you, they're knowing that what they're trying to do and you're helping them understand how to do it... can feed to your company without you having to spend all those resources to do it.

**L:** If that were to happen, yeah...

**R:** But somehow, it's gonna take a proactive process to generate those. Everyone thinks it happens naturally, it doesn't. Nothing happens naturally. It takes people working specifically for a purpose to accomplish things.

**L:** When... Jeff Hatcher was there, there was the beginning of that... because his personality lent itself to doing that. Right now, I feel a real sort of difference between this developmental work and production. But I'm not in it anymore.

**R:** You're not directly involved in that process, so it's not your responsibility but we wish somebody would do it. Same thing for the Asian American playwrights, I wish somebody would... because it's not for me right now. And I'm busy starting another company, so...

**S:** So *Brothers Paranormal* is the first official co-production, the working relationship that you had together, it led to this. How's it been for you, Lou, working on this?

**L:** I'm thrilled with it. I always viewed your task (Theater Mu/Rick Shiomi) with the various Asian communities as being almost impossible. I always said there's no way he can do all that. They're so disparate. Trying to group that pan-Asian thing.

**R:** And some of them don't even like each other. For good reasons.

**L:** Exactly, when you go back and start getting into this.. But when I got into this and started meeting people, I was telling Saymoukda, here I am sitting at a Thai temple with Buddhists and monks walking by. People are going, "here, come on, oh yes we can help. We're having this. Come here, eat this, do that." Then now, I look at this and go "oh what a wonderful opportunity." 'Cause all these systems, that immigrant community is still tight. The Black community is atomized.

**R:** All dispersed.

**L:** But I loved it, I just loved it. Meeting all these new artists.

**R:** I'm just curious, I'm not familiar with the play, are the two brothers Thai?

**S & L:** Yes

**R:** But they're being played by two Korean guys - oh no, one Korean guy and one Filipino guy so that's...

**S:** A Sherwin [Filipino] and a Kurt [Korean]. And the mother, Leslie, is Japanese.

**L:** Do you know Leslie?

**R:** Yes, not really well but we've come across many times.

**L:** Me too, I've met her at conferences.

**S:** We talked a little bit, the Asian actors and I, "would the Thai community be upset about this-the casting?"

**L:** As long as, and you know I do cultural work, and I don't have anything up there, like, there's no such thing as putting a little African something up there. So I've depended on you to make sure we're respectful, that those cultural references are on, so that anybody can come in there and look at it and say, "yeah, that's it."

**R:** That aspect is important, with so many cultural groups, it's a dangerous thing to assume they're all the same cultural activities. Those specific things have to be honored and understood.

**L:** And they're so subtle, these things. I go to see a show that a white woman's directed, a young Black kid to sass his mom... I know my mother would've slapped the taste outta my mouth. It's little bitty things that you've gotta know if you're gonna do this work.

**R:** If that's where the play is set, then you have to understand the world of that.

**S:** Even regionally, too, especially Lao and Thai communities wherever we land, we just operate differently. Like Prince grew up in Indiana, so his experience is totally different from another Thai person's experience in Minnesota

**R:** Or different from LA.

**S:** Yeah so even talking about what type of bowl he would have, would it be from Target or from the Thai grocery store...

**L:** Yeah, we had a big discussion about that... but it all has been enriching what I do. Seeing those parallels. It's really wonderful. And I think we've got a chance to make new audiences.

**R:** Absolutely, crossover audiences. When we did *365* [*365 Days/365 Plays* by Suzan-Lori Parks] here, and loved working here and was great, I was personally shocked at how many, how sizable portion of our audience that came to see the play had not been to *Penumbra*.

**S:** What was *365*, again?

**R:** Suzan-Lori Parks, she wrote a play a day for a year, so we chose like 45 of them and put them together as a show. We had a great time. But the audience that we got, we didn't draw big, because we were still incredibly new at that point, but even the people that we did draw a lot of them hadn't been to Penumbra before and I was shocked by that. And as you said before, there's a whole segment of the Black community that will go to the Guthrie to see you direct a play there for Penumbra but maybe not come here.

**L:** When we did *Fences* over there, and I played the role here and there, so I know ..... I come out opening night for curtain call and there in the front row are all these black folks wearing minks. And I go, "where in the hell have you been?" It's the same show, in fact it's better smaller.

