



Philip Kan Gotanda– The Chronicler of the Asian American Experience

Dr. Hisham Muhamad Ismail

Assistant Professor of English Literature, Faculty of Language Studies - Arab Open University, Bahrain

Received: 19 Nov 2020; Received in revised form: 21 Jan 2021; Accepted: 11 Feb 2021; Available online: 06 Mar 2021

©2021 The Author(s). Published by AI Publication. This is an open access article under the CC BY license

(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract— Since the 1970s, Philip Kan Gotanda has been at the heart of the Asian American theatre movement and has become the voice of Asian American experience, producing theatrical works that can speak in different voices of Asian Americans and encompass a broad range of dramatic styles. Along with other playwrights such as David Henry Hwang, Momoko Iko, Velina Hasu Houston and Wakako Yamauchi, Gotanda is considered an influential figure in the second wave of dramatists, who follow the footsteps of the pioneer Frank Chin, to develop a viable Asian American theatre. From the beginning of his career, Gotanda's works have been successfully presented and produced at both Asian American theatres and mainstream venues across the United States.

Keywords— Philip Kan Gotanda, Ethnic theatre, Mainstream theatre, *Yankee Dawg You Die*.

I. INTRODUCTION

The mutual relation between Philip Kan Gotanda and his ethnic background as well as his specific upbringing have played a crucial role in inspiring almost all of his works. One can say that Philip Kan Gotanda's works witness his movement from writing for specific audience to writing for non-specific audience. This movement can be noticed as a natural and logical outcome of the development that takes place in Asian American literature, but Gotanda's movement is mainly characterized by his desire to build relationships between the two kinds of theatres. Actually, he works with various mainstream and international arenas but he still keeps his loyalty and sincerity to the Asian American theatres. So, this paper will start with a brief background of the ethnic theatre in the U.S. and the beginning of Asian American term and experience. Then, it will examine Gotanda's personal record and the major motives behind his movement from the margins of the ethnic theatre to the mainstream arena. Finally, it will present the major works of the playwright in addition to some critical comments on the themes and styles of these works.

II. ETHNIC THEATRE –ORIGINS AND DEVELOPMENT

Historically, ethnic theatre existed from the late eighteenth century in the U.S. David Krasner mentions that for the first groups of settlers in the United States, such as the French in Louisiana, the Italians in San Francisco and the Chinese in San Francisco, these theatres served two purposes at that time; it created a social center and it invoked remembrances of homeland (18). So, we can describe ethnic theatre as: "theatre by and for minority communities, whose cultural heritages distinguish them from the Anglo-American mainstream" (Banham 327). Johnella Bulter mentions that ethnic theatre tends to seek, identify, and assert the cultural realities of these groups (xx).

Ethnic theatre reached the peak in the early twentieth century due to a huge wave of immigration at the turn of the century. Maxine Schwartz Seller points out that the development of ethnic theatre was closely connected with immigration as a social and cultural process (4). So, it focused on the immigrants' social situations and on their conflicts and struggles as well as provided education to fulfill the immigrants' intellectual needs. For these reasons, the major ethnic theatres that were established

primarily by Chinese American and Japanese American artists such as East West Players in Los Angeles, Asian American Theatre Company in San Francisco, Pan Asian Repertory in New York, and Northwest Asian American Theatre Company in Seattle, became alternatives to mainstream-dominated venues.

One of the major ethnic groups in the U.S. that had a strong presence in the cultural, social and political mainstream venues is the Asian Americans. Sau Wong indicates that since its inception in the late 1960s, as a part of the ethnic studies agenda, Asian American literary studies have gained increasing institutional recognition across the United States (3). Elaine Kim sees that one of the serious problems facing them and other racial minority writers in America has been that many readers insist on viewing their writing as sociological or anthropological statements about the group (xv).

Demographically, the Asian Americans represented in 1960 one half of one percent of American populations, but the 2010 census refers to an increase in this percentage that reaches 4.6% of the total American population and by 2050 this percentage is expected to be 7.8%. Roberta Uno -Ford Foundation Program Officer - comments on this increase:

Demographers are saying that by the year 2050 people of color in aggregate will become the majority of the United States ... This reality has already happened in many urban centers like Los Angeles where a new term ... "majority minorities" has emerged to describe the population. A major paradigm shift now confronts the arts and culture field as terms like minority, mainstream, ethnically specific, culturally specific, traditional, dominant culture and underrepresented are being inverted, made obsolete, or being given new meaning by changing demographics. What does it mean when mainstream is just one of many rivers in our society? (qtd. in Houston 2)

These figures suggest a strong demographic basis for the prominent presence of Asian Americans as active participants in a number of public arenas; and this presence is accompanied with a basic change in the minds of most Americans toward Asians, a change best described by a misleading term "model minority". This term initially was applied only to the Japanese Americans, but Esther Ghymn argues that by the 1970s the term was increasingly used to describe successful, upwardly mobile Asian

Americans of any ethnicity (2). On the other hand, no one can deny that the history of Asian Americans has been at times a very painful one, because they face all kinds of racism and discrimination.

