

**Legal Name**

Interact Inc

**Project Title**

To host Rick Shiomi at InterAct Theatre Company to imagine and explore new approaches to building demand for Asian American artists and audiences

**DDCF Grant Number**

2013225

**Project Progress and Successes**

InterAct received a grant award of \$20,000 in December, 2013 through DDCF's "Building Demand for the Arts" program. The purpose of this grant award was to support a 15-month residency by director/playwright Rick Shiomi to build demand for Asian American theater in Philadelphia.

**Context for Residency**

Despite having evolved into a robust theater town, and having a very diverse population, including significant numbers of Asian Americans (in particular, Chinese, Vietnamese, Cambodian and Korean communities), Philadelphia has struggled to develop a palpable Asian American presence in its theatre scene. Back in 1995, InterAct and the fledgling Asian Arts Initiative co-produced Philip Gotanda's YANKEE DAWG YOU DIE, and we hired Shiomi to direct. This was Philadelphia's first-ever production written, directed, designed and performed by Asian American artists. We had hoped this project would be the catalyst for a growing Asian American theatre community in Philadelphia, but the lack of locally-based artists involved, combined with Asian Arts' increasing focus on other art forms, resulted in a return to the status quo.

Nearly 20 years later, both InterAct and Asian Arts have grown into more established institutions, and Philadelphia is home to a handful of quality, professional Asian American theater artists. So InterAct invited Shiomi back for a residency to re-ignite this effort. The residency was, in part, built around the Consortium of Asian American Theaters and Artists' (CAATA) bi-annual Conference & Festival (ConFest), scheduled for October 2014 in Philadelphia.

**Residency Activities**

Shiomi came to Philadelphia for seven separate weeks in January, February, March, April, May and September 2014, as well as February, 2015. The major activities of the residency were as follows:

**1) Galvanizing Asian American Artists**

Canvassing a wide range of contacts with such organizations as the Temple University Asian Student Association, the Boat People SOS Vietnamese organization, the FACTS school (Fine Arts Cultural Traditions) and the Japanese American Citizen's League, as well as the theater departments at various local colleges and universities, Shiomi was able to identify and reach out to emerging Asian American theater artists, mostly actors. Shiomi met with both

the small handful of established Asian American theatre artists and the growing community of aspiring professional artists, to understand their hopes and challenges, engage them in professional development activities, and generate a palpable sense of community. The three leading Asian American theatre artists are Justin Jain, Bi Ngo and Makoto Hirano. Jain is a freelance Equity actor and co-founder of the Berserkers Residents, a comic devising theatre collective of three performers. Ngo is a freelance Equity actor and teaching artist who has worked with many of the region's professional theatres. Hirano is a performer and co-founder of Team Sunshine, a movement based devising theatre collective. With their enthusiastic involvement, Shiomi organized several meetings for the larger community of Asian American theater artists, which includes stage manager Melody Wong, director Sarah Mitteldorf, master electrician Lucas Nguyen, dramaturg Gina Pisasale, playwright Kathy Vinogradoff, and actors Catzay Vilayphonh, Richard Chan, Daniel Kim, Dana Kreitz, Pratima Agarwal, Daniel Pham, Asaki Kuruma, Victoria Chau, and Stephanie Walters, as well as several college student actors. By the end of May 2014 we had gathered a contact list of over forty Asian American theater artists based in Philadelphia.

## 2) Free Acting Workshops.

Shiomi conducted and/or organized scene study and monologue audition workshops for young Asian American actors. One was led by Shiomi; two by Jain, Ngo and Hirano; and one by Seth Rozin and Azuka Theatre Artistic Director Kevin Glaccum. Over 26 artists participated in four workshops.

## 3) Play Reading Series

Shiomi, in consultation with InterAct Producing Artistic Director Seth Rozin and Asian Arts Initiative Executive Director Gayle Isa, designed a series of four readings of plays by Asian American playwrights, entitled *The Way Home*. The purposes for the series were to (1) provide opportunities for Asian American actors and directors to hone their craft and gain visibility, (2) expose Asian American plays and playwrights to local artists and audiences, and (3) create opportunities for artistic engagement and discussion among the Asian American artist community. The first reading in February was Mike Lew's new play *TIGER STYLE!* -- a comedy about a Chinese American brother and sister, who decide to take a break from their droll California lives and explore their heritage on a whirlwind trip to China. Shiomi directed the five-person cast, which included four local Asian American actors. The reading was hosted by InterAct and attended by 32 people, most of whom were under 35, Asian American artists and patrons. The second reading in March was Mia Chung's *YOU FOR ME FOR YOU* -- a time-bending drama about two North Korean sisters who attempt to flee their homeland against all odds. Shiomi directed the four-person cast, which included three Asian American actors. The reading was hosted by Asian Arts and attended by 38 people. The third reading in April was Boni Alvarez' *THE SPECIAL EDUCATION OF MS. LORNA CAMBONGA* -- a drama about a Filipina teacher who comes to teach in South Central Los Angeles, only to discover the challenges of American culture and a failing education system. Sarah Mitteldorf, a Philadelphia-based Asian American director, directed the eight-person cast. The reading was hosted by InterAct and attended by 29 people. The final reading in May was Michael Golamco's *COWBOY VS. SAMURAI* -- a romantic comedy about an Asian American transplant to a small Western town, who wrestles with his ethnic identity and his affections for the only other Asian American within 100 miles. Mitteldorf directed the four-person cast. The reading was hosted by Asian Arts and attended by 45 people. 25 artists were involved in the readings, which were attended by a total of 144 patrons.

## 4) Establishment of the Philadelphia Asian Theater Project (PATP)

At the suggestion of Charles McMahon, Artistic Director of the Lantern Theatre (and director

of the controversial production of JULIUS CAESAR), Shiomi met with other local theater leaders to discuss participation in a coalition of theater companies that would work together to support the development of Asian American theater and artists in Philadelphia. Interested parties included InterAct, Lantern, Wilma Theatre, People's Light, Plays & Players, Egopo Classic Theater, Kaleid Theater and Azuka Theatre, along with support from Asian Arts. The basic purpose of PATP is to encourage production of plays in which Asian American artists play a central role (playwright, director, lead actor), and to support such efforts through collaborations in marketing, casting, professional development activities and community resources. PATP has met twice, in September 2014 and February 2015, agreeing to cross-promote each other's relevant public programs. In the 2014-15 season, PATP was able to support Plays & Players' production of HOLD THESE TRUTHS by Jeanne Sakata, a one-man play featuring Makoto Hirano.

For the upcoming 2015-16 season, Bi Ngo will play the lead in the Lantern Theatre's production of 36 VIEWS by Naomi Izuka, and InterAct will produce the regional premiere of Young Jean Lee's STRAIGHT WHITE MEN.

#### 5) Participation in CAATA ConFest

The development of the local actor pool positively impacted the success of the CAATA ConFest. One track of the four-day event was a series of play readings featuring local actors, all of whom received free admission to the rest of the ConFest as part of their compensation. By participating in the ConFest, local artists gained both visibility within and a connection to the larger national Asian American theater community.

#### 6) Establishment of Philadelphia Asian Performing Artists (PAPA)

With Shiomi's and Rozin's encouragement and support, veteran actor Bi Ngo hosted a meeting of Asian American actors and founded PAPA (possibly the first Asian American acting group since Asians Misbehaving disbanded over ten years ago) in November 2014. PAPA's primary aim, at this early stage, is providing social networking and professional development for Asian American actors. PAPA has already conducted a monologue workshop, and has plans to invite accomplished artists like Tisa Chang to Philadelphia for master classes.

