



Portraits by Gotanda



In a cavalcade of plays both intimate and epic, the playwright elucidates Asian-American life

By Terry Hong

An intricate lot of untethered souls populate **Philip Kan Gotanda's** *After the War*. There's the unemployed African-American man and his young daughter, who is being cared for by the sister of her runaway mother, and the taxi-hall dancer from Oklahoma with her mentally challenged younger brother. There's the Japanese-American accountant despairing that a woman could ever want him, and a young Russian-Jewish immigrant by way of Yokohama who just might prove him wrong. And there's the ex-jazzman and his would-be sister-in-law who run the boardinghouse where all these waifs have landed.

It's this kind of specificity—a painterly quality—that has marked Gotanda as the chronicler of the Japanese-American experience. You could call him an Asian-American August Wilson as, decade by decade, he has dramatized a series of richly detailed American portraits.

Cases in point: a 16-year-old Japanese girl whose romantic passions wreak havoc in Hawaii in 1919 in *Ballad of Yachiyo*; a Japanese-American family that returns to its much-changed California home after being released from a World War II internment camp in *Sisters Matsumoto*; a woman whose world

spins in the turbulent late-'60s atmosphere of antiwar protests and nascent Asian-American identity politics in *The Wind Cries Mary*; an actor who challenges Asian-American stereotypes in the media in the 1980s hit *Yankee Dawg You Die*.

But what sets Gotanda's new play *After the War* (which premieres at [American Conservatory Theater](#) in San Francisco this month) apart is its epic sweep. "Because it is such a Chekhovian play, Philip has focused intensively on the arc of each individual character and how each relates to the whole," says ACT artistic director Carey Perloff, who commissioned Gotanda to write *After the War* following ACT's critical success four seasons ago with *Yohen*, about the failing relationship of an older African-American man and his Japanese-American wife in the 1980s. "*After the War* is a series of interlocking love stories that occur across races and cultures, so each relationship is fragile and fraught."

The play revisits a preoccupation of Gotanda's: the period of U.S. history involving the internment camps of the 1940s (an experience his parents went through). "When Japanese Americans returned to San Francisco's Japantown after World War II, there was a unique moment when Japanese-American and African-American communities intersected, living side by side," says Gotanda. "There was a growing discontent amongst African Americans as GIs returned to the same racism they left, and workers lost their jobs as docks closed down. At the same time, Japanese Americans had just returned from being imprisoned by their own government. The play explores that resulting historical moment, marked by the potential for two marginalized groups to find commonality and forge a cross-cultural bond."

While the Japanese internment experience looms large in the history and development of Asian-American drama—not to mention the Asian-American psyche—Gotanda continues to reveal its as-yet-unproduced facets in new artistic ways. "I think audiences will be fascinated by this startling moment in American history," says Perloff, who also directs. "We think we know something about the internment camps, but in fact so much has been buried in silence, and the stories are just beginning to be told."

"What he's doing in his plays is to make the Asian-American experience a very *American* experience," says Michael Omi, recent chair of the ethnic studies department at the [University of California–Berkeley](#) and currently a visiting fellow at [Stanford University](#). "I think that's central to his impact on the mainstream theatregoing audience. His stories are not marginal, exotic tales. What he's telling is essentially an *American* story."

The past few years have seen three important premieres for Gotanda, all of which mark new directions in the playwright's creative process. In 2004 San Francisco's [Campo Santo at Intersection for the Arts](#) produced *a fist of roses*, which Gotanda created in intense collaboration with Campo Santo and Intersection's artists, including choreographer Erika Chong Shuch. The taut, 70-minute mosaic is a departure for the versatile Gotanda, both thematically and stylistically. Without linear storyline, the play attempts to piece together the stories behind male violence against women.

"It pretty much sucked the breath out of me. It's such a courageous, powerful piece of work," says Tommy Tompkins, the former cultural and arts editor for the [San Francisco Bay Guardian](#), who has followed Gotanda's work from the beginning of his career. "Philip's one of America's finest playwrights and, I sense at this point, a rather restless spirit, which might be hard on him personally, but bodes well for his work."