**R:** You can be way more intimate with it.

**S:** People will dress up to the Guthrie, but not to....

**R:** Yeah, there's a certain status. All kinds of education that has to still go on, all kinds of socialization in a way, of people's attitudes in terms of where the work is being done, who's doing it, and where the value is...

**L:** And then you run the risk, which I've done, it hurts me to my heart, I go into a major regional... I direct all over, so I'm doing that, so I go in and do this cultural work and it tells the community this is yours, you pay taxes, you paid for this, come on in. And then, they enjoy themselves and they say okay, and they bring their friends to the next play after I've moved on and they get their feelings hurt.

**R:** Yeah, it was a one-shot deal. But you got to do the work. The other thing, any given moment it can be very frustrating. Any given moment in those 20 years, you say "oh man, why didn't this work?" or "why didn't they come?" But when you look at it over the 20 years, things have changed so much. So every little moment that you did, in terms of frustration or success, is all contributing to that change.

**L:** When you can get that longer view...

**R:** Even though it's painful sometimes along the way. We laugh, but...

**S:** Anything I didn't ask?

**L:** One thing that's important - although we didn't bring this thing to fruition, we were trying to do it and support each other...

**R:** I think that's true, yeah, exactly. It's just that that mutual support is there in so many other ways than just production. I don't mind saying that, I spoke to funders and said "you gotta support Penumbra"

**L:** Sure, I know you have...

**R:** You just realize that there are some important institutions that are doing much more important work. Wonderful theatre, but much more important work than that.



## SCENIC BREAKDOWN (and questions about staging)

**SPOILER ALERT** – This section identifies plot points that will reveal surprises in the play. *We recommend you read it after you've seen the play.*

A. Act One, Scene One (Interlude 1)

- a. Flashes, creepy montage that eventually exposes Jai in tableau

**b. *Flashes***

**Q. What does this opening image do for the audience? Is this the welcome of the play, and if so, what type of watching does it ask for from you?**

B. Act One, Scene Two

- a. Max and Delia in the office, the signing of contract, *the sell*, the ghost story

**b. *The Sell***

**Q. How does Max use the space of the office to tell the ghost story? Why does it scare Delia so?**

C. Act One, Scene Three

- a. Visarut and Max fight about the business, about mom, about their cultural separation

**b. *The Brothers Fight***

**Q: What role does the pile of luggage play when it serves as an entrance for characters?**

D. Act One, Scene Four

- a. Act One, Scene Four
- b. The Brothers Paranormal do a home visit, a preliminary meeting at Felix and Delia's
- c. Jai appears to Delia

**d. *Inconclusive***

**Q: How do elements of the production interact to craft an atmosphere like this? What does the stage do that movies or books can't?**

E. Act One, Scene Five

- a. Tasanee speaks to the audience about Thai funerals
- b. Max brings on Tasanee for this case
- c. Ella's Mack the Knife, Jai baits and tortures Delia
- d. Jai attacks Felix
- e. Max remembers the truth (1 of 2)

**f. *For the Record / On the Record?***

**Q: Does having the scenes staged simultaneously (with actors onstage and frozen when scenes shift) change anything about this for you? What do you learn about how this play interacts with an audience?**

F. Act One, Scene Six (interlude 2)

- a. Tasanee flashy flash

**b. *Flashes 2***

**Q: Is Tasanee in the same world as Jai?**

- G. Act Two, Scene One
  - a. Delia and Felix in the hospital room
  - b. “Unlucky in cards, lucky in love”
  - c. Jai kills Felix
  - d. ***“Unlucky in Cards, Lucky in Love”***

**Q: What does “lucky in love” look like? Feel like?**

- H. Act Two, Scene Two
  - a. Max and Tasanee on the case
  - b. Tasanee reminds Max of Thai words
  - c. Difficulty of being old self in new place
  - d. Visarut rejoins, on the case, Tasanee gone
  - e. Delia returns, demands to speak to Jai
  - f. Max remembers the truth (2 of 2)
  - g. Visarut takes Jai away
  - h. ***Whose Ghost?***

**Q: How does Max deal with the truth? What does it say about his relationship to his family? What can you tell about Jai’s anger from this scene?**

- I. Act Two, Scene Three (Interlude 3)
  - a. Visarut montage flashy flash
  - b. ***Flashes 3***

