

in riot gear broke through the human barricade around the hotel and forcibly evicted the remaining tenants.

4. An ethnic tribe in the Philippines from northern Luzon.

5. An epic poem first published in *Liwanag: Literary and Graphic Expressions by Filipinos in America* (San Francisco: Liwanag, 1975).

6. Fermented shrimp/fish paste used as a condiment.

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#### **Selected Works by Al Robles**

*Looking for Ifugao Mountain*. Illustrated by Jim Dong. San Francisco: Children's Book Press, 1977.

"The Fall of the I Hotel." San Francisco: CrossCurrent Media/National Asian American Telecommunications Association, 1983. Videorecording.

"Hanging on a Carabao's Tale." *Amerasia Journal* 15, no. 1 (1989): 195-218.

*Rappin' with Ten Thousand Carabaos in the Dark*. Los Angeles: UCLA Asian American Studies Center, 1996.

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### *Philip Kan Gotanda*

**Interview by**

**ROBERT B. ITO**

Philip Kan Gotanda began his career as a playwright in 1979 with *The Avocado Kid*, a rock musical adaptation of the Japanese fairy tale *Momotaro*. Since then he has written numerous plays dealing with the Japanese American experience, including *A Song for a Nisei Fisherman*, *The Dream of Kitamura*, *Yankee Dawg You Die*, and *The Wash*. He has received a National Endowment for the Arts fellowship, three Rockefeller Playwriting Awards, a McKnight Fellowship, and the 1989 Will Glickman Playwriting Award. In addition to his busy schedule as a playwright and director, Gotanda also wrote, directed, and starred in the short film *The Kiss* and recently finished production on a jazzy film noirish spoken-word piece, *in the dominion of night*.

I met with Gotanda on three occasions, and he generously supplied me with production copies of almost all his plays, including works that were either out of print or currently in production. When I met with him in 1993, he was overseeing theatrical productions in both Los Angeles and New York. He spoke about how he had "fallen into" writing plays and

about his desire to return to two of his former loves, film and music. After discussing his early career playing in a rock band with fellow Asian American artists David Henry Hwang and Sam Takamoto, he talked about small-town racism, his Nisei parents, and growing up Sansei in Stockton, all topics that led into a discussion about “the camps.”

**RBI** Many of your plays deal with the Japanese American internment experience. Did your parents talk much about the camps?

**PKG** When I was growing up, they didn’t talk about it; they were rather traditional in that way. They would talk a little about the good times, every now and then refer to the positive stuff—my father would talk about fishing—but beyond that not very much conversation about it. But, when these organizations like the Daughters of the American Revolution, Native Sons, would come by asking for donations, my mother would lecture them. As a kid I remember wondering, Why is my mom doing this? She was rather fearless. She would lecture them, saying, “It’s because of you people we were put in the camps; why should I give you money?”

**RBI** Were you ever confused about what your parents were talking about, when they would talk about camp and you would think “summer camp”?

**PKG** No, I never thought that. I know other friends have said that they thought they were talking about some big summer camp that everyone went to, one summer, and they just stayed for a long time. People always ask each other when they meet, “What camp were you in?” or, “What camp was your father in?” No, I always thought that it was a peculiar event that had a certain aspect of being not so good, but, beyond that, I just let it go. As you get older, you figure out certain things, so, by the time I was about twelve, I already

kind of knew what it was.

**RBI** How has the camp experience affected your sense of self-identity as a Japanese American and a playwright?

**PKG** My parents’ camp experience continues to inform my work and life both on a conscious and on an unconscious level. I’ve exploited themes of its psychic scar in *American Tattoo* (1982), the subsequent internalized racism being passed on from generation to generation in *Fish Head Soup* (1986), and its immediate psychological aftermath in *Sisters Matsumoto* (1999).

**RBI** Was there any resistance from your family when you decided to become a playwright?

**PKG** Yes and no. On one hand, I was raised with a lot of exposure to the arts—took a lot of piano lessons, violin lessons, painting lessons—and I played in bands all my life as I was growing up, all through junior high and high school and college. And there was never an active discouragement of that, but there was this expectation that, at some point, when I got down to a career, I was going to be a doctor. Even though it wasn’t mentioned, it just was assumed that I was going to be a doctor because they assumed everyone in my family was going to be a doctor. So, once I began to move away from that, there was a certain sense of disappointment from my father, strong disappointment. And what I began to realize was that he was never going to understand and that’s simply him looking at me through his world. He grew up on the island of Kaua’i, a huge family struggling to find a career, to find the American dream. To him, the idea of becoming an artist made no sense (how does one feed oneself?). That’s a luxury that, in his lifetime, he didn’t have. And that’s a luxury he afforded me because he went through what he went through, but, at some point, as I got older, I realized that it

was unfair of me to expect him to give up his world to understand mine.