As *fist* closed, Gotanda returned to his artistic roots at San Francisco's [Asian American Theater Company](#), one of the country's original Asian-American venues. While a growing number of the new generation of Asian-American playwrights have eschewed productions in ethnic theatres—and ethnic labels in general—Gotanda has continued to develop work both in the theatrical community that first welcomed him and in the country's more mainstream houses. "It's a conscious choice to work with [both kinds of] companies," he says. "I've invested time building ongoing relationships with all of them."

As the frontman for AATC's youthful vanguard, artistic director Sean Lim adamantly embraces his theatre's culturally specific mission, and the theatre has reemerged in the past five years as an important incubator for Asian-American artists. "People in my generation grew up on Philip's work. To us, he's like a god," Lim declares unabashedly. "Of course, I think of him as an Asian-American playwright, although I realize that some people think it limits you to a category or frame of reference. Honestly, I don't think Philip would be as successful if he weren't Asian American. There's another layer to your powers of perception [as a writer] when you're an outsider in our society. Today's audiences demand keener insight from our artists about our increasingly complex world. It's the hyphenated artists that will be able to provide the stories that strike the chord of modern-day life."

Gotanda echoes Lim in regards to today's Asian-American artists. "In the '60s, Asian-American theatre was Chinese and Japanese-American driven, with some Filipinos and a few Korean Americans participating. That was indicative of the demographics and immigration patterns of the time. The early work was informed by those groups. Now, it's quite a different representation—Koreans, Filipinos, Vietnamese, Cambodian, Thai, Hmong, South Asian Indians, Pakistanis, Mainland Chinese, gay, lesbian, transgender, new arrivals from Japan, Malaysia, Taiwan, biracial and mixed race, 1.5ers [immigrant children who spent the majority of their lives as Americans]."

Gotanda offered two distinct one-act visions of that contemporary life with the debut of *Under the Rainbow* at AATC in 2005. The first, *Natalie Wood Is Dead*, a companion piece to *Yankee Dawg You Die*, focuses on a mother and daughter and their cringe-inducing experiences representing two generations of struggling Hollywood actors. The second, *White Manifesto and Other Perfumed Tales of Self-Entitlement, or, Got Rice?*, is an all-out, in-your-face monologue by a privileged white male who has a taste for Asian women.

"It's been almost two years and people still tell me about how much they loved the show," says Lim of the sold-out production. "*Rainbow* was one of the most successful productions in [AATC's] history. Audiences really gravitated toward the fresh language coming from Philip. People were amazed with its dexterity of new ideas. We were scared it would offend, but people embraced it. I think it's because the play changed people's outlooks without threatening their core identities. It was also one of the most diverse audiences we had that season."

From AATC, Gotanda headed east to U.C. Berkeley, then south to [University California–Los Angeles](#) in mid-2005 to premiere *Manzanar: An American Story*, his multimedia, multilayered reenvisioning of the internment experience created in collaboration with luminaries including [Kent Nagano](#), [Robert Wilson](#), Naomi Sekiya, [David Benoit](#), Kristi Yamaguchi and [George Takei](#). "His art illuminates areas of our national heritage that, for the general population, are often diminished, misunderstood or ignored," says Stephanie Glass Solomon, *Manzanar's* producer. "His characters put a human face on complex social concerns. He shows the connection between human emotions and critical events and

therefore is able to reveal our commonalities. This helps to make us whole as a society."

As a voice of Asian America, Gotanda is soft-spoken and gentle, and increasingly generous in sharing his success with talented new voices. Working with Philip is "like getting a private lesson with Tiger Woods," marvels Wesley Du, a first-year UCLA playwriting graduate student and one of Gotanda's mentees. "In a business where egos are huge and pretentiousness looms large, he is one of the most down-to-earth people I know."

