

Equality (REAC) and its Equity Office. In Volume 12, while two of the essays do deal with practices “categorizable” as Canadian community-engaged performance (Salverson and Little), this field remains under-examined with respect to the nature(s) and extent of presumed-to-be “collaborative” practices.

I do, wholeheartedly, recommend both of these collections, to scholars and artists, and to teachers and students. Each provides unfailingly thoughtful and often provocative critical analysis of performance practices largely unconfined by institutionalized modes of production. Discussions of creative process and aesthetic communication are, for the most part, inseparable from particularities of context, artistic intention, audience relationship, and assessment of efficacy. This is purposeful scholarship, examining purposeful creative work. Introductions to both volumes are organized thematically, with individual authors’ names appearing several times.

In Volume 14, Maureen Moynagh writes that Walter Borden’s *Tightrope Time* “argues for re-imagining community” (155). Judging from the contents of Volumes 12 and 14 in the *Critical Perspectives* series, Canadian artists and scholars are getting on with the work of re-imagining theatre, relationship with audience, dominant structures, and sites of diverse, hybrid, and mutable Canadian-ness.

NINA LEE AQUINO, ed.

Love + Relationships: A Collection of Contemporary Asian-Canadian Drama.

Volumes I and II. Toronto: Playwrights Canada Press, 2009. Vol. I xi + 307pp; Vol. II xi + 279pp.

NINA LEE AQUINO and RIC KNOWLES, eds.

Asian Canadian Theatre: New Essays on Canadian Theatre.

Volume I. Toronto: Playwrights Canada Press, 2011. xvi + 276pp.

JOSEPHINE LEE

The twelve plays collected in the two-volume set of *Love + Relationships*, the first comprehensive collection of Asian Canadian drama, vary widely in terms of their stories, aesthetics, and production histories. Many of them are what editor Nina Aquino describes as theatrical “milestones” (ix): for example, M.J. Kang’s haunting *Noran Bang: The Yellow Room* was the first play written in North America depicting contemporary Korean diasporic experience. *Miss Orient(ed)*, a biting satire of Filipino

beauty pageants by Nina Lee Aquino and Nadine Villasin, marked the entry of the Carlos Bulosan Cultural Workshop into the realm of professional Toronto theatre. And pioneering playwright R.A. Shiomi's detective story *Yellow Fever* was the first professionally produced Asian Canadian play (first staged in San Francisco in 1982, the play received its Canadian premiere in 1983, by the Canasian Artists Group in Toronto).

These and other dramatic works bring us into the broad terrain of contemporary Asian Canadian politics, raising formative questions of exclusion and racial violence, diaspora and immigration, transnational community, gender and sexuality, and stereotyping and media. Winston Christopher Kam's *Bachelor-Man* addresses queer identities and masculinity in the context of the 1923 Exclusion Act and bachelor communities of Chinese labourers. In *The Plum Tree* Japanese Canadian internment leaves its scar on present-day characters and defines their sense of home, land, and country. Jean Yoon's whimsical valentine to Yoko Ono, *Yes Yoko Solo* and Leon Aureus's hard-hitting *Banana Boys* both explore how cultural stereotype and expectation affect young identities and relationships.

The range of stories attests to the fact that there is no one definitive Asian-Canadian experience, and raises important questions about the theatrical representation of diverse and multinational identities. Set in early twentieth-century Shanghai, Marjorie Chan's *China Doll* imagines how Ibsen's *A Doll House* might inspire a young woman with bound feet. Hiro Kanagawa's riveting *Tiger of Malaya* depicts the Manila War Crimes trial of General Tomoyuko Yamashita. The complexities of intimacy, recognition, and communication are poignantly staged both in Betty Quan's family drama *Mother Tongue* and David Yee's engagingly varied vignettes, *Paper Series*. Such unruly identities and stories don't fit neatly into any one ethnic or racial box. At the same time they test easy claims about universal human experiences by emphasizing how racial, ethnic, cultural, and national differences matter.

