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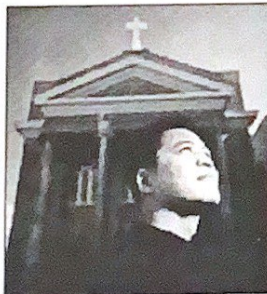
Minority Leaders

From public performances in Santa Monica malls to critically acclaimed shows on mainstream stages, original and culturally diverse plays are reaching wider and younger audiences. Calendar Live! points you to some of the leading ethnic theater groups in Los Angeles.

By **Debbi K. Swanson**,
Special to Calendar Live!



Ethnic theater groups may have started out as an outlet for minorities largely ignored by the mainstream, but this is changing. Long-standing companies such as **East West Players** and the **Bilingual Foundation of the Arts** are evolving to reach across cultures. Larger theater houses are producing minority playwrights in order to attract a younger and more diverse audience. Newer companies like **Cornerstone Theater** are creating a fresh genre.



Tim Dang artistic director
of the East West Players.
*Robert Gauthier/Los
Angeles Times*

"All people have an ethnic background of some kind," says Bill Rauch, Cornerstone Theater's artistic director. "It's important that all of us in theater reposition ourselves so that the norm in theater isn't all white."

Many artistic directors say it's a balancing act to produce plays that not only speak to the issues and lives of a specific group, but also attract the mainstream theater crowd. Their collective goal is to create original material through their own playwright development programs that will be treated with equal regard by the general public.

During the past five years, the Mark Taper Forum, under Artistic Director Gordon Davidson's leadership, started the **Latino Theatre Initiative** (LTI), **Blacksmys** (the Black Playwrights Workshop) and the Asian Theatre Workshop to bring these cultures' stories to the mainstream stage. Leaders of these groups say the time is right, because the stories of a specific culture are really everyone's stories.

"People want to see their own life on stage," says Luis Alfaro of LTI. "So we're trying to create (Latino) work for the American, mainstream theater. We're trying to be leaders of the mainstream, though our history in the community is alternative and radical."



Diane Rodriguez, L. Kenneth Rickardson, and Luis Alfaro. *Karin Johansson / For Calendar Live*

Alfaro and co-founder Diane Rodriguez are known for their alternative backgrounds in gay and comedy theater. LTI's biggest accomplishment to date was bringing Oliver Mayer's "Blade to the Heat" to an audience of 35,000 at the Taper's mainstage in 1996. LTI also has commissioned work by six playwrights.

"We're looking for good writing," adds Rodriguez. "It's been in a box and we're trying to open it up and get it out.

We're shaping a new vision of what it is to live in America."

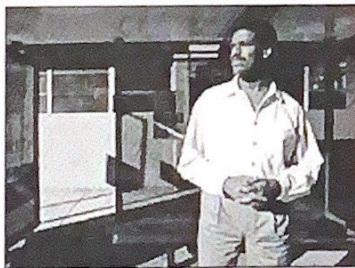
Noted playwright Chay Yew heads the Taper's Asian Theatre Workshop and he, too, advocates cultural crossover to create greater awareness. "The problem I have with certain ethnic theater groups is sometimes those who really need to see it are those of other races," he says.



Chay Yew heads the Asian Theatre Workshop. *Photo by Jose Pombo*

L. Kenneth Richardson heads the Taper's **Blacksmyths** workshop, which is working to promote African American playwrights. Collaborative pieces are presented annually at drama festivals. Yet Richardson says not all of his friends and associates approve of his connection with Taper head Gordon Davidson.

"Some of my friends bluntly ask, 'Aren't you on the plantation in the master's home?' It's not that way," Richardson says. "Gordon doesn't screw with us. He chooses the best people and lets them go."



L. Kenneth Richardson. *Randy Leffingwell / Los Angeles Times*

While the Taper's programs are raw with the edge of new writers, Carmen Zapata, co-founder of the **Bilingual Foundation of the Arts** (BFA) in Lincoln Heights, has blended new work with the Spanish classics for Latino audiences. Now 25 years old and producing four mainstage productions a year, the theater started out with modest intentions.

Before moving to their current space, an old jail, in 1978, Zapata's group resided in the Inner City Cultural Center and treaded lightly with comedies before adding to their repertoire. Mainstage productions are now done alternately in Spanish and English, to "share the beautiful culture with those who don't speak Spanish," says Zapata.

BFA is developing new playwrights' works through the Bilingual's

Reader's Theater, where plays are presented and discussed with the audience and creative team. BFA also produces theater for children and teenagers. With sold-out performances and a less than glamorous industrial neighborhood location, a 299-seat theater on Olvera Street is set to open in 2004.

Now in its new 220-seat **theater** in Little Tokyo, **East West Players'** (EWP) Tim Dang reminds us that Asian American theater is only 33 years old, but continues to evolve. With 65 different Asian Pacific cultures in Los Angeles, EWP tries to select a balanced season of musicals and dramas to appeal to people of those cultures.

And EWP feels it is important to foster cultural crossover however it can, so EWP's David Henry Hwang Writing Institute includes writers of all cultures. The hope is the new work developed there will eventually find its way to the stage, either at EWP or elsewhere.

Dang says African Americans helped pave the way for other minority voices and finds the scarcity of Los Angeles African American theater "astonishing." There are few African American companies, and only one regularly producing theater -- the 5-year-old **Towne Street Theater Company** located in a downtown loft.

ACT-trained Nancy Davis of Towne Street says there is a need for more finely trained African Americans in the theater. Davis hopes to provide that training and have the group grow into a mid-sized downtown theater.

Taking a completely different approach to blending cultures is Santa Monica's **Cornerstone Theater Company**. This group moved here to establish a permanent base after touring the Midwest for several years. They have quickly become one of the city's most distinctive companies producing original work or ingenious adaptations of classics, such as "Everyman," which they performed in a mall. They take theater to the streets, or a warehouse, or a neighborhood, to make a point they felt could best be made in Los Angeles.

"We moved here six years ago to build a bridge between communities on a more regular basis," says Rauch. "L.A. is the United States of the 21st century, because it reflects who we're becoming as a nation."