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Representation and relevance

Strollers' "Question 27, Question 28" revisits a painful chapter of U.S. history

BY GWENDOLYN RICE

FEBRUARY 20, 2020

RSS



During World War II thousands of families like the Mochidas (above) were confined to camps.

When Jack Nee joined the **Strollers Theatre** board of directors in 2017, he knew little about the community theater. But he was surprised when he looked at the company’s production history. “In over six decades of performances, a grand total of two plays by people of color had been produced,” he says. Now, with its 2019-2020 season, Strollers has doubled that number with productions of *Men on Boats*, by Indian American playwright Jaclyn Backhaus, and *Question 27, Question 28* by Singaporean playwright Chay Yew. “That still isn’t great in the big picture, but it is better than keeping to the status quo. The number can always go up, and it should.”

Nee is directing Chay’s documentary play, *Question 27, Question 28*, which runs at the Bartell Theatre, Feb. 20-22. He’s been intrigued by the script since he first read it

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several years ago. “I’ve read numerous plays by Asian American authors; this is one that seemed necessary, given what has transpired in the U.S. the past few years.” Nee says. “The demonization of certain populations in this country needs to be combated in as many ways as possible.”

Question 27, Question 28, tells the story of more than 120,000 U.S. residents of Japanese descent who were forced to leave their homes and report to internment camps after the U.S. formally entered World War II. One indelible part of their captivity was the “loyalty questionnaire,” which posed two questions to the people who were interned. Number 27 asked about their willingness to serve in the U.S. armed forces, and 28 asked them to swear unqualified allegiance to the U.S. Chay’s script examines the aftermath of the U.S. government’s incarceration of its own citizens, through the actual voices of internees. The entire script comes from verbatim excerpts from oral histories and interviews.

Last year, **Timothy Yu** — a poet and associate professor of English and American studies at UW-Madison — led a “teach in” to protest the Overture Center’s production of *Miss Saigon*. Yu says he was pleased to hear that Strollers was producing *Question 27, Question 28*. “Chay Yew is a major figure in Asian American theater, and he is also an important director who has brought Asian American productions like *Cambodian Rock Band* to venues across the country,” Yu writes in an email to *Isthmus*. “I think it will provide an opportunity to showcase the exciting work being done by contemporary Asian American playwrights to a Madison audience.”

Yu says representations of Asians on Madison stages are rare, and often stereotyped. “Hopefully Overture and other major venues in Madison will see productions like *Question 27, Question 28* as an example of the kind of vision they could bring to their own stages,” says Yu. “There is a whole world of Asian American theater out there that Madison has so far missed out on. It’s time for that to change.”

Nee believes the play has further relevance for our time because of the escalating refugee crisis at the Mexican border. “How can we remain quiet about the violation of human rights being inflicted in the name of America?” says Nee. “Different people are in cages this time, compared to the 1940s. Combating this kind of hatred through art is one form of resistance.”

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