Josephine Lee sees that the circumstances which forced the Asians to flee to the United States have been completely different from those of other immigrant groups (*Between Immigration* 49). Nevertheless, both African Americans and Asian Americans have been historically excluded from the full status of being American by using some racial actions such as the barring of citizenship and voting rights, unequal access to education, laws prohibiting land ownership and miscegenation, as well as by anti-immigration restrictions and oppressive labor practices. So, Ronald Takaki mentions that from the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act until after WWII, anti-immigration laws and other forms of institutionalized discrimination severely limited the numbers of Asian immigrants, changed the nature of their respective communities, and marked their status as Americans (90).

Originally, the term "Asian American" appears in the 1960s as a replacement for the title "Oriental". It is a historically specific, coalitional identity that embraces peoples of Asian origin. The term "Asian American" not only highlights the tension of hyphenation, it also draws attention to its own incompleteness as a category. So, Asian American activism allied with other civil rights movements in the 1960s and after, had produced important changes in the social framework of American life. William Wei mentions that these movements were primarily the result of the convergence of two historical developments: the emergence of a generation of college-age Asian Americans and the public protests surrounding the Vietnam War (1). Therefore, the growing influence of Asian Americans has its foundations in political and cultural as well as demographic changes. Josephine Lee mentions that one significant aspect of these changes can be seen in recent cultural production; that Asian Americans have been increasingly recognized for their contributions to the visual arts, literature, music, dance, and theatre (*Performing Asian* 3).

The director Eugene Nesmith reminds us that a member of a particular race does not possess one monolithic point of view, and argues that separatism in theatre particularly, as well as in society in general, is too narrow for today's multicultural world (Zesch 3). So, many critics foresee that a new generation of artists, who have already moved beyond traditional definitions of Asian identity to speak in numerous artistic voices, can easily confront this simple definition of identity creating new genre of drama that is called "minority drama". It is

defined as a drama written and performed by and for minority groups – has to pass through a period of questioning and anger; it is now becoming part of a larger landscape. Thus, Karen Chow thinks that abjection for Asian Americans can be manifested through a continuous fluctuation between invisibility and visibility, as well as inclusion and exclusion, and being accepted and reviled (3).

Coincidentally, King-Kok Cheung notes that the themes treated in Asian American plays tend to emphasize historical experiences common to those groups such as Chinese immigration and labor histories and the Japanese American internment camps of the World War II (*Interethnic Companion* 125). Many consider internment camps as one of the most shameful chapters in the United States history, when approximately 112,000 to 120,000 Japanese and Japanese Americans were put in concentration camps by the decision of the president Franklin Roosevelt.

The American mainstream theatres were not ready for Asian American plays when they first appeared. This attitude was driven from two reasons; the first is the inherent discrimination of the American society towards any ethnic groups at this time, and the second is that Asian American drama as a literary canon has been composed and produced for domestic consumption inside the ethnic community. But from the commercially successful productions, such as *M. Butterfly* by David Henry Hwang and *Tea* by Velina Hasu Houston and *Yankee Dawg You Die* by Philip Kan Gotanda, the mainstream venues began to appreciate this experience and exposed more enthusiasm toward Asian American conflicts and themes.

Consequently, the wide-ranging themes like identity, cultural adjustment, immigration stigma, racism within, and the joys and hardships of diasporas experience as well as the possibilities and limits of multi-ethnicity continue to be appreciated by the multicultural audience more than by a homogeneous crowd. The critics argue that the diverse voices of Asian American plays not only have enriched the American stage, but also have explained and outlined the struggles of all Americans in an ever-changing racial landscape.

III. PHILIP KAN GOTANDA – BACKGROUND AND MOTIVES

Being widely recognized as one of the most representative Asian American playwrights in the contemporary history and one of the pioneers that have helped in expanding the margins of the ethnic theatre without sacrificing his genuine ethnic spirit, Philip Kan Gotanda's plays recreate on stage the changing reality of

Asian American life, with all of its frustration, contradiction, and glory. In his works, Gotanda is mainly concerned with some topics and conflicts like generational and gender expectations and the role of racism within the dynamics of the Asian American experience. Undoubtedly, he succeeds in conveying the hopes, fears, shattered dreams, and triumphs that collectively make up the Asian American experience. His work tells the Asian story in America that is continually being re-firmed. He clarifies this point by saying: "This can truly be an exciting time. We are all participating in the reinvention of America, from the ground up. As an artist and a citizen of the world, what a grand time to be alive" (qtd. in Omi xxvi).

