



FOSTERING AUTHENTIC REPRESENTATION

The 1491s: Ryan RedCorn, Migizi Pensoneau, Dallas Goldtooth, Sterlin Harjo, Bobby Wilson.
Photo by Alexis Munoa Dyer.

By Amelia Acosta Powell

The 2019 season is the first in the Oregon Shakespeare Festival's history to feature plays by living playwrights of color in all three slots in the Thomas Theatre. *Cambodian Rock Band* by Lauren Yee, *Between Two Knees* by the 1491s, and *How to Catch Creation* by Christina Anderson are all revolutionary in myriad ways, some blatant and others subtle. But there is one revolutionary aspect all three share: the playwrights are all telling stories of their own communities, in these cases the Asian American, Native, and African American communities, respectively.

Perhaps that seems simple—that a writer from a certain identity group would be the best person to interpret that group's narrative. Unfortunately, historically marginalized peoples have long been subjected to having their narratives rewritten by the conquerors, the oppressors, the dominant group. The stages of

American theatre have seen far more productions of *The King and I* or *Miss Saigon* than plays written by Asian American writers; far more productions of *Porgy and Bess* or *Once on This Island* than plays by Black playwrights (or at least this was so before August Wilson); and few, if any, Native or Indigenous stories at all, save for cameo appearances of Native characters in stereotype roles like Chief Bromden in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* or Tiger Lily in *Peter Pan*.

OSF has been working to dismantle these inequities for years, producing plays by writers of color every season as well as inviting directors and actors of color to interpret Shakespeare and other Western classics. That said, producing a full slate of stories about communities of color written by playwrights who identify as part of those groups is significant because it fosters authenticity, challenges stereotypes, celebrates the beauty and humanizes the pain. It also creates visibility in order to empower future generations. Thus the 2019 Thomas season represents

a significant milestone on the organization's journey toward fulfilling its mission to "reveal our collective humanity."

What does it mean to foster authentic representation? Not every playwright will have personally experienced everything they write about—what a limited field the theatre would be if that were required. Like a playwright who has never practiced law preparing to write a courtroom drama, a writer portraying a community to which they do not belong can do research and conduct interviews—can even do so with the utmost respect. However, there are certain nuances that they will never understand as an outside observer, even if the approach is absolutely empathetic. Furthermore, there is room for some plays written by someone outside of the community, but a vastly disproportionate number of them have always been produced, and it is, quite simply, past time for communities of color to have the opportunity to have agency over their own narratives.

As August Wilson said in his historic address, *The Ground on Which I Stand*, "We cannot allow others to have authority over our cultural and spiritual products. We reject, without reservation, any attempts by anyone to rewrite our history so to deny us the rewards of our spiritual labors, and to become the culture custodians of our art, our literature and our lives. To give expression to the spirit that has been shaped and fashioned by our history is of necessity to give voice and vent to the history itself."

Wilson deftly summarizes the historical, spiritual and political significance of authentic representation, not only for African American art (about which Wilson was speaking specifically) but also as it applies to other communities of color and marginalized groups. Christina Anderson's play *How to Catch Creation* is such an example of a playwright asserting her own cultural custodianship, to borrow Wilson's apt words. Anderson authentically explores the wide breadth of human experience that her characters encounter, from love to sexuality to art making to re-entering mainstream society after imprisonment to parenthood and legacy. That nuanced, fulsome and robust investigation of the human experience comes from the writer's own deep connection to the people about whom she writes.

On the other side of the authenticity coin, producing plays by writers of color sharing their own cultures' narratives offers

an opportunity to dismantle harmful stereotypes about those groups. Some of these stereotypes appear in plays and other media maliciously in order to damage and control, others appear out of ignorance or lack of exposure, and still others perhaps out of a misguided sense of humor or irony based on the erroneous assumption that ours is a post-racial society.

For an example of the first malicious style of stereotyping, one must look no further than Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*.



Actor Wotko Long in one of his multiple ensemble roles in *Between Two Knees*. Photo by Jenny Graham.

Even if the Bard's original motivation behind the writing of Shylock, the greedy Jew whose only salvation is to convert to Christianity, is not known for certain, it is well documented that the play received more than 50 productions in Nazi Germany between 1933 and 1939. There can be no confusion as to why the title was so popular—the stereotypical portrayal of a Jewish person reinforced the Nazis' political agenda to dehumanize Jewish citizens and assisted in making them a common enemy.