**Q: Why do ghosts stick around in this play? What tethers them to this world?**

- J. Act Two, Scene Four
  - a. Max and Tasanee in the apartment again
  - b. Delia comes, moves in
  - c. The slot machine, the gamble, *the jackpot*
  - d. ***The Jackpot***

**Q: What does the play tell you about how Max loves his family? What is his progression over the course of the play? What does Delia take from this? How does she continue on?**

## ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTORS



Saymoukda Duangphouxay Vongsay is a Lao American writer. She was born in a refugee camp in Nongkhai, Thailand and immigrated to Minnesota in 1984. Because of her unique background, her work is focused on creating tools and spaces for the amplification of refugee voices through poetry, theater, and experimental cultural production. Her plays have been presented by the Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Center, Theater Mu, Consortium of Asian American Theater Artists, and Theater Unbound. She is a Playwright's Center and Theater Mu fellow in playwriting, a Loft Literary Center fellow in poetry, a Loft Literary Center fellow in children's and young adult literature, a Twin Cities Media Alliance fellow in public art, and an Aspen Ideas Bush Foundation scholar. Her poetry, essays, plays, and short stories can be found in the Asian American Literary Review, Massachusetts Review, Jungle Azn Magazine, Rubin

Museums' Spiral Magazine, Journal for Southeast Asian American Education and Advancement, Saint Paul Almanac, and elsewhere. She's received creative grants from the Jerome Foundation, Bush Foundation, John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, Forecast Public Art, Metropolitan Regional Arts Council, and the MN State Arts Board, and elsewhere. She holds a Master in Liberal Studies degree and co-hosted a podcast on Minnesota Public Radio. Keep up with her @REFUGENIUS.

Matthew is a dramaturg, lighting designer, scenic designer and writer based in Minneapolis, MN. He also dabbles in technician work, community development, cultural planning and in development work. He holds a B.A. in Theatre Arts with a minor in Urban Studies from the University of Minnesota - Twin Cities. As a dramaturg, his work has been with Penumbra Theatre Company and Theater Mu, the University of Minnesota and the Apollo Theater. He is a member of the Literary Managers and Dramaturgs of the Americas (LMDA) and was awarded their Early Career Dramaturg Residency Grant for 2019, supporting his work on the co-production of *The Brothers Paranormal* with Penumbra Theatre Company and Theater Mu. As a lighting designer, his work has been with Labrador, a Minneapolis-based performance

collective, and within the University of Minnesota's BFA/Guthrie Acting Program. As a scenic designer, his work has been unrealized but includes classwork at the University of Minnesota. He is a member of the United States Institute for Theatre Technology (USITT). As a writer, his work has been seen at the Playwright's Center's Ubu Roi Bakeoff (hosted by Paula Vogel), at the University of Wisconsin - Stevens Point Players' Fringe Festival 2017 (*All Bets Are Off*), and at Introspect Arts' New Works Festival (*It's a Work in Progress*, 2015). His poetry has been published in the D.C. Everest literary magazine, *Point of Convergence* (2014, 2015).



Sun Mee Chomet is a St. Paul-based actor, dancer and playwright. As an actor, Sun Mee has worked with the Guthrie Theater (*Othello*, *Burial at Thebes*, *Macbeth*, Tony Kushner's world premiere: *The Intelligent Homosexual's Guide to Capitalism and Socialism with a Key to the Scriptures*, *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, Naomi Iizuka's world premiere: *After One Hundred Years*); Cincinnati Playhouse/Hartford Stage/Kansas City Repertory/Repertory Theatre of St. Louis (Broadway Tour of Mary Zimmerman's *Metamorphoses*); Syracuse Stage/Charlotte Repertory (*M. Butterfly*); New York's Lincoln Center (Directors' Lab); Mu Performing Arts (*Cowboy vs. Samurai*, *WTF*, *Asiamnesia*, *Circle Around the Island*, *Mask Dance*); Ten Thousand Things Theater (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*); History Theatre (*100 Men's Wife*); Penumbra Theatre (for colored girls...) and many other theaters locally and nationally. As a playwright,

Sun Mee's first play, *Asiamnesia*, was voted Best New Script of 2008 by Minneapolis Star Tribune. Her most recent one-woman show, *How to Be a Korean Woman*, was named Best Solo Performance of 2012 by *Lavender Magazine* and voted in the Top Ten Shows of 2012 by the Star Tribune as part of "The Origin(s) Project" presented with Katie Hae Leo's *N/A*. Sun Mee is a Playwrights' Center 2013-14 McKnight Theater Artist Fellow and TCG 2013-15 Fox Fellow. She is grateful for generous support towards the development of her work from the Jerome Foundation, Metropolitan Regional Arts Council, Sun Mee received her M.F.A. in Acting from New York University's Tisch School of the Arts and her B.A. in Sociology and Anthropology from Earlham College.