In just that down-to-earth manner, Gotanda spoke to this writer about Asian-American theatre today and his recent work.

TERRY HONG: You've spent your entire creative career chronicling social and political movements. So where are you now?

PHILIP KAN GOTANDA: I've had the luck and will to be a playwright who has written what he's wanted and been able to support himself by it. It's allowed my work to follow a highly personal narrative over the years, with each subsequent play giving me an opportunity to further this discussion of issues and themes of import to me. When you've built a body of work in that manner, it makes you strong in ways you might not expect. Your beliefs and reasons for action are rarely whims, and, when you do extrapolate, invent, advance a theme, there's a confidence that it's built on a lifetime of adhering to one's gut, intellect and heart. It makes you solid—hard to push over. That's where I find myself today. A mature artist who knows his craft, who's worked hard to earn it, and feels poised and strong to take on new challenges.

Looking back, could you have imagined this would be your life in the early 21st century?

I remember in the early '70s, I was playing at a bar in San Francisco's North Beach at another open-mike night. You know, you get 10 minutes to show your wares. Above the din of clinking glasses and drunken chatter, I was singing my yellow soul out—songs of being Asian American—when a stripper from next door came in and began dancing up the aisles to my music. The audience began to clap to the rhythm of my tune as the stripper worked her way towards me. I looked over the crowd and thought, "Damn, this is not working, Philip."

I could never have imagined what my life would be like in 2007. I had absolutely no thoughts of being a playwright. Theatre was an alien art form. I had decided I would go to law school. Still, after a series of fortuitous incidents and one bad accident, I found myself, right after graduation, driving to L.A. to do my first play—a musical called *The Avocado Kid*. I had never stepped into a theatre, never seen a dramatic production. But from that first show at **East West Players**, I committed to theatre and never looked back.

I know you eschew labels, but for the sake of theatre shorthand, I've referred to you as the August Wilson of the Asian-American community. I don't think I'm alone in using that moniker for you.

August Wilson is one artist for whom I have the deepest respect. He created strong individual works, but also an extraordinary body of work committed to the one task of showing us the life and soul of African Americans. He didn't compromise. Quite frankly, I don't think you can if you ever hope to dig as deep and go as far as August did. You literally have to keep putting your blood on the paper without entertaining notions of what it will bring tomorrow. If I can achieve an iota of what August did in his lifetime, then, hey, I could die a happy man.

How do you think Asian-American theatre has changed and developed over the past half-century?

Recently, the first national Asian-American theatre conference was held in downtown Los Angeles [[The Next Big Bang: The Explosion of Asian American Theatre](#), reported in *American Theatre*, Oct. '06]. What was extraordinary was the spectrum of artists who had gathered under this umbrella label "Asian-American theatre." Many of these were Americans who were comfortably bicultural, bilingual, listening to American hip-hop right alongside an Asian pop artist, fluidly moving through borders of geography, culture and language. Along with this came a variety of theatre forms that made for a wonderful, energizing chaos.

The key thing was that everyone had chosen to attend and be in the same room. And, by and large, everyone agreed that the label "Asian American" had to be examined, questioned, reinvented, thrown out or rebirthed. Nonetheless, they were all there in a strong spirit of inclusion. I realized this was the new Asian-American theatre. Whether we kept the label or not was irrelevant to me. It's just a label. These were live people representing something that would exist whether it had a name or not.

You work easily in both so-called mainstream and Asian-American venues. How are they different, or not? Do you have a preference?

One thing I've done over the years is to build working relationships between mainstream and Asian-American theatre companies through co-productions. In L.A., we did a co-production of my play *Yohen* with East West Players and [Robey Theatre Company](#), an African-American-centric company. I invite you into my house, you invite me into your house. It's a beginning.

