

Philip Kan Gotanda's *After the War* by Caridad Svich



Philip Kan Gotanda. Photo by Diane Takei.

Philip Kan Gotanda's plays have been captivating audiences in the Bay Area, nationally and internationally for more than 10 years. His newest play, *After the War*, captures the post-World War II lives of 11 Americans of diverse backgrounds who end up living in the same boarding house in San Francisco's Japantown. Reexamining the history of a specific neighborhood, Gotanda continues his career-long obsession with the reclamation of lost or misunderstood stories. Indeed, *After the War* brings Gotanda back to issues surrounding the internment crisis, which he originally explored in his play *Sisters Matsumoto*. *After the War* was commissioned by American Conservatory Theater and plays March 22 through April 22.

Caridad Svich: What distinguishes *After the War* from the rest in your body of work so far?

Philip Kan Gotanda: I originally wrote *After the War* with specific actors from ACT's core acting company in mind--Steven Anthony Jones, Rene Augesen, Gregory Wallace and Marco Barricelli. I'd never done that, and I enjoyed the challenge of tailoring characters for them. Through the three-and-a-half-year development process people's schedules became clearer, and only Steven Anthony Jones remains in the role he created. In a way he's been the anchor actor, as we had a working relationship from *Yohen*, and he's worked closely with me on his character.

The play's writing has traveled. I spent several weeks in Wyoming at Ucross at a Sundance writer's retreat. Then later Carey and I took the piece to the Sundance Institute Theatre Lab. Both allowed for good strides in the work. In particular I got good feedback on the African American characters at the Lab. In addition to Steven here at ACT, the two actors there were generous and forthright with their insights about behavior.

It's also been an artistic luxury to work with Carey throughout the development stage. The piece has numerous locations that must be transitioned into and out of seamlessly, a theatrical equivalent of cross-fades and dissolves. Working closely with me on the dramaturgy allowed Carey to develop a concept for staging that would allow for this. We didn't want the dollhouse effect, as it would feel static and choppy. The theatrical transitions Carey has worked out with Donald Eastman (scenic design) and James Ingalls (lighting) allow for fluidity without drawing technical attention to itself. Any kind of self-conscious mechanics would take us away from the text and sink the play, as it's built on cumulatively unfolding in, at times, subtle and delicate ways.

Probably the most notable difference thematically with this work is the diversity of characters--Japanese American, African American, poor whites from Oklahoma, a Russian Jew by way of Yokohama. All marginalized peoples thrown together in a Japantown boarding house after World War II. What's interesting about that period is that while Japanese Americans were relocated into camps, African Americans from the adjacent Fillmore District moved in, establishing businesses and residences--also an extraordinary jazz scene. Then at the end of the war, Japanese Americans returned to their old neighborhood now inhabited by African Americans and an assortment of other peoples. There ensued a unique period of intersection for the Japanese American and African American communities. At the time, there was growing discontent among African Americans: GIs returned home to find the same racism they had left, while workers lost jobs as ship yards closed down. Japanese Americans had just returned from being imprisoned by their own government, and there was confusion as to their place in American society. What I explore is the idea that this particular moment provided a small window where these two communities might have established some kind of bicultural community based on their commonality of postwar marginalism.

What's always interesting is how current issues will bleed into and affect story and characters as you're writing. There's a young Japanese American man, Lieutenant Ehren Watada, who has refused deployment to Iraq on the grounds that it's an illegal war. It's an event that has invited a great deal of criticism from former 442nd and 100th Battalion members who feel he should have deployed as ordered. It has divided much of the Japanese American community. This echoes the situation in my play where Chet is a pariah in his own community for refusing to sign two questions in a loyalty oath. Many young Nisei did sign and served valiantly in the armed services while suffering an extremely high rate of casualties. Chet is seen as someone who has shirked his country's duty, a coward, compared to the other young men in the community who had served and died. Lieutenant Watada's circumstances helped to feed Chet's storyline and bring forth the parallels.

CS: Why do you think there is a seeming cultural swell to reexamine that time and its pain, and what has brought you to revisit the subject of internment crisis in not only *After the War* but your multimedia collaboration with Kent Nagano *Manzanar: An American Story*?

PKG: My involvement with the subject of Japanese American internment in *After the War* and *Manzanar: An American Story* is a continuation of a journey begun 27 years ago to bring this story to the public's awareness. The challenge is keeping it fresh, timely and relevant. That means entering the events differently, reframing them to have resonance with today's issues. *Manzanar* stressed the relationship of the internment to the aftermath of 9/11 and the profiling of American Arabs and Muslims. *After the War* speaks to relationships other than black and white. This has been of critical importance to me, especially in works like *Yohen* and *After the War*: that relationships of Asian American characters to African American characters cannot be understood simply by using the same assumptions as with blacks and whites. New assumptions must be utilized to accurately understand and portray the particularities of these relationships.

With regard to this reexamination of stories of Japan, the US and World War II, I believe it has more to do with two nations revisiting their mutual histories in order to better allow for their present day alliances. Both Japan and the US are major powers whose status is declining on the world stage. The US is seen as a world power losing its dominance. Japan has dramatically lost its economic preeminence, and the US is increasingly being tested by other world markets. It's important that the US and Japan mend any past friction and allow for a renewed alliance to support each other in economic and military policies. They need each other. And that kind of institutional need on national levels gives rise to these types of storytelling and reexamination of history.

CS: What has the collaboration process been like with Carey Perloff on *After the War*? And with Kent Nagano on *Manzanar*?

PKG: Working with Kent Nagano and Carey Perloff were opposite ends of the spectrum. In the collaboration with Kent Nagano, I wrote the text and directed for this original symphonic piece with live narration. Kent brought me on board this project. At the time, he was conducting the Berkeley Symphony, conducting the Berlin Philharmonic and co-heading the LA Opera with Placido Domingo. The composers were French, Japanese and American. Meetings were held over speakerphones and much of the communication and exchange of music and text was by the Internet. We also met in person at various locations. This was a different way of working, with so many artists creating one unified piece. It was an extremely logistical challenge. Also, working with a symphonic score as well as rehearsing with full orchestras was quite new. In the end, I found the process, the collaborators and final performances to be invigorating, challenging and inspiring. It's allowed me to think more along the lines of an opera project in the near future.

With regards to Carey Perloff, we used to live in the same neighborhood and would run into each on the street and in coffeehouses. Working with Carey is more like working with someone who lives across the street rather than across an ocean. Regarding the

process, I've never worked from inception to first performance as collaboratively with a director as with Carey. This has spanned three-and-a-half years--through workshops, readings, a cast of many and drafts 1 through 45 and counting. It's given us a familiarity with each other's work style that allows for a shorthand in problem solving. At this point, the script is in good shape. I don't like to go into rehearsals with areas of the script unclear, as I don't like to figure things out during rehearsals. Small rewrites, small cuts and edits should be it. If I have to do large rewrites, or, God forbid, I'm chasing the ending, it means everyone loses critical rehearsal time and the production will suffer. And more white hair for me. It's the responsibility of the playwright to make sure the rehearsal time can be spent doing just that, rehearsing.

CS: In what ways do you allow for/think about the audience members' entry and passage through a work?

PKG: I do consider audience entry and passage through the work. That said, given my usual Asian American themes, I expect the audience to come to the work on its terms rather than vice versa, to have knowledge or be willing to stretch and live within the play despite not knowing all the particulars. Everyone has to work a bit. That's how audiences grow; that's how playwrights grow.

CS: You started your career in music (and law), but it was music that led to your plays and playwriting. How have musical concerns influenced or guided your playwriting, and why?

PKG: I've always been interested in music. I started forming bands when I was about 13 with other kids in the neighborhood. As my mom drove us around, my role as liaison soon transitioned into the leader of the band. It was my responsibility to learn the songs off the record and teach them to the other members. The only problem was I could never do that. So I started to make up my own songs, so whatever I taught the other band members was, of course, right--had to be; it was my song. I continued all through high school, college and after. David Henry Hwang and I had a band together for a period of time. So that's in my background, and I'd been wanting to try it again since starting theatre.

That led me to forming and fronting a spoken-word jazz ensemble called the new orientals. It was made up of some LA jazz musicians from the band Hiroshima. All friends. I wrote a full-length spoken-word play, "*in the dominion of night*," inspired by Knut Hamsun's *Hunger*. My friend Dan Kuramoto scored it. I wanted to explore performance as well as the idea of text and music being able to jam in front of a live audience--a cross of the old Kerouac Beats and the poetry slams of today. Though the text was set, Dan scored it to allow for improvisation throughout the piece, both in music and performance of text. My wife, Diane, directed and helped me enormously, as I hadn't acted before. It was a very cool experience fronting the new orientals and performing on stage. My interest in music is still strong, as evidenced by the project with Maestro Nagano.

It's interesting that in *After the War* I've been keenly aware of the rhythm of characters' speech. Along with the usual feel for placement of pacing and emotional color to support the overall structure, I was very conscious of how and what things came out of people's mouths. African American character Earl's speech patterns aren't the same as Chet's, the Japanese American character. And Earl and his sister-in-law, Leona, who's worked to create a dignified presence, have different rhythms and choice of language. Especially within the Japanese American community, whether you're first, second or third generation, whether you came from Hawaii or the mainland, all affect your behaviors, manner of speech being one of them.

CS: The topic, for example, of what makes a Latina play Latina, or Asian American play Asian American, and so on, and why, still is one that stirs up passion, rage and a good deal of conflict.

PKG: I'm less inclined to get worked up over what to call something. Words like Asian American are constructed terms to suit a time and place in our histories. If and when they run their course, get co-opted, become prisons, you find a more appropriate term to better describe what it is you're pointing at. Or hijack them, like queer. I recently gave a keynote speech at the first Asian American Theater Conference in LA. The attendees were such a cross-section of peoples: Korean, Thai, Hmong, Laotian, Cambodian, South Asian Indian, Chinese, mixed race, gay, lesbian, Vietnamese Americans--even a group that included all the countries along the Silk Road. This certainly wasn't the same Asian American theatre of the late 1970s; nonetheless, here we were, all willing attendees at an Asian American Theater Conference. It was a vital, inspiring, chaotic gathering in the spirit of inclusion. This is the new Asian American Theatre. It's present, of the moment and not going anywhere. Whether the name comes or goes won't change that. Whatever you want to call it or not call it, it's here.

CS: In what ways do you continue to position your work politically above and under the radar?

PKG: You know, I don't really consider where the radar is. I try to stay present, nourished on all fronts and busy with work.

Caridad Svich is resident playwright of New Dramatists, and founder of the theatre alliance NoPassport. Her new play with songs Thrush premiered at Salvage Vanguard Theatre in Austin this season.

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