While other examples might not be so overt in their malevolent intentions, the barrage of media portrayals of Black people as slaves, maids or criminals; Asian people as doctors and math geeks (or prostitutes for the American military); and Natives as magical medicine people or alcoholics have real-world ramifications on how people are perceived and treated.

The sketch-comedy group the 1491s not only recognizes and subverts that dynamic, they challenge mainstream audiences to face those stereotypical and harmful images and ideas head-on. In *Between Two Knees*, the writers highlight mainstream expectations of what a Native story might look

like, and then turn those assumptions back on the audience to question, edit and ultimately overturn. Take, for example, the narrator of the play, who is not a Chief, nor a medicine man, just simply a person. "Having traveled across the land I have gained many sacred names from the hundreds of tribal nations I have met on my journeys," he says in the opening monologue, "Names like: Sitting Buffalo. Big Eagle. Punches Kittens. Bad Breath. Tickle Beaver. And Downward Facing Dog. But today, you can call me by my most sacred Indigenous name: Larry."

This signature brand of 1491s comedy is a balancing act—openly acknowledging and naming stereotypes, but using them strategically within a crafted framework that calls out the fallacy of these generalizations, holds perpetrators of them accountable and also corrects history—all while keeping the tone playful

and fun. Walking this fine line is simply not possible for an artist whose lived experience does not expose them to the nuanced realities of living that balance in their daily life.

Just as dismantling stereotypes is the careful, surgical work of those who have the lived experience, so too is the task of deep and broad expressions of a people or culture. So often, portrayals of certain groups are minimized into a limited box that focuses on only the negative, failing to celebrate the beauty of that culture, or on the positive, failing to humanize the pain of that community. While it is certainly important never to forget the dehumanizing history of slavery in the United States, the disproportionate appearance of slave narratives and other depictions of Black pain onstage and in other forms of media disregards stories of Black inventors, Black artists, Black scholars, Black people in love, Black JOY. Similarly, the portrayal of Asians as a model minority who are all mathematicians, doctors and chemists disregards important stories of violence, addiction, imprisonment and traumas large and small. In reality, of course, all people are subject to both extremes, positive and negative, of the human condition, as well as everything in between.

Lauren Yee's *Cambodian Rock Band* captures the full breadth of humanity in one elegant, painful, joyous, moving story. If audiences have any preconceived notions of Cambodia, they are likely rooted in the history of the Khmer Rouge, the regime of the Communist Party led by Pol Pot, who murdered millions of Cambodians. Meanwhile, many audiences may not have any

knowledge of Cambodia at all. It is absolutely important that the history of genocide not be forgotten, ignored or negated. However, there is much more to Cambodia than the violence suffered there under the Khmer Rouge. There is glorious natural beauty, there are resilient people and there is incredible music. Yee captures all of these aspects and more in her play that fearlessly addresses genocide as a global phenomenon and as a

human tragedy, yet also celebrates the beauty of Cambodia, Cambodian people and Cambodian rock music with ferocity, playfulness, joy and love.



Brooke Ishibashi, Jane Lui, Abraham Kim and Moses Villarama in *Cambodian Rock Band*. Photo by Jenny Graham.

The importance of featuring writers who identify with the community that is the subject of a given play goes beyond what those artists bring to the texts themselves. To demonstrate for the next generation of people of color that we get to control our own narratives and tell our own stories is to empower us with agency that has effects on every aspect of our lives. For the young Asian American woman who might be awakened to new possibilities by seeing *Cambodian Rock Band* running all year, with an Asian American playwright, Asian American director and an all-Asian-American cast; to the Native student who might be a class clown but never considered that comedy can be a career until

seeing how the bracing and clever humor of the 1491s five-person Native sketch-comedy team is celebrated in *Between Two Knees*; to the queer Black artist who might never have seen themselves onstage or on the page before *How to Catch Creation*, with a Black playwright, Black director and all-Black cast—these plays will be life-changing.



Riley (Kimberly Monks) and Tami (Christiana Clark) seek out some joy in *How to Catch Creation*. Photo by Jenny Graham.

To return to August Wilson's brilliant speech, *The Ground on Which I Stand*, "We can make a difference. Artists, playwrights, actors—we can be the spearhead of a movement to reignite and reunite our people's positive energy for a political and social change that is reflective of our spiritual truths rather than economic fallacies. Our talents, our truths, our belief in ourselves is all in our hands. What we make of it will emerge from the self as a baptismal spray that names and defines. What we do now becomes history by which our grandchildren will judge us."

May the 2019 Thomas season reignite our positive energy for political and social change, may it reflect our spiritual truths and may it contribute to a history in which the future generations will take pride.