I'm presently working with three San Francisco-based theatres: American Conservatory Theater, Campo Santo and Asian American Theater Company. All have different missions, budgets, audiences. ACT offers me the most sophisticated and high-profile venue, access to artists from all over the world and resources to mount the best possible production in all regards. Campo Santo is an intimate, edgy, writer-driven company located in the Mission. Here is a place where you can push your artistic impulses without fear of failing. They also have one of the hippest audiences and my favorite black-box space. AATC is family. I can mentor, teach younger Asian-American voices, learn from their new eyes. I can do controversial works like *White Manifesto* and they'll put it up. I mean, where else can you have your dog jump on stage opening night and no one bats an eye when the writer goes up and gets him? All three theatres are friends. All three feed me artistically in different ways. All three I consider artistic homes.

Some have commented that to stay in the Asian-American (or other ethnic-specific) theatre community is to self-ghettoize one's work.

I've heard this argument for years. And it's always smacked of a kind of self-hating intellectual snobbery. People are afraid the association will limit their commercial opportunities. I mean, if you really believe that, then go ahead and *un-ghettoize* yourself—but what does that mean, and how the hell do you do that? Not allow your work to be done at Asian-American theatres? I guess that means [getting produced in] only white theatres? Never be seen walking down the street with an Asian-American playwright? Hey, that's me! It really has that old mentality of, "Now that I got mine, I no longer want to be associated with the common folk, *i.e.*, those other Asian Americans." It's a selfish attitude that, ironically, can only have been uttered because Asian-American communities existed and laid the groundwork for that individual to be in a position to think that way in the first place. You can do both.

I know that one of the ways you continue to give back to the Asian-American community is to nurture other young writers, especially playwrights-in-training. What are the most important lessons you impart to them?

Perhaps the most important lesson and the initial hurdle the mentee has to get over is this: If you write, make sure you have something to say. Otherwise, shut up, 'cause it's a waste of everyone's time. Once we've established that, then we're done with tough love and it's all about nourishing and helping them make themselves wiser, braver human beings. And it follows, playwrights with a keen point of view and rooted self-knowledge speak their truths and withstand the prevailing counter-winds.

Is it possible—given the importance of race even in the 21st century—that your advice to an upcoming Asian-American artist might be different than what you'd say to someone without a distinct ethnic background?

I mentor writers and filmmakers from a variety of backgrounds. My advice is particular to each individual. My play *White Manifesto* is drawn in part from conversations with artist friends who are white, who are grappling with their place in this 21st century. As my character Richard says, "You gotta have game, too."

If the mentee is from the West Coast, I'd stress that the rest of the country is not as progressive when it comes to perceptions of Asian Americans, their stories and their perceived audience viability in mainstream American theatre. That said, you cannot compromise your work to get produced. You have a responsibility as an artist to keep telling the truth in your works and continue to build on that storytelling. Never adapt, relocate or shuffle to fit the new 21st-century, racism-dressed-up-as-economic-necessity-and-demographic numbers. Keep writing, keep telling the truth, that's all you can do.

How has your creative process changed over the years?

I've a great deal more confidence in my writing abilities and the process of writing. For a while, I was always apprehensive when I took on a commission as to whether the muse would appear in time to complete it. The process is not that mysterious anymore. In fact, the writing I do that comes when I'm less than inspired at times is the better, more disciplined work.

I've also begun to do more collaboration—like *a fist of roses* and *Manzanar: An American Story*. Collaboration can be fertile, in particular with those artists who come at the work from a different medium, with a different eye. It's a good way to invigorate one's pictures, keep definitions of your aesthetics challenged and fresh, prod your ego into knowing the advantages of humility, and affirm what's real and what's not.

As prolific and multi-platformed as you are, might you have a favorite piece you've created?

It's an early play, *The Dream of Kitamura*. The central image is from a vivid dream I had in which my father sits on a decaying throne, terrified, pointing into the night screaming, "Kitamura! Kitamura!" Kitamura, as I interpret in the dream, is death coming for him. I, along with a composite of my two brothers, stand on either side of the throne, our swords drawn, ready to protect him.

