

A Voice of One's Own: Setting the Stage with Specific Authenticity

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Writers write about themselves, we are told. Yet for reasons dictated by “the market” or the “mainstream” or the ever shifting parameters of “universality,” a writer’s subjectivity is often asked to realign itself. This new, acquired lens envisions a “dominant,” more “representative” voice, one rendered “accessible” to the “broadest” imagined audience. It is heartening to know that playwright Philip Kan Gotanda rejects that trajectory, and locates his voice in a place he calls “specific authenticity.” In aligning the lived with the enacted, Gotanda centers his life as a third generation Japanese American (“Sansei”) as the vantage point from which he writes plays, asserts a world view, and explores intersections with other communities, evidenced so poignantly in *Yohen*.

The term “specific authenticity” resonates powerfully for me as it corresponds so fittingly to our aesthetic here at Silk Road Theatre Project. One of the many characteristics that make Silk Road unique amongst Chicago theatre companies is our adherence to what I call the playwright/ protagonist imperative. The playwright must be of a Silk Road background (Asian, Middle Eastern, Mediterranean), and a central character, or the play’s protagonist, must also hail from said background. It is a principle that guides me in selecting the plays we produce, telling stories from within. If it’s a well crafted play, it invites us all “within.”

On the flip side, refurbished colonial literature, vintage tourist manuals, and Orientalist reproductions need not apply. In conceptualizing Silk Road’s mission, I spent considerable time pondering the idea of “authorial voice”: that subjective arena from which the act of defining and representing oneself becomes possible. And it was around the idea of self-representation that a thesis emerged, obvious as it may sound: representation begins at home. A playwright is informed and inspired by the cultural milieu in which he is raised. As for nature or nurture, the jury is out. But family, community, ethnic heritage, religion, all become imbedded in our creative DNA. And it is our relationship to that we generically call “background” that is transmitted, consciously or otherwise, in the stories we create. Whether we understand our “insider” relationships, our communal reference points, in terms positive or negative, congenial or conflicted, healthy or dysfunctional, mixed and complex, is beside the point. The point lies in that which is written onto us and that we decide to rewrite.

At Silk Road Theatre Project we have committed to dramatizing the specific authenticities of Silk Road peoples and their Diaspora communities. Which isn’t to say a writer can’t write whatever the hell she pleases, regardless of background (we do still have the First Amendment, thank God!), but for our purposes here, we’re interested in voices that are specific and authentic to the commitment that distinguishes us most. It is a commitment that suits me well. As artistic director I’m drawn to that which is particularly specific, peculiarly authentic, and painstakingly personal in a playwright’s process and product. I search for background in the foreground, in the subtext, in the footnotes, in the blank spaces. And when it opts not to be seen, when it insists on hiding, I’ll be damned if I don’t catch a glimpse. As for Philip Kan Gotanda, he won’t be found hiding anywhere. Specific authenticity makes certain of that.