Gotanda is strongly committed to Asian American drama and to the forward motion of Asian American culture, so he places that culture in a human spotlight, which encourages recognition of the Asian American experience as an important aspect of the American story. Michael Omi confirms: "What he's doing in his plays is to make the Asian-American experience a very American experience, I think that's central to his impact on the mainstream theatre-going audience. His stories are not marginal, exotic tales. What he's telling is essentially an American story" (qtd. in Hong, *Portraits by Gotanda* 2). Gotanda possesses precisely the imagination that C. Wright Mills described as "necessary to understand that neither the life of an individual nor the history of a society can be understood without understanding both" (3). His plays reveal a deep appreciation for both history and biography, and they illuminate how individuals, shaped by historical circumstances, in turn help to define and to create the realm of possibility.

Philip Kan Gotanda, who was born on December 17, 1951 and was raised in California, is a Sansei – third generation Japanese American. His father, Wilfred Itsuta Gotanda, came to the U.S. mainland to study medicine at the University of Arkansas. Seiwoong Oh mentions that after being involved in a successful medical career, he ironically found himself forced to return to Arkansas when, during World War II, he was interned at Rohwer camp (94). After the war, he came back and resumed his life in Stockton. There he married Catherine Matsumoto, a schoolteacher and started a family. Philip Kan Gotanda was then born; the youngest of three sons.

Micheal Omi elucidates that the impacts of the Japanese environment are clear from his early life (xii). Gotanda remembers the various cultural influences from the Japanese festivals, samurai movies, and the athletic leagues of the Buddhist church alongside episodes of *The Twilight Zone* and *Star Trek* and his brothers' recording of Bob Dylan and Miles Davis. At this early stage of life,

theatre held little interest for him. From early childhood to early adulthood, Gotanda was conscious of two competing and opposing sides to his character: a creative and artistic side that battled with a serious and professional counter impulse. He feels an uneasy tension between the two, often fluctuating from one position to the other. His first creative effort is music. At age thirteen, he began to play guitar, write and compose songs. In 1969 he entered the University of California at Santa Cruz in 1969 aiming at becoming a psychiatrist, at the same time he didn't lose his interest in music.

There are two main turning points that have deeply influenced Gotanda's career and life in general. The first is the experience of internment of the Japanese Americans during the World War II and the second is his journey to Japan. Both experiences and his growing awareness and perception of the Asian American life and the racism they face, shape his attitudes and later his relation with the mainstream. He believes that Asian Americans must have an expanded vision of what Asian America is; a vision that continually grows to include ever more diversity and complexity. He says: "Some people think that Asian American theatre is a static art form. People think it is about dealing with Angel Islands, The railroads, the camps, etc. But our culture is a live beast" (qtd. in Omi xxvi).

Gotanda's understanding of the whole experience of the Asian Americans adds new dimensions to his works, and he considers writing the true stories about their experiences as a kind of responsibility and commitment to his ethnic group. He comments on this point:

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 matter, it makes you strong in ways you might not expect. Your beliefs and reasons for action are rarely whims, and, when you do 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. (Hong, *Portraits by Gotanda* 4)

In the 1970s, the time of the rising political conflicts in the United States, Gotanda experienced for the first time the political sense. At the university, he participated, to a limited extent, in the newly formed Asian American Political Alliance that challenged the forms of institutional racism in the camps and within surrounding Asian American communities. In the midst of these heady political events, Gotanda left the United States to Japan, ostensibly to study ceramics. He was, in fact, going to Japan to carve out a space in which he can rethink his interests. He explains the circumstances around his journey to Japan in an interview under the title *Being Japanese America*:

So when I got the opportunity to spend a year abroad in Japan, I took it. This was around 1970. I lived there for a year and a half. Most of it spent in a small pottery village north of Tokyo in Tochigi-ken, Mashiko... I didn't go to Japan, I left America. Here, I felt that I just couldn't find my niche. In Japan, I had a somewhat mystical experience. For the first time in my life, I experienced a sense of racial anonymity. I was living without the burden of racism; I didn't have to work at constantly deflecting it. The mantle of racism lifted off my shoulders and drifted away. What an extraordinary feeling. (4)