Bryan Thao Worra is author of *DEMONSTRA* (2013); *BARROW* (2009); *Winter Ink* (2008); *On the Other Side of the Eye* (2007) and *The Tuk-Tuk Diaries: Our Dinner with Cluster Bombs* (2003). His work appears in over 100 international publications, including *Astropoetica*, *Cha*, *Asian Pacific American Journal*, *Hyphen*, *Lantern Review*, *Kartika Review*, *Journal of the Asian American Renaissance*, *Expanded Horizons*, *Quarterly Literary Review Singapore*, *Strange Horizons*, *Tales of the Unanticipated*, and *Innsmouth Free Press*. He was selected as a Cultural Olympian during the 2012 London Summer Olympics' Poetry Parnassus convened by the Southbank Centre. His work is part of the Smithsonian traveling exhibit *I Want the Wide American Earth: An Asian Pacific American Story*. He is the first Lao American to be accepted as a professional member of the Horror Writer Association and the Science Fiction

Poetry Association, to which he currently serves as president. His accolades include a Fellowship in Literature from the National Endowment for the Arts and an Asian Pacific American Leadership Award in the Arts from the Council on Asian Pacific Minnesotans. He works on Lao and Southeast Asian American refugee resettlement issues across the United States.



Dennis Madamba is a Filipino-American illustrator from The Bay (San Francisco Bay Area), currently calling Minneapolis, MN his home. He enjoys producing images that reveal multiple layers within a story, focusing on the use of texture and color. Dennis received a BA in Art from the University of California, Santa Cruz and an MFA from the Minneapolis College of Art & Design. His work has shown in California, Minnesota, and New York.



Lou Bellamy is the founder and Co-Artistic Director of Penumbra Theatre Company in Saint Paul, Minnesota. During his thirty-nine year tenure, Penumbra has evolved into one of America's premier theaters dedicated to dramatic exploration of the African American experience. Under his leadership, Penumbra has grown to be the largest theater of its kind in America and has produced 39 world premieres, including August Wilson's first professional production. Penumbra is proud to have produced more of Mr. Wilson's plays than any other theater in the world. Mr. Bellamy is an OBIE Award-winning director, an accomplished actor, and for 38 years was appointed as Associate Professor at the University of Minnesota in the Department of Theatre Arts and Dance. Directing credits include plays at Arizona Theatre Company, Denver Center for the Performing Arts, Penumbra Theatre, Signature Theatre, Oregon Shakespeare Festival, The Cleveland Play House, Indiana Repertory Theatre, The Guthrie Theater, The Kennedy Center, and Hartford Stage Company.



Rick Shiomi is a Toronto-born theatre artist now based in Minneapolis, Minnesota, and a leader in early Asian Canadian theatre movement in the 1980s. He credits his time spent in Vancouver in the 1970s, working with the Powell Street Festival in its early years, and later with the Redress movement, as what gave him the fuel for his early work as a playwright, including his first play, the award-winning *Yellow Fever*, premiered in San Francisco in 1982 by the Asian American Theater Company and the first Asian Canadian play (*Canasian Artists Group*, 1983) professionally produced in Canada. He moved to Minnesota in the 1990s and co-founded Mu Performing Arts, as well as the taiko group Mu Daiko, in Minneapolis. Although he has written over twenty plays, over the course of his career, his work has shifted from playwrighting towards directing, and he has made many memorable contributions to Asian

American theater as a director and artistic director, such as a production of *Into the Woods* set in Asia and *The Mikado* set in Edwardian England. Shiomi has received numerous awards for his work, including the McKnight Foundation Distinguished Artist Award (2015). Shiomi is now co-Artistic Director of Full Circle Theater Company, which has a multicultural, multiracial mandate.