#### 7) Database of Asian American Plays

Shiomi, Rozin and Gina Pisasale (Literary Manager at People's Light, whose graduate thesis was around Asian American plays) have created a database of plays by living Asian American playwrights on DropBox.com, where local artistic directors, literary managers, directors and actors can access scripts for possible productions and audition monologues. Our hope is that over time this resource will lead to productions of some of these plays in the Philadelphia region.

#### Related Activities & Developments

While not officially part of the DDCF residency, Shiomi was invited to direct InterAct's world premiere of CAUGHT by Christopher Chen in October/November 2014. The production featured Bi Ngo and Justin Jain, along with Temple University acting student Kimie Muroya. Opening less than ten days after the CAATA ConFest, CAUGHT garnered uniformly rave reviews and played to sold out houses, making it one of the most successful shows in InterAct's history. But more importantly, it capitalized on the work of Shiomi's DDCF residency by gaining significant positive attention for the growing presence of Asian American artistry.

In conjunction with InterAct's production of CAUGHT, Bi Ngo moderated a public convening around the issue of representation, featuring New York playwrights Mike Lew and Rehana

Mirza, local actor Catzie Vilayphonh, and local actor/playwright/director James Ijames. The event was attended by 30 people, most of whom were Asian American theatre artists and InterAct subscribers.

In November 2014, Charles McMahon of the Lantern Theatre approached Shiomi about a project to develop and produce a play based upon the novella *The Ronin* by William Dale Jennings. Set in 12th century Japan, the novella is itself inspired by a zen story *The Tunnel* which is in the book *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones*. The Lantern is applying to The Pew Charitable Trusts for a major grant to develop and produce the play with Shiomi as playwright and director, and with Bi Ngo and Makoto Hirano involved in the cast. If that project goes forward (with or without Pew funding), it will involve a whole cast of Asian American actors in a main stage production at the Lantern (the opposite of the *JULIUS CAESAR* production). The production of this play would be slated for spring 2017.

#### Conclusion

Rick Shiomi's residency was not only an unqualified success, but far exceeded expectations of InterAct, Shiomi and the growing community of Asian American artists and audiences who participated in residency activities. It is the shared goal of all involved that we will be able to build on the foundation we have built over the past fifteen months through continued involvement of Shiomi, and through providing more direct, financial support of the groups and initiatives that were born out of the residency.

#### **Challenges / Obstacles / Failures Encountered in the Project**

In a bizarre coincidence of timing, Shiomi's residency began just before a controversy erupted in response to the Lantern Theatre's production of *JULIUS CAESAR*. Lantern had embraced a production design concept that involved questionably thought-out elements of ancient Japanese culture, while not involving any Asian American artists in the production, prompting considerable public and private criticism among Asian American theatre artists. An open letter from Makoto Hirano garnered national attention, and several forums and meetings were held to give voice to the community's anger and frustration. While we initially thought this controversy might have a negative impact upon the residency, it ended up having the opposite effect. The *JULIUS CAESAR* controversy helped to galvanize Asian American artists around a common cause, and created valuable visibility and context at the outset of the residency.

#### **What was learned from these that might be of benefit to others?**

The two major things we learned from Rick Shiomi's residency were (1) Timing is everything. The Philadelphia theatre community simply wasn't ready for a movement to increase the presence Asian Americans 20 years ago. (2) Everything begins with the community of artists. In addition to better timing, there is now a critical mass of Asian American theatre artists, primarily under 25, living, working and/or attending college in Philadelphia. Once organized into an actual self-aware community, these artists quickly began to make an impact in the larger theatre scene.

**Links to relevant website(s) and/or project publications, reports, etc.**

**If someone wishes to speak with your organization further about your project, would there be a willing contact? Y/N**

If yes, please provide contact name and information for preferred method of contact (email, phone, etc).

Yes. Rick Shiomi would be the best person to speak with, but Producing Artistic Director Seth Rozin will also be a good resource.