Like any Asian American person who visits his ancestral homeland, the journey helps in deepening the sense of marginality in the American society because he immerses himself in a culture in which he is not defined as "Other". In Japan, Randy Kaplan notes that Gotanda realized then and there the effort required of Asian Americans to prepare themselves psychologically in order to prevent the impact of racism (70). Gotanda says:

After about a year or so, I was feeling quite comfortable in Japan. I spoke and understood the language well enough to get by; I wore the right clothes, my gestures were contained, my body language appropriate. I even began to dream in the Japanese language. About this time, I had some business back in Tokyo. I took the train in and I remember coming out of station ... and how as I was coming out I was hit by a sea of faces. And they all looked like me. As I began to walk I was surrounded by crowds of people and they all looked

like me ... later as I reflected back on what happened, I realized what had lifted off me. It was American racism. A lift time of living where every aspect, but in that moment, on the streets of Tokyo, I had experienced what it was to live life not at the margins, but at the center. (*Being Japanese America* 6)

Upon returning from Japan, Gotanda came back to the United States with a renewed sense of clarity and vision (Bryer & Hartig 202). He became more involved in Asian American culture, realizing the uniqueness of its identity. Gotanda completed his undergraduate studies at the University of California at Santa Barbara, and specialized in Japanese arts. During this time, he began to involve deeper in the emergent Asian American movement, and his interests were driven by the cultural possibilities presented by the poetry of Lawson Inada and Jessica Hagedorn, the music of Charlie Chin. He comments:

I realized that I could give voice to an experience that was my experience – that I could look in the mirror and write about this particular face. It was a liberating feeling. I was drawn to a particular vision of what Asian American creative expression could be. (qtd. in Omi xiii)

After graduation in 1973, Gotanda spent the next two years as a song writer and singer. Almost all of his songs at that time dealt with themes related to his consciousness to the Asian American experience. He kept pursuing his efforts until he met David Henry Hwang. Gotanda's cooperation and friendship with Hwang continued to expand the Asian American theatrical context. Several of Gotanda's earlier plays for the Asian American Theatre Company in San Francisco were directed by Hwang. Hwang and Gotanda, are by far the most well-established Asian American playwrights, and the two are often mentioned simultaneously when describing the growing field of Asian American drama. Their careers have become models of how Asian American playwrights can move towards the center of mainstream theatre.

After writing songs for a while, Gotanda found himself unsatisfied with the simple rendering of a song because of the limitations of the song format. He comments: "I was never content to have my songs just sung. I always saw staging, costumes, and the use of theatrical gestures to convey what I wanted to say" (qtd. in Omi xiv). Gotanda had tried without success to get a record made of songs, but he was well-known among

Asian American activists, students, and artists. During this time, the Asian American theatre scene in Los Angeles had been established with Mako's East West players in 1965, and Frank Chin had launched San Francisco's Asian American theatre company in 1973. Moreover, Asian American musicians, artists, and writers declared their commitment to create and expose Asian American experience rather than reproducing traditional Asian art forms.

IV. GOTANDA'S PLAYS – REFLECTION OF THE ASIAN SPIRIT

Due to all these circumstances, Gotanda took his first step toward playwriting and presented his first musical play entitled *Ballad of the Issei*. Although he did not receive any formal training in playwriting, unlike the majority of second wave playwrights, he practiced theatre as a musician and gradually learnt its secrets. Gotanda's first theatrical piece *The Avocado Kid or Zen* (1978) is essentially musical, inspired by the well-known Japanese folk tale "Momotaro the Peach Boy." Critics regard *The Avocado Kid* as a specifically Asian American play; which weaves familiar threads drawn from Asian and Asian American culture and subverts them. He has no idea about how a play can be transformed from a text to material reality to be staged on the theatre. This play expresses his growing awareness of his root cultural heritage, but unfortunately its frank treatment of sexuality helps in not eliciting enthusiastic responses from reviewers.

Then, Gotanda began to read more widely in order to develop his craft. It is well noted that his discovery of Sam Shepard's *Angel City* (1976) is considered the source of inspiration, because of Shepard's own roots in music, and his use of American iconography. From 1979 to 1985, Gotanda wrote plays for Asian American theatre companies on both coasts. His plays during this period exposed his development from musical to more straight dramas. Esther K. Lee notes that his audience base widened as he wrote more in the style of naturalism and narrative storytelling (143).