Around that I built a cowboy-sitcom-goth-esque play about a lord in a castle who dreams a dark thing—Kitamura—is coming for him and hires two gunmen as guards. David Henry Hwang directed and we did it at the Asian American Theater Company in the '80s. An interesting side note is that a few years after that, I got a phone call out of the blue from Jean Erdman, who ran a theatre in New

York, **Theater of the Open Eye**. Somehow through a friend of a friend, she and her husband had come across my unpublished play and wanted to produce it. I didn't understand their interest in my play until I learned that Jean's husband was the well-known mythologist Joseph Campbell, and they had responded to the mythic elements and dream images. I collaborated with them on several productions of the play and [my wife] Diane [Takei, an actor and producer] and I became friends with Jean and Joe. We viewed them as mentors for us.

I always think of you as a playwright first, but you're a filmmaker as well. Do you prefer the medium of theatre?

For the writer, the playwright, there is no medium like it. In the initial writing phase, you have the luxury of being left alone to create with your laptop and a cup of espresso. Then it moves into the collaborative phase of working in a studio, mixing it up with other artists. And finally, you have the live performance experience—immediate, charged, out there naked for all the world to see. And you live or die, or both, in that brief time of hyper-excitation.

Do you have an ideal audience? Is there ever a perfect audience? What are some of the reactions you might be looking for?

I don't know if there is an ideal audience. Having begun my career in storefronts where it was not unusual to have more people on stage than in the audience, the ideal is anyone who comes through the door of their own volition, paying or otherwise. The perfect audience is when everyone is there of their own volition, the patrons *outnumber* the actors on stage and they *pay*.

I did have an interesting experience in Tokyo a few years back. I was there to catch the opening of a Japanese translation of *Sisters Matsumoto*. It was being done by the **Gekidan Mingei Theatre Company**. They're an old, well-established theatre and provided many of the actors for the early Kurosawa films. What I noticed immediately about the audience was its homogeneity—everyone was Japanese. Of course, in America, everyone is American, but there is also diversity—Japanese Americans, other Asians, white, African American, biracial, bicultural, etc.—and the play is understood according to the degree of knowledge you have about the world. So there's a general understanding of the play and then areas where a portion of the audience will respond while others may not.

We also did *Sisters Matsumoto* in Boston [at the **Huntington Theatre Company**]. During a post-show discussion, a gentleman said he was Jewish and that, had his family experienced similar circumstances, his family exchanges would have been bloody and loud. Why wasn't that the case with this family? The indirectness of this Japanese-American family's confrontations and self-imposed masking of feelings were not understood by the gentleman.

In Japan, watching a homogeneous audience take in the play as a group was a first-time experience for me. Everyone understood the play's subtle cultural nuances, silences and indirectness of argument *all at the same time*, everyone together. In America, the response to my works by a mixed audience is simply what it means to be an American. There are gaps in how we all take in each other's information, and we work to become more knowledgeable of the other's world—race, culture, religion or otherwise. It's interesting to note that Japan is experiencing the situation from the opposite end. They are contending with a newly changing demographic as more immigrants break down the homogeneity of the country.

Now that *After the War* is about to premiere, are you at work on another play?

Yes, I'm doing one work for Asian American Theater Company that is *very* loosely inspired by the children's book *The Five Chinese Brothers*. If you are of Asian background and of a certain age you probably had this story read to you by a well-meaning mom. This was the only children's book around that had "oriental" characters and big pictures, and I guess moms were desperate to give their kids something they could identify with. If you look at it now, it's so politically incorrect, it's hilarious—and, oddly, still heart-warming. The five brothers all look the same, bow in unison and wear long queues down their backs. The moral of the story is still rather disturbing—something to the effect that if you're charged with murder and the state is unable to execute you by drowning, fire, asphyxiation or decapitation, you must be innocent and released back into society. My version is called *4 Chinks and a Dyke*. Like the title, the piece aspires to be offensive and funny. Now this is a piece, like *White Manifesto*, where an Asian-American theatre company is the perfect fit.

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