

The Dramatist Blog

OP/ED: WRITING MY AMERICA

by CHRISTINE TOY JOHNSON



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Christine Toy Johnson – photo by Bruce Johnson

As the country and our industry continue to have a national reckoning about systemic racism, we’ve been emboldened to, even charged with, speaking our truths loudly and clearly in the hopes that our voices will not only at last be heard, but respected and taken seriously.

Reports from the field are not pretty. Discrimination and exclusion based on race, ethnicity, gender, presence or absence of a disability, sexuality, age...it’s been experienced everywhere. And though, of course, there are plenty of good and open minded people in our industry (one that ironically prides itself in being the club where those of us who felt like misfits could actually fit in), micro aggressions, macro aggressions, blatant and hostile acts of othering, the perpetuation of harmful stereotypes, the erasure of cultures, unequitable employment opportunities and everything in between are part of what has been considered the unspoken “normal” American theatre scene.

As an Asian American actor who has had the great and (frankly unusual) good fortune to have been making my living in the industry for my entire adult life, I came to writing later than some and now consider it to be an inexorable part of me, my soul and my creative being. I also have been an active and avid advocate for inclusion in the arts, having served for years in leadership roles for unions, guilds, and non-profit organizations. So, it came as a great surprise to me to have a major epiphany during a panel I moderated for the **Women’s Theatre Festival** in July. Pun Bandhu (actor/producer/co-founder of **AAPAC**), Porsche McGovern (lighting designer/author of a prominent **LORT** stats study on designers & directors) and Pirronne Yousefzadeh (director/associate Artistic Director of **GEVA Theatre**/co-founder of Maia Directors) graciously agreed to talk with me about how we can expand our circles of familiarity in order to create more diverse and inclusive theatre. You know, following the thought that if you look in the same pools, you will only find the same people – and trying to change that course. Because in a lot of theatres across America, sticking to those pools have historically resulted in very homogenous, very un-diverse teams of artists. (See reference to unequitable employment opportunities above.)

Some more truths: our underrepresentation cannot be blamed on this myth that we don’t exist, because this simply is not true. As Pirronne suggested, if people don’t know that we exist, they’re “living under a rock.” But here’s where the biggest light bulb went off for me: Pun pointed out that with so much programming being based on how it aligns (subconsciously even) with the White male gaze of the prominent artistic leadership around our country, so many of our stories are not being included because they do not match those expectations or perceptions, nor can they center them. Understanding that when a play doesn’t “speak to” a gatekeeper it is likely because that gatekeeper has no agency in the world of that play and/or no way to center their own perspective in it has broken open a new level of insight for me. This might seem obvious, and clearly involves the prerogative of said gatekeeper, but what would happen if those who were making these decisions had a wider range of gazes through which to look?

Though I’ve come to accept that expectations of what someone who looks like me “should” be writing don’t always match what I am writing, this new articulation made me realize that for all these years I had not been really, truly taking what Pun pointed out into account. My America, the one I wish to write about and see—viewed through my lens as a sixth-generation Asian American woman who grew up in the suburbs of New York City with an obsession for being an “all American girl”—is not in alignment with many other people’s views of my America, in which Asian Americans are not a part of the fabric of America but instead (subconsciously even) the “perpetual foreigner” and otherized by a society that does not necessarily value a person’s desire to be American and honor the cultural heritage of their ancestors at the same time. My America, the one I wish to write about and see, is a country full of possibilities. Where immigrant journeys are respected, and contributions are acknowledged. Where a person feels like they belong in the place they call home. Where democracy is sacred and compassion is the law of the land. Where the only barriers to access to opportunities lie within our failure to imagine that we can cross them. Where “all men are created equal” includes all men, women and those who prefer not to identify as either. Where love is love is love is love is love. Where our voices can rise in dissent, but also in unity. Where we can be seen for who we are, not rendered invisible for who we aren’t. My America is beautiful and messy and joyous and painful and loving and righteous and welcoming and proud and humble. Ultimately, I don’t believe that my America, the one I wish to write about and see, is so different from those whose majority is in power. So why is there such a disconnect?

The way many of us have internalized the systemic racism and assumptions in our industry runs deep. In casting, when we were told “we just want the best person for the job” as an explanation for not being hired, it was actually freeing to finally realize that because we hadn’t actually had access (philosophically and/or physically) to be considered for that job, how could they possibly know that the best person wasn’t us? Similarly, if we don’t have true access to being considered for production, how can it possibly be known that a story worthy of being told is not one of ours?

Now, I’m smart enough to know that not every play can get produced, and not every play I’ve ever written will find a home. But I do reaffirm now that My America, the one I wish to write about and see, is worth singing about and carrying close to my heart, even if it doesn’t match up with someone else’s idea of what that is or can be. And this new articulation of a problem we’ve been discussing for years suddenly makes me sad, yet also hopeful. Sad because it hits home to realize why so many historically marginalized voices continue to be generalized, otherized, exoticized, and/or dismissed. Hopeful because I suddenly no longer have the burden that I placed on myself years ago, assuming that the stories I want to tell aren’t worthy of being told. Because the truth is, they are.

Like the wide array of gazes out there that, given the opportunity, are ready to see us, we are ready to be seen. Let’s go.

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