He passed away a couple of years ago. He had started to accept my career as a playwright even though I think on some level he never fully understood it. And that was fine. I think that, when you're younger, it's important that your parents totally understand what you're doing, and for me, at least in my relationship with my father, I finally realized on some level that he just couldn't. He would come to see my plays, and that's more than I could ever ask of him. If I ever have a child, that might be more than I might be able to do. To make the jump from where he came from and what he went through to survive and accomplish to showing up at one of my plays around a lot of young Asian Americans watching this thing called theater, which was never a part of his life, never a part of his vocabulary. And yet he would show up. My mother, on the other hand, was much more comfortable with a lot of these notions of art and its pursuit.

**RBI** Do you think you would discourage your own kids from going into the arts?

**PKG** Well, you know, I can sort of understand why parents say that to kids now because, having tried to make a living at this for almost twenty years, I know it's simply not easy, and, quite frankly, the majority of those people who set out to make a living as an artist don't make a living. The majority are not able to pursue their work full-time; it's a very rough life. There are certainly rewards that one gets, but it's a very, very tough life. What Mom and Dad said was true: It's gonna be really hard. How are you going to feed your family, your children? How are you going to feed yourself? You're used to a certain lifestyle, it's fine now, but what about when you're thirty, forty, struggling, and it's not gonna be much fun? And, you know, it's true; it's not fun.

**RBI** Do you ever worry that people might mistake the parent-son conflicts in many of your plays with your own relationship with your parents?

**PKG** Actually, I know people do because, after *The Wash* came out, they were surprised my mother was still alive. They'd meet my mom and go, "You're still alive!" and she'd answer, "Yes. For a long, long time now." No, I don't actually. Maybe early on I used to, but now, as a working writer, I don't think about that too much. I do know people within the Japanese American community get upset sometimes when I talk about certain things.

**RBI** Dirty laundry.

**PKG** Yeah, dirty laundry stuff, the fact that these characters are not necessarily . . . healthy people. In *Fish Head Soup* it's a very dysfunctional family. I think they're really interesting families, but they're not your role models. But that to me doesn't matter as much as that they're interesting people. I think they're interesting families *and* dysfunctional. As are a lot of people in our community.

**RBI** Do you write with the Japanese American community in mind?

**PKG** I used to answer this differently. I used to say, No, I don't have any particular audience in mind, but, at least right now, I always do sort of think it's an Asian audience. It's not conscious, although I think my feeling is always that there are Asian Americans who will be looking at this and responding to it. But maybe it's because of the characters that I write about; I always see the world filled with Asian characters. In my newest play, there are no specific Asian American themes per se, but all the characters are Asians; it's just filled with all these people who are Asians.

So I guess that, in terms of an audience, I'm not sure. But

I do know that I don't try to write for an audience. Ultimately, I'm just trying to tell the story, and, as I'm trying to tell the story, in the back of my mind, I think I see Asian American faces out there. But it's more what I see as opposed to what I'm writing. I absolutely think that you should not try to write for an audience. I think that's dangerous for a writer. Tell the truth of what you're trying to tell, and that'll take care of it.

I'm always worried about writers who feel they have to change their work to accommodate people outside their Asian American group. I find that sad, that people would ever consider that. Stop writing if you're going to do that, you know; go write for television. Because you just should not in any way change it for that reason. You can change it for other reasons, but not that.

My sense is just to write as specific to the world as possible, and, at some level, the audience has to come to you. And, in terms of the work you've been doing and the body of work you've created, part of the exchange is that you learn from each other. It's like the whole idea that there exist these Asian American communities in America, all so different and varied, but they exist, and they're whole worlds unto themselves, and, as you walk down the street, you may look and think and not realize that this person walking up the street returns home, to a family, to a relationship to food and his or her god, to his or her cousins and his mother's mother that extends back and back and back, to a whole world of psychology, philosophy, politics. And it isn't just this one person walking down the street. And, on some level, it's your responsibility to figure out that world. If that story bends over backward to accommodate and reduce that world to the lowest common denominator, then everyone's lost in terms of being able to enter into other people's worlds and understand them. What happens when you change it to accommodate things or allow other people to change your work? You end up with

what you see in films or on television: stick figures, creations that have nothing to do with us but rather a national need for a scapegoat, or a sophisticated racist cartoon that walks and talks a little more in the nineties, but ultimately has little to do with us.

**RBI** *Yankee Dawg You Die* is a play you did about the experiences of two Asian American actors in Hollywood, and it deals with these same issues of artistic integrity. When you wrote Vincent's defense of the demeaning "Charlie Chop Suey" roles that many veteran actors played, did you have any particular actor in mind?

**PKG** The play actually draws from a lot of people; there's no one person in any reference. People continue to come up to me and say, That's so and so. Guy Lee came up to me, "That's about so and so, isn't it?" and I said, Well, not really. It's drawn from a lot of different actors.

