Foreword

By David Henry Hwang

In 1979, when my first play *FOB* was presented at the Eugene O'Neill National Playwrights Conference in Waterford, Connecticut, the idea of an Asian American play was relatively new. I remember overhearing the sound designer, not knowing I was within earshot, ask the stage manager, "So what are we going to use for this? Chink music?"

Since then, Asian American theatre has come a long way, and now includes many of America's indispensable theatre artists. As usual, one can see the glass as half full or half empty. On the one hand, works by Asian American playwrights have been produced in some of this country's most prestigious not-for-profit theatres, including New York's Public Theater and Los Angeles's Center Theater Group. Moreover, Asian American theatre companies have blossomed across the country. The invaluable *Asian American Theatre Revue* (www.aatrevue.com), at last count, lists more than ninety professional and community groups in North America.

The glass looks less full, however, when we consider that productions of Asian American plays by mainstream theatres remain relatively rare, particularly outside New York City or the west coast. Producers worry that they won't be able to cast these plays, or that audiences may not relate to the stories. As for the Asian American companies, many produce infrequently, and their ongoing futures are uncertain. San Francisco's seminal Asian American Theater Company, for instance, has struggled in recent years to survive.

Still, Asian American theatre continues to grow. I've been particularly impressed by this genre's capacity for change. The term "Asian American," first applied primarily to those with ancestry from a handful of East Asian nations, has itself expanded over the past decades. Similarly, Asian American plays have repeatedly broken new ground to remain relevant and bold.

As a kid in 1960s Los Angeles, when I knew a particular TV show or movie was going to feature an Asian character or storyline, I went out of my way *not* to watch it. It was safe to assume that whatever I saw would make me feel "icky." In those days, Asians and Asian Americans in pop culture could be "good," such as Charlie Chan; or "bad," such as Fu Manchu and various Chinese, Korean and Vietnamese soldiers. They rarely, however, resembled actual human beings. Instead, they were one- and two-dimensional figures, poorly written—literally alien. They were, in a word, inhuman.

In 1965, when the nation's first Asian American theatre, East West Players, was founded in Los Angeles, Asians constituted only about 0.5% of the U.S. population, as opposed to 5% in 2007. Since relatively few Americans came into contact with actual Asians, their primary frame of reference was popular imagery. They assumed that we all lived in, well, Asia, a land about which they knew very little, except that American kids should clean their plates because there were starving kids in China.

The so-called "first wave" of Asian American dramatists, emerging mostly in the 1960s and 1970s, sought to claim cultural space for works neither white American nor foreign-Asian. East West Players, originally envisioned as a showcase for Asian American actors, stepped up to the challenge when its founding artistic director, Mako, realized that the theatre's mission would not be achieved if it did not produce a body of new dramatic work.

In 1968, during East West Player's third season, my mother, Dorothy Hwang, served as the rehearsal pianist for a production of Menotti's operetta *The Medium*, reset in postwar Japan. I was ten years old, with no particular interest in theatre. Given the choice, however, of going to rehearsals or being babysat at my aunt's house, I chose the former. We rehearsed in the basement of a church in the Silver Lake district of Los Angeles. Looking back, I realize I was privileged to have seen Asian Americans as actors, artists and theatrical leaders, and to have witnessed Mako directing one of his first shows.

During the late 1970s, when I started trying to write plays in college, I was inspired by the work of first-wave dramatists such as Frank Chin, C. Y. Lee, Momoko lko and Wakako Yamauchi. I put

together an Asian American arts series at my university, bringing artists to campus. In those pre-internet days, you had to ask around to find out who was doing interesting work. I was told of a singer-songwriter named Philip Kan Gotanda, and called him up to meet. Turned out, we were both interested in writing plays and, since I happened to play electric violin, we also formed a band together. Philip and I became part of Asian American playwriting's "second wave," as did R. A. Shiomi, a Japanese Canadian who brought us up to Vancouver to give a concert. Work, art and friendships blossomed in this underground scene. We never expected that what we were creating would one day be studied in schools, let alone penetrate mainstream American culture.

As a "second-wave" playwright, I found myself writing about identity, as did many of my peers. Once we tore down the stereotypes that mainstream America had imposed on us, what was left behind? Asian America itself was a uniquely *American* construct. In Asia, Chinese people do not see themselves as having a great deal in common with the Japanese or Filipinos. The term, invented in the late 1960s, was in many ways a convenience, unifying Asian people to broaden our political influence. It also, however, reflected the reality that, as a Chinese American, my life experiences were more similar to those of, say, a Japanese American, than to a Chinese person living in Shanghai.

Second-wave writers often searched for the holy grail of authenticity. Freeing ourselves from the racist images that mainstream America had imposed on us, we reasoned, would reveal our true selves. But which truth? Battles raged, with authors and scholars accusing each other of "reinforcing stereotypes" and writing "fake" stories.

Second-wave Asian American dramatists were not a particularly diverse group. We argued that the term "Asian" should replace the colonialist and geographically vague "Orient." However, we did not conceptualize ourselves as coming from the whole of Asia. Rather, the majority of us were of Japanese, Chinese and Filipino descent—in short, that same geographically vague area formerly known as the "Orient." As for mixed-race Asians, we remained a little uncertain about their place in the movement. The playwright Velina Hasu Houston, for instance, whose ancestries encompass Japan, Africa, Cuba and Native American Indians, has written about sometimes having felt excluded.

"Third-wave" playwrights, many of whom are represented in this volume, have expanded the world of Asian American theatre.

My generation, so close to the birth of Asian America, sometimes saw it as the key to the riddle of our identity: I am Asian American, therefore I am. Third-wave writers, who grew up taking the idea for granted, regard ethnicity as simply one piece in a much more complicated mosaic of identity. Their plays explore a wide variety of concerns: from family dramas like *Durango* and *Last of the Suns* to the pop culture/digital dreamscape of *wAve*.

Third-wave writers have largely abandoned the quest for the holy grail of authenticity, since Asian America is neither monolithic nor uniform. No single writer can represent an entire culture; only a community of writers can do that. Moreover, the genre now includes writers whose backgrounds span much more of Asia's actual geography. South Asian, Vietnamese and Korean American dramatists, for instance, are among today's most exciting. Furthermore, with about 14% of Asian Americans self-identifying as multiracial in the 2000 census, our theatre now embraces stories and artists of mixed ancestry.

Second-wave writers were determined to define ourselves as American, not foreigners. Third-wave writers grew up in a shrinking world, with national borders becoming ever less relevant. The immigration story of *Swoony Planet*, for instance, is more fluid than the similar stories of an earlier era; author Han Ong has described his play as a "frequent-flier narrative." Asian American theatre continues to push boundaries.

I am inspired by the writers in this volume, who have questioned assumptions and expanded the palate of our nation's dramatic literature. According to traditional thinking, children learn from their elders. In art, however, it is often the elders who have much to learn from the next generation. *Version 3.0* playwrights have kept Asian American theatre vital. On a personal level, seeing and reading their plays has kept me young.

May 2011
Brooklyn, New York

David Henry Hwang's plays include *M. Butterfly*, *Yellow Face*, *Golden Child* and *FOB*. He is a Tony Award-winner and three-time nominee, a three-time Obie Award-winner, and has twice been a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize.