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Joyce Lam is artistic producer of the Vancouver Asian Canadian Theatre.

Chung Chow photo

Richmond Review

Producer found niche in Asian Canadian theatre

By Veronica Lawrence - Richmond Review

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When Joyce Lam of the Vancouver Asian Canadian Theatre Company contacted Neil Simon to see if she could change some parts of his play *The Odd Couple*, the legendary playwright was aghast that she would dare to alter his words, and responded with an emphatic no.

“Hey, I had to ask right?” said Lam.

Lam’s fearless attitude is what led her to a career in theatre in the first place. And it’s this same bravery that convinced Lam to take on an all-Asian interpretation of *The Odd Couple*.

The words and characters are the same, but audience members with a keen eye will spot subtle differences on stage, like a bowl of oranges for good luck (a Chinese superstition) and slippers for guests, alongside the obvious differences. The production also will run Mandarin subtitles above the stage on a large screen to create a more inclusive experience for non-English speaking people from the Chinese community.

“We felt maybe they’re not coming to the theatre because they’re uncomfortable,” said Lam.

Introducing new culture into an old play came easily to Lam, Simon’s reservations aside. She was amazed at

how easily her actors were able to slip on the characters of Oscar and Felix, but also how the subtle cultural differences came just as naturally.

“You bring what you’ve brought with you,” she said of how the actors’ individual cultures affect their portrayals.

The Odd Couple is the story of two friends, the slovenly Oscar Madison played by Ron Yamauchi, and the neurotic neat freak Felix Ungar played by Jimmy Yi, who share an apartment while coping with their respective divorces.

In Lam’s version, Ungar is a recent immigrant to Canada who still abides by old Chinese traditions and Oscar is a lifelong Canadian resident with a Japanese heritage and a more nontraditional approach to life.

The actors in the play get to stretch their funny bones, as well as their acting talent while portraying these familiar characters.

Lam said many Asian actors typically wouldn’t be offered the opportunity to act in a Neil Simon play because directors are often unable to look beyond colour lines.

But creating an environment where only Asian actors can participate made it possible for Lam to do something unconventional with a conventional story.

“We’re like the stepping stone to give them the experience to get to the mainstream,” said Lam.

Creating opportunities for Asian actors is the reason Lam created the Vancouver Asian Canadian Theatre Company.

Years ago, she heard about an all-Asian comedy troupe from Seattle and was surprised to hear about how funny they are.

So she invited them to Vancouver to do a show in her hometown. The night was a rousing success and Lam discovered there is an audience for all-Asian entertainment, she just needed to find the performers.


Since then, Lam has organized various well-known productions around Vancouver including the popular Sex in Vancouver series, loosely based on the TV show Sex and the City, but with an all-Asian cast. Lam said the success of the productions is based on one simple fact about culture.

“We are more similar than we are different,” she said.

Eight years after the inception of the Vancouver Asian Canadian Theatre Company, Lam has few regret—only ambitions to make the company larger and more successful.

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