Gotanda's early works such as *A Song for a Nisei Fisherman* (1980), *Dream of Kitamura* (1982) and *Bullet Headed Birds* (1981) are bittersweet dramas about the nisei families. These early plays demonstrate his skill and sensitivity which enabled him to describe this experience clearly. With the success of these plays, more mainstream theatrical venues were interested in staging his work. *A Song For A Nisei Fisherman* and *The Wash* are featured at the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles, and *Yankee Dawg You Die* at the Berkeley Repertory Theatre. By these productions, Gotanda moves from speaking to specific

homogeneous ethnic group to mainstream heterogeneous audience. He points out:

Even though my work was being presented at these larger venues, I refused to compromise the material or try to make it more accessible to a particular audience. The audience should come to you. This may seem arrogant, but what it amounts to is a leap of faith. (qtd. in Omi xvi)

The consequence of Gotanda's leap from the margins to the mainstream of the theatre world has been an expansion of his audience without sacrificing his authentic flavor. Moreover, in several plays, he uses Japanese American references and colloquial speech as natural elements of the dialogue, and he pays little effort to make them accessible or understandable to non-Japanese American audiences. One can note that Gotanda strategically utilizes his cultural specificity as a way of presenting to his audience a more unrestrained and look at the real entity of American culture.

The next series of plays reflects Gotanda's growing perception of America which is mediated by his Japanese American community, where he is engaged in network of family, friends, and organizations. He succeeds in recreating a slice of that world and illuminating it for his audience. He depicts the rituals, the relationships, the conversations, and, in essence, the sight, sounds, and smells of Japanese America. Actually, *The Wash* (1985) and *Yankee Dawg You Die* (1986) place him firmly in the public's eye as the creator of distinctly non-stereotypical, realistic characterizations of Japanese Americans and their lives. The first play is a frank, tender and thoughtful treatment of the death of marriage, the second is a biting ironic examination of the impact of racism on the lives of two Asian actors in the entertainment industry.

For over the last two and half decades, Esther K. Lee sees that Gotanda has insisted on dramatizing what he describes as "specific authenticity", one that stems from his experiences in being brought up as a Sansei in the American society (139). In particular, he has been the leader in bringing the stories of Asian Americans to the American stage and a major influence in the expansion of the definition of theatre in America. Throughout his career Gotanda has embodied the heart and spirit of an artist devoted to the telling of his own particular way. He has created one of the largest and most varied bodies of work about the Asians living in America. Proudly he comments on his career by saying:

For the last 27 years I've been creating stories about the Japanese American

experience. As a playwright, and more recently, as a filmmaker. I've been fortunate to work within Japanese American communities, outside in the "mainstream" arts communities, as well as, in the international scene. And during that time, given these unique perspectives, I have seen many changes to Japanese America and in being Japanese American. I'd like to offer a more personal account of my experiences and reflections on the shifting Japanese American identity. (Gotanda, *Being Japanese America* 1)

To Gotanda's credit, his ability to give racism a face and a name or simply to acknowledge its existence becomes an empowering experience. Gotanda's major works are thematically driven by his excavation and public naming of the deeply rooted effects of racism on Japanese Americans and their lives. He comments: "My parents' camp experience continues to inform my work and life both on a conscious and on an unconscious level" (Cheung, *Words Matter* 175). To this point, the internment camps figure prominently in his plays, in spite of being born after World War II. Emmanuel S. Nelson points out that the internment's impacts on his writing and life are obvious. Gotanda's parents were interned in Rohwer Camp in Arkansas, and he bases some of his earlier plays on his parents' as well as their generation's experiences (868). For example, he makes use of themes such as internment's psychic scar in *American Tattoo* (1982), the subsequent internalized racism being passed on from generation to generation in *A Song for A Nisei Fisherman*, *The Wash*, *Fish Head Soup*, and *Sister Matsumoto*, and its immediate psychological aftermath in *Sisters Matsumoto* (1999). He comments on this issue by saying:

If you're Japanese American, this part of history, the internment camps, is part of your body ..., I was born post. War in the 1950s and the camps weren't talked about a lot, but they were certainly there, they had a huge effect on the psyche and behavior of entire communities. It's absorbed weather it's talked about or not. (qtd. in Jones 1)

In spite of his severe and dark examination of the reality, and in spite of the unbearable effects of racism, he succeeds in providing people with some nobler sense of humanity. It is a theme that runs through almost all of his plays. In the depth of a crisis, Gotanda provides an incredible resilience of human beings and the human spirit;

individuals like Nobu in *The Wash*, Vincent in *Yankee Dawg*, and Harry Kitamura in *Day Standing on Its Head* can in fact change, carve out a sense of worth and purpose, and transcend their perceived situation of powerlessness.

Gotanda's works represent fascinating aspects of Asian American historical experience and sensibility. He exposes themes and issues in a manner that is neither oppressive nor informative. His characters are multidimensional, and full of the contradictory motives and feelings that represent the human condition. They embody specific Asian American traits and values, and at the same time they are the products and agents of a particular historical experience. It is this kind of specificity – a painterly quality – that has marked Gotanda as the chronicler of the Asian American experience in general and Japanese American in particular.

