

Singing songs of 'Four Immigrants'

TheatreWorks staging world premiere of Min Kahng's new musical

BY JOHN ORR
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Lots of people are excited about the new musical that is getting its world premiere at TheatreWorks Silicon Valley on Saturday, especially the people who are making it happen: playwright and composer Min Kahng, director Leslie Martinson, and the cast.

"Everybody is so excited," said Kahng in a recent interview. "New musicals for Asian actors are hard to come by. There's only a handful of Asian roles, and not too many new roles for Asians."

This is not a small issue for Asian actors.

Just think back to when "Miss Saigon" debuted in London in 1989 then moved to Broadway in 1991 with a white British actor, Jonathan Pryce, in "yellow face," playing an Asian.

David Henry Hwang later wrote a very funny play, "Yellow Face," which was eventually staged at TheatreWorks, that dealt with that issue. In that play, an Asian playwright accidentally casts a white man in an Asian role, which has expanding repercussions.

No such problem for "The Four Immigrants," which is based on Henry Yoshitaka Kiyama's 1931 comic book, "The Four Immigrants Manga: A Japanese Experience in San Francisco, 1904-1924," which tells of four young Japanese men in America.

Kahng, born in San Francisco, the son of Korean immigrants, found the book in a used bookstore in Berkeley.

"The title caught my attention," he said. "Then I saw it happened in the Bay Area and had Asian lead characters. And that there was an emotional arc to the story that would work well. I decided to use it as source material."

The script is charming and fun, and calls for a stage to be



Kevin Berne / TheatreWorks Silicon Valley

Charlie (Hansel Tan, center left), makes some quick money at Bakkapei Bao's gambling house in Min Kahng's "The Four Immigrants: An American Musical Manga," presented by the TheatreWorks Silicon Valley at the Lucie Stern Theatre in Palo Alto, through Aug. 6.

populated by comic-book frames, with actors popping into and out of the frames to perform various scenes. It follows the fate of four immigrants from Japan, including Henry, an artist. They have a number of adventures and misadventures.

Part of the script's charm is that it is in straight English when the characters are supposedly speaking Japanese to each other, but in broken English when Americans are speaking to them. It's fun, and clever.

"It's the most fun I've had in rehearsal in a long time," said Martinson, who is associate artistic director at TheatreWorks, "and also challenging, because its a world premiere. Normally when directing a play, it's a little like exploring a

big house — here's a window, are there ghosts in the attic, that sort of thing.

"With a world premiere, it's like we're standing in a big field with a set of blueprints under your arms. Sometimes you change the music, sometimes you change something theatrical."

The play was born at and developed with lots of help at TheatreWorks.

"It's been great," said Kahng. "TheatreWorks has been so supportive from the start. I wrote the first 10 minutes at a TheatreWorks writers retreat in 2014. TheatreWorks has been part of the show since the first words were written, produced the first stage reading

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Courtesy of TheatreWorks Silicon Valley

A frame from the book "The Four Immigrants Manga: A Japanese Experience in San Francisco 1904-1924," by Henry Yoshitaka Kiyama, translated by Frederik L. Schodt, published by Stone Bridge Press, Berkeley.

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in 2015, made it part of the New Works Festival in 2016."

Kahng said he doesn't feel anxious about the premiere. "One of the great things about Leslie as a director is she makes everybody in the room feel that we're moving well, keeping us calm, making the show as good as it can be."

Kahng, who lives in Alameda with his husband, was a music major at Cal Berkeley.

"I've always written songs, and I've always thought about creating stories for the stage. I ended up hearing both the spoken word and the music, and grew up wanting to fuse those two. It's not much different from just being a playwright. I just also have that different language of music.

The all-Asian cast features four men who play the immigrants, and four women who play everybody else. "About 99 roles," said Kahng.

"There's a lot of coming in and out."

There are layers to the story, Kahng said. "The comic-book layer, the text that Henry created — I have no idea of these experiences are real, I have no idea if



Kevin Berne / TheatreWorks Silicon Valley

Kerry Keiko Carnahan, left, and James Seol in "The Four Immigrants."

the Henry he created in the book is real or stylized — and also, the true story of Henry Yoshitaka Kiyama, who lived and worked in San Francisco. There's not much we know about him, other than what he told us. Then, there is the other layer, that Henry is part of this first-generation history, of immigrants from Japan. There are not as many first-person accounts as we would like. I hope to honor all those layers as best as I can."

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