In Marty Chan's *Maggie's Last Dance* neither the concerns nor the identities of the thirty-something characters dealing with the romantic fallout of their high school years are recognizably Asian Canadian; at the same time, characters compare their anxieties about love to Quebec separatism, referencing the most visible fracture in Canada's national identity. This subtle allusion to disunity is openly interrogated in the anthology of critical essays, *Asian Canadian Theatre*. Its essays reflect how the politics of race

in present-day Canada are shaped by official policies of contemporary multiculturalism, and how questions about representation and visibility are markedly different from those of a generation ago. Editors Nina Lee Aquino and Ric Knowles note how the “official multicultural script” (ix) demands a certain kind of conformity: “the very mechanisms of visibility that allow it to emerge also paradoxically might undercut its power to change and critique” (viii). Artists of color have redefined a previously all-white field, but Canada’s official image of itself as a “mosaic” also prompts questioning of how visibility is carefully managed.

On one level, this anthology operates as a useful companion to *Love + Relationships*, with essays by Karen Shimakawa, Donald Goellnicht, Jenna Rodgers, and Ric Knowles providing thoughtful commentary on Shiomi’s *Yellow Fever*, Kam’s *Bachelor-Man*, Quan’s *Mother Tongue*, and Aquino and Villasin’s *Miss Orient(ed)*. But the volume also serves as an important reminder that theatre does not just mean scripted drama, and acknowledges the multifaceted nature of production and collaboration. Asian Canadian theatre is examined as a complex and dynamic set of cultural practices, in turns expressive medium, political soapbox, representational media, commodity, and rarefied art form. Xiaoping Li notes the expansion of this term in light of previous understandings of Asian Canadian theatre as limited to either “the transplantation of traditional theatrical forms from places of origin” by immigrant groups or “[o]riginal plays written by Asian Canadians about their experiences in Canada and following the form of European theatre traditions” (11). There is valuable material on the history of Asian Canadian theatrical production, considering the history, mission, and target audience of companies such as Carlos Bulosan Theatre Company and Nightwood Theatre in Toronto, and Concrete Theatre in Edmonton. Xiaoping Li provides a thorough history of Asian Canadian theatre in Vancouver. Thy Phu comments on the improv sketch comedy of Vancouver’s Assaulted Fish and Toronto’s Asiansploitation, and Sean Metzger looks at space, language, and lion dancing in Montreal’s *quartier chinois*.

The volume originated in a 2010 gathering, hosted by Toronto’s fu-GEN Theatre Company, of theatre artists and practitioners with scholars of Asian American theatre, Asian Canadian studies, and Canadian theatre. The excitement of those live conversations is conveyed by the collection’s juxtaposition of scholarly research and artistic reflection. This sometimes leads to uneasiness about the divide between academic theory and

theatrical practice. Actor, playwright, and director Jean Yoon, whom Esther Kim Lee calls “patient zero” in Asian Canadian theatre, extends her critique of mainstream theatre’s inequity of labor to question why the contributors to the anthology are “asked to contribute their time, experience, and talents for no compensation at all?” She comments that “[a] project like this may advance the Art, but at the cost of the individual bleeding time and resources from his or her own work. How is that right? How is that respect?” (85). Yoon draws needed attention to academia’s relative privilege and its occasional neglect of how theatre artists think about work, compensation, and artistic survival.

In general, however, the volume presents scholars and artists as allied in their common goals of advocacy for the arts and their awareness of the deep divisions of racial, ethnic, and cultural politics. Both are concerned with how Asian Canadian visibility is packaged and more radical voices constrained in an era when multiculturalism has become commodified and mandated. While understanding the need to unify under the broad rubric “Asian Canadian,” they express discontent with the management of Asian Canadians into a traditional politics of identity based on recognizable difference and register the tension of, to use Aquino and Knowles’s memorable phrase, “negotiating the space between the rock of disappearance and the hard place of visibility as stereotypically ‘Asian’” (“Introduction” viii). Christopher Lee outlines how the very rhetoric of anti-racism, with its language of “tolerance, citizenship, and inclusion,” distracts the public from “the underlying economic, social, and political causes of racism,” leading to what he calls, adopting Smaro Kamboureli’s term, the “sedative politics” of official multiculturalism (104). Lee eloquently articulates the pitfalls in the celebration of Asian Canadian “firsts,” such as “leaders, professionals, artists, and others who broke long-standing barriers or projects and events that placed Asian Canadians on the map by challenging various forms of racism.” While such achievements indeed merit recognition, they are also part of a political imagination that promotes “a temporality in which a racist past gives way to the present as a moment of contestation in which sustained efforts may lead to a qualitatively different, and better, future” (103). Performer Brenda Kamino is likewise wary of celebratory occasions such as the GENesis conference:

The audience was respectful and enthusiastic and, I fear, hopeful due to our presence both back in the day and at the conference;

however, after the reflection is done and the acknowledgment and gratitude have been expressed, I must ask the required question: where are we as a community, and do we need not only to share our issues and concerns with our own, which was successfully done throughout that wonderful uplifting week, but also to take our collective discoveries to the mainstream community that continues to allow us to ghettoize ourselves? (60)

Kamino emphasizes that “the struggle is only beginning, and without our continued support, vocal questioning, and sabre rattling, we leave those who follow to invent the wheel yet again” (60).

Xiaoping Li’s useful account of Asian Canadian theatre on the West Coast looks both backwards—connecting theatrical work to the aims of Asian Canadian activism in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s—and forwards to the changes in “Asian Canada” in an era of unprecedented immigration and “diasporic consciousness and practices” (13). At stake for Asian Canadian theatre is not just multiculturalism’s countering of Canada as homogeneously “white,” but also new transnational and multi-sited sensibilities. This is demonstrated by Dongshin Chang’s examination of the Kunqu Society (*haiwai kunqu she*) in New York and the Little Pear Garden Collective (*xiao li yuan*) in Toronto, which details the many practices involved in making theatre such as workshops, guest artists, funding sources, and technique, all of which reflect the conditions of mobility and migrancy. Playwright Donald Woo considers the complexity of mixed-race identity, which on the one hand is valued in a global age (“the ability to speak informed by more than one tradition (and culture) is a desirable ‘currency’ from which the mixed-race Asian Canadian artist should be able to profit” [100]). On the other hand, Woo reflects, being only ‘half’ might undermine the writer’s authority as “Asian Canadian.” His line of questioning exposes the overall instability of monolithic racial, ethnic, cultural, and national categories:

How can I write a family drama set in a Chinese Canadian household when I don’t know what it’s like to have a Chinese mother? How can I be taken seriously as an artist if I write about two French Canadian cousins from rural Quebec if I’ve never grown up in a fully Québécois family? (101)

Woo’s questions underscore the pressure on Asian Canadian theatre artists to represent communities and individuals whose political voices have until fairly recently gone unheard. Yet identifying and

correcting this absence again often packages what is Asian Canadian as a coherent and unified entity. To their credit, the editors acknowledge this limitation. For instance, Aquino and Knowles note how the expectation of pan-ethnic unity only highlights the exclusion in their anthology of concerted attention to work on or by South Asian Canadians. Aquino informs readers not to think of the works included in *Love + Relationships* as a set of “greatest hits.” Nonetheless, there are immense pressures here to be both fully representative and definitive in ways that might unintentionally limit the broader public understanding of Asian Canadian theatre.

Perhaps the contribution of these volumes should not be measured, then, so much in the fullness of its coverage, but rather in its presentation of singular, yet significant, moments of connection. In this we might note, as Christine Kim does, the importance of reflecting on the more intimate theatrical encounter. Kim looks at a particular instance of the 2007 Theatre Replacement’s series of six seven-minute monologues, *Bioboxes*. These performances were staged for single audience members, with the actor wearing a small box on her shoulders; audience members could control whether the performer speaks in English or a second language (French, Chinese, German, Italian, Japanese, and Serbo-Croatian). Through examining the “Japanese box” (written and performed by Vancouver-based artist Cindy Mochizuki), Kim turns attention to whether these intimate moments of one-on-one exchange can “generate interest in the mundane intimacies of racialized lives” (189) in order to test the more comfortable limits of multicultural political recognition. Within these three new collections, Kim provides one of many valuable reminders that Asian Canadian theatre can get to the heart of racial, ethnic, and cultural difference, not just in its diverse and momentous public dimensions, but also in the quiet and minute realm of the everyday.

DWAYNE BRENNAN

Our Kind of Work: The Glory Days and Difficult Times of 25th Street Theatre.

Saskatoon: Thistledown Press, 2011. 237 pp.

MOIRA J. DAY

In 1979, national arts reviewer Jamie Portman lauded 25th Street Theatre, and “its irrepressible artistic director,” Andy Tahn, for rising above a perpetual lack of money and facilities to realize a