Gotanda's plays demonstrate his ability to write in many ranges of styles. In *Day standing on Its Head* (1994) he adapts the surreal style with which he journeys into the mind of Harry Kitamura, a man struggling to find his way through a confusion of mid-life regrets and lost dreams. *Fish Head Soup* (1995) is a dark examination of a Japanese American family's deeply rooted dysfunctional behaviors. *Ballad of Yachiyo* (1996) is an impressionistic memory play set in Hawaii that tells a love story. *Sisters Matsumoto* (1997) is a realistic drama which presents the psychological damages suffered by a nisei family in the aftermath of their internment in World War II as they return to their childhood home to rebuild their lives. *Yohen* (1997) depicts another marriage in crisis, this time between a nisei woman and her African American husband. Though stylistically diverse, Don Wilmeth notes that all of his plays examine the psychological dynamics of the Asian American experience (298).

Although his works deal with and are driven from Asian American experience, he tries to address broader social and cultural issues, beyond the Asian American community. Clearly, Gotanda's plays refer to his movement away from the confines of a hyphenated identity, from works which can be read primarily as ethnic to those with more universal themes. With his works he claims that one can move from the ethnic theatre to the mainstream arena without compromising or sacrificing one's ideas and interests. In other words, writing for a broader audience doesn't necessarily require a systematic elimination of all Asian qualities. In his plays, Gotanda attempts to elude the limits of ethnic marginality, to occupy a more central position and speak to a larger, non-specific audience.

Gotanda remains uncompromisingly devoted to create a uniquely and specifically Asian American vision

instead of seeking to ensure commercial success outside the Asian American theatre world by undermining his writing to accommodate the sensibilities of non-Asian American audiences. Moving beyond the Asian American theatre doesn't signal an end to Asian American themes for Gotanda. He argues that these themes are as appropriate for a general audience as for non-specific Asian American Audience. He claims: "Even though my work was being presented at these larger venues, I refused to compromise the material or try to make it more accessible to a particular audience. The audience should come to you. This may seem arrogant, but what it amounts to is a leap of faith" (qtd. in Esther K. Lee 143).

It is crucial to note here that Gotanda's plays have been produced extensively throughout United States (H. Kim 102). His works have played at both ethnic theatres and mainstream venues such as: Berkeley Repertory Theatre, East West Players, Manhattan Theatre Club, Asian American Theatre, A Contemporary Theatre, Group Theatre, Northwest Asian American Theatre, Playwrights Horizons, Wisdom Bridge, Los Angeles Theatre, Asian American Theatre Center, Studio Theatre, Mark Taper Forum, Eureka Theatre, Asian American Repertory Theatre, Toronto Free Theatre, ESIPA, Pan Asian Repertory Theatre, and Theatre of the Open Eye. In addition, his works are also presented internationally. Gotanda's *Ballad of Yachiyo* was produced at London's Gate Theatre in co-production with Royal National theatre. A Japanese language version of his play, *Sisters Matsumoto*, was produced in Tokyo.

From large mainstream venues to experimental black boxes to Asian American-African American ethnically specific theatres, Gotanda has consciously worked to bring the themes of his works to the widest range of audiences in order to prove that the Asian American culture is still alive and not static. Through working with the mainstream audience, he was concerned with providing them with a more extensive understanding of America through the world of his plays. In an interview with Gotanda, he states: "I'm coming from a specific place as a Japanese American, but I want to make sure audiences can meet me halfway. When you want to reach a lot of people, your work should be inclusive enough for everyone to find its center" (Berson, *Role Model* 20). Gotanda has invited non-Asian American audiences to the specific world of his plays not only through his writing but also by forming relationships with the regional theatre companies, he comments:

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 Theatre, Campo Santo and Asian American Theatre Company. All have different missions, budgets, audiences. ACT offers me the most sophisticated and high-profile venues, access to the artists from all over the world and resources to mount the best possible production in all regards. Campo Santo is an intimate, edgy, and writer-driven company located in the Mission... AATC is family. I can mentor, teach younger Asian-American voices, learn from their new eyes... All three theatres are friends. All three feed me artistically in different ways. All three I consider artistic homes. (qtd. in Hong, *Portraits by Gotanda* 5)

Since the mid 1980s, he has attempted to move beyond the Asian American theatres in his work. One can note that Gotanda's relationship with the mainstream theatre can be described on different levels. On one level, when a mainstream theatre company decides to produce one of his plays, Gotanda has chosen to work with mainstream companies because he feels a responsibility towards his plays. Esther K. Lee mentions that Gotanda thinks that those plays deserve the best possible production which can be found and presented with large venues (144).

On another level, he has also encouraged Asian American theatre companies to create and build equitable relationship with larger regional theatre companies. For Gotanda, these relationships are the only way smaller ethnic theatres can survive the competition. So, he has encouraged co-productions of his works by both Asian American and mainstream theatre companies. For example, *Day Standing on Its Head* was co-produced by the Asian American Theatre Company and Berkeley Repertory in 1994 and in 1999 *Yohen* was co-produced by the East West Players and Robey Theatre, an African American theatre company in Los Angeles.

Gotanda thinks that such collaborations not only validate smaller companies' existence, but also allow larger companies to understand the language of Asian

American theatre. Only by forging these relationships would both institutions be able to "present a more expansive presentation of Asian America and America" (Esther K. Lee 144). So, he has no objection to label his works as Asian American and found it not limiting but politically empowering. He clarifies this point by saying: "I'm happy to be working more in the mainstream regional theatres and in the entertainment industry, but I still believe there is an Asian American theatre and an Asian-American literature. 'Asian-America' is, in itself, a political term" (qtd. in Berson, *Between Worlds* 33).

While he continues to be well-received in more mainstream theatrical venues, Gotanda keeps a firm commitment to Asian American theatre companies. Like many other Asian American playwrights, he gets his start in these theatres. He expresses his strong and intimate relation with the Asian American theatres in an interview by saying: "the one place you can truly define what this thing called an Asian-American theatrical aesthetic is. It's the place where you can develop it in its purest form ... I see the Asian American theatre world as family" (Hwang 19).

It is worth noting that Gotanda has been the recipient of numerous grants and awards for example; the Guggenheim, TCG-NEA, Rockefeller, PEW Charitable Trust, Civil Liberties Public Education Fund, and the Lila Wallace Readers Digest Award (Niiya 149). Astonishingly, most of Gotanda's works have received limited and inadequate scholarly attention. Though his works are certainly worthy of such consideration, the majority of critical comments to his plays must be sought in newspaper reviews written in response to specific productions rather than to the literary value of his works.

Gotanda's plays address a broad range of Asian American and specifically Japanese Americans' experiences and encompass a variety of theatrical styles, including realism, surrealism, and the eclectic style of the American stage musical. Each of Gotanda's work makes a distinct claim for the diversity of Japanese America. He comments on this point by saying: "Sometimes Japanese-American society looks from the outside like one monolithic thing. But I wanted to explore issues of class, of the economic effects of war, particularly for this class, because of their money and their power... People think my plays are autobiographical, but in fact they aren't. They're fictionalized and put into my lens of examining certain issues" (qtd. in Schiffman 2-3).

Finally, many critics consider Philip Kan Gotanda as the creator of influential Asian American dramas that reflect the state of contemporary Asian American theatre and, indeed, often influence the course of its development.

In clear words, one can say that Gotanda has achieved successful movement from the limited margins of the ethnic theatre to occupy a secured position in the mainstream arena. This movement was achieved because both Gotanda and mainstream had the desire to be interwoven and to work with each other. Throughout his career, Gotanda strives to maintain his right and ability to speak to both the Asian Americans and the others. Furthermore, Dunbar mentions that Gotanda's development shows deliberate resistance to reductive ethnic readings. In these plays, Gotanda's conceptual framework seems to open outwards, because he complicates the notion of just what Asian American is or can be (19).

REFERENCES

- [1] Banham, Martin, ed. *The Cambridge Guide to Theatre*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1992. Print
- [2] Berson, Misha. "Role Model on a Role: Philip Kan Gotanda's Work Grabs Mainstream Attention and Inspires Younger Artists". *Seattle Times* 10 Oct. 1996. HighBeam Research. Web. 19 May 2010.
- [3] ---, ed. *Between Worlds: Contemporary Asian American Plays*. New York: Theatre Communication Group Inc., 1990. Print.
- [4] Bulter, Johnnella E., ed. *Color Line to Borderlands: The Matrix of American Ethnic Studies*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2001. Print
- [5] Bryer, Jackson R., Mary C. Hartig. *The Facts On File Companion to American Drama*. New York: Facts On File Inc., 2010. Print.
- [6] Cheung, King-Kok. *An interethnic companion to Asian American literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997. Print.
- [7] ---, ed. *Words Matter: Conversations with Asian American Writers*. Hawaii: University of Hawaii, 2000. Print.
- [8] Chow, Karen H. "National Abjection: The Asian American Body Onstage." *Asian Theatre Journal* Vol. 21. Issue 1 (Spring 2004): pp.112-115. JSTOR Web. 5 April 2009.
- [9] Dunbar, Ann-Marie. "From Ethnic to Mainstream Theatre: Negotiating "Asian American in the plays of Philip Kan Gotanda"." *American Drama* Volume 14, No.1 (Winter 2005): pp. 15-31. HighBeam Research. Web. 7 May 2010.
- [10] Ghymn, Esther Mikyung. *Asian American Studies: Identity, Images, Issues Past and Present*. New York: Peter Lang, 2000. Print.
- [11] Gotanda, Philip Kan. "BEING JAPANESE AMERICA." 7 August 2006. Accessed from <http://www.sf.us.emb-japan.go.jp/pdf/sympo1.pdf>
- [12] Hong, Terry. "Portraits by Gotanda: In a Cavalcade of Plays Both Intimate and Epic, the Playwright Elucidates Asian-American Life." *American Theatre Journal* Vol. 24. Issue 3 (March 2007). HighBeam Research. Web. 19 May 2010.
- [13] ---. "The Philip Kan Gotanda Chronicles." *AsianWeek Newspaper* 26 November 2004. HighBeam Research. Web. 7 May 2010.
- [14] Houston, Velina Hasu. "Out of the Margins: A National Theatre Conference in Los Angeles Galvanizes Asian-American Forces." *American Theatre Journal* Vol. 23. Issue 8 (October 2006). Questia Research. Web. 16 Jan. 2010.
- [15] Hwang, David Henry. "David Henry Hwang interview with Philip Kan Gotanda." *BOMB a quarterly Arts & Culture magazine* Issue 62 (Winter 1992). JSTOR Research. Web. 4 May 2009.
- [16] Jones, Chad. "Gotanda turns his attention to S.F.'s Japantown in 48." *Oakland Tribune* 21 March 2007. HighBeam Research. Web. 7 May 2010.
- [17] Kaplan, Randy Barbara. "Philip Kan Gotanda (1951-)." *Asian American Playwrights: A Bio-Bibliographical Critical Sourcebook*. Ed. Miles Xian Liu. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2002. 69-88. Print.
- [18] Kim, Elaine H. *Asian American Literature: An Introduction to the Writings and Their Social Context*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1982. Print.
- [19] Kim, Hyung-Chan, ed. *Distinguished Asian Americans, a biographical dictionary*. Westport: Greenwood Press, 1999. Print.
- [20] Krasner, David. *A Companion to Twentieth-century American Drama*. Blackwell: Blackwell Publishing, 2005. Print.
- [21] Lee, Esther Kim. *A History of Asian American Theatre*. Cambridge University Press, 2006. Print.
- [22] Lee, Josephine. *PERFORMING ASIAN AMERICA: Race and Ethnicity on the Contemporary Stage*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997. Print.
- [23] ---. "Between Immigration and Hyphenated: The Problems of Theorizing Asian American Theater." *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism*. Vol. XIII. No. 1 (Fall 1998): 45-70. JSTOR Research. Web. 5 April 2009.
- [24] Nelson, Emmanuel S., ed. *The Greenwood Encyclopedia of Multiethnic American Literature*. Westport: Greenwood Press, 2005. Print
- [25] Niiya, Brian, ed. *Japanese American History: an A – to – Z reference from 1868 to the present*. New York: Facts On File Inc., 1993. Print.
- [26] Oh, Seiwoong. *Encyclopedia of Asian-American Literature*. New York: Facts On File Inc., 2007. Print.
- [27] Omi, Michael. Introduction. *Fish Head Soup and Other Plays*. By Philip Kan Gotanda. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1991, xi-vxxx. Print.
- [28] Schiffman, Jean. "Profile: Blue-Collar Playwright Philip Kan Gotanda's Work ethic combined with his loyalty to individual perspective has kept his plays thriving on the West Coast". *Back Stage West* 13 May 1999. HighBeam Research. Web. 7 May 2010.
- [29] Seller, Maxine Schwartz, ed. *Ethnic Theatre in the United States*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1983. Print.
- [30] Takaki, Ronald. *Strangers from a Different Shore: A History of Asian Americans*. New York: Penguin Press, 1989. Print

- [31] Wilmeth, Don B. *The Cambridge Guide to American Theatre*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007. Print.
- [32] Wong, Sau-Ling Cynthia. *Reading Asian American Literature: From Necessity to Extravagance*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1993. Print.
- [33] Zesch, Lindy. "Existing in the Present Tense." *American Theatre Journal* Vol. 12. Issue 9 (Nov. 1995). Questia Research. Web. 16 Jan. 2010.