**RBI** How did you come up with the idea for the play?

**PKG** The play comes out of my first experiences doing theater with the Asian American Theater Company and the East West Players, companies that had come out of the Asian American movement. The plays were supposed to be political expressions, cultural expressions, trying to find the language, theatrical language, to say what we were and are. And, as a writer, you're put in the middle. I'd be sitting with these older actors, and they'd always go on and on about the young actors, and how they just don't know what it's like to be a professional and to work in the industry and what it was like before, and it's so easy to point fingers, but wait, wait until they start to work in the industry, they'll find how hard it is. And then to hear the younger actors go on and on about how, I can't believe it, did you see so and so, the role that he did, I can't believe how these guys can do that. So this play was supposed to be a tribute to Asian American actors and the

situation that I felt they were all placed in. Put them in a room, and let them talk to each other, and see what happens.

**RBI** In the play, Vincent defends his participation in racist movies to his younger colleague by saying that he and other veteran Asian American actors “built the mountain, as small as it may be, that you stand on so proudly looking down at me” [p. 98]. Do you think Vincent’s defense is a valid excuse?

**PKG** Personally, I don’t think it is an excuse. If an actor knows he or she is doing a role that is, on some level, demeaning to Asians or is helping contribute to a climate of anti-Asian sentiment in the country but willingly takes the role—that’s not good. Because [the racists] are going after us. And not only are they going after us—they’re consciously trying to make us disappear or misrepresenting us in the media, thereby making us disappear by being other than what we really are. That makes us easy targets and also affects how we perceive ourselves and how we deal with racist acts. And it’s no longer a matter of just being called a name: it’s a matter of being shut out of everything. Shut out of all political and cultural systems in the most basic ways—even being killed. And so for somebody to say now, “I’m sorry, I can’t worry about how Asians are being perceived, I can’t worry about issues that deal with anti-Asian violence, hate crimes, I can’t worry about that, I just have to make a living”—that’s no longer a position one can hold. People have to be held accountable.

**RBI** How do you react when you see some of these obviously talented Asian American actors—actors who have done strong work in your own plays—being forced to take some pretty weak film roles?

**PKG** That’s something that you should ask the actors about. I talk to them, and I think I know their work well, but it’s sort of tragic that you have someone like Nobu McCarthy, who’s an extraordinary actress, and yet, in film and television, she’s

offered very, very little. There are a lot of wonderful actors running around—all ages, all shapes, all sizes—who just are never afforded the opportunity. And this sets up all sorts of peculiar situations where, if you’re never afforded the opportunity and you’re wonderfully talented, when you get that one shot, you’re all nervous. You have one little window, you have one little audition to show exactly what you can do for this one role that’s come along that everyone wants, and you may not be able to relax enough to put your best foot forward, in terms of both a moment on screen or in the audition. You don’t get enough opportunities to continually go up because that’s all part of the game, too. Or enough opportunities so that, when you’re in front of the camera, you know how to work it. Or you aren’t given a shot by a director who won’t allow you to take your moment.

It’s sort of the Vincent thing: you take your moment. That’s a big deal, you know. Talk to someone like Sab [Shimono]. He talks about taking your moment. So you’re on there for just a short time playing a North Vietnamese general. They’re trying to get you on and off real quick, and you’re thinking, “Gee, you know, thirty years doing this, and I have this one shot. There are a lot of things I’ve thought about in terms of what this character should do, so let me take my moment. It may be a small thing to everyone else, but I’m an actor, in a drama, and people don’t get that.”

**RBI** An audience member at an Asian American film conference that you attended at UCLA referred to a lot of these same kinds of concerns for Asian artists and actors as “whining.” How would you respond?

**PKG** I think the idea of whining is sort of a subjective comment; it depends on your point of view, right? What he perceives as whininess I might perceive simply as an honest appraisal of the situation and pointing to the problems so we can go about rectifying them. How can you talk about Asian

Americans involved in filmmaking without talking about the idea that we either don't exist or aren't given the opportunities to succeed? And, when given opportunities as actors, we're given roles that are shitty, roles that force you into a position where you either make a living doing what you've studied all your life for and risk angering your community or just don't work. That's what *Yankee Dawg* is about, although in the play the decisions are never that clear-cut. You have to own up and be responsible for what you do; that I feel absolutely. But it's not that clear-cut.

**RBI** What do you think of the current state of Asian American theater?

**PKG** As far as the institutions themselves, they're having a hard time. No monies, and an identity crisis over who they are and what they're supposed to be saying as we hit the year 2000. When you have bigger, better-funded white institutions doing the programming you used to do and are still trying to do with only a fraction of those theaters' budgets, you've got to be fiscally creative and philosophically rigorous to survive and to justify your existence to a society that is becoming increasingly sophisticated and balkanized in matters of race and culture. It will be interesting to see where everything lands in the next few years.

**RBI** What do you think of the segregation of American theater into mainstream and "other"?

**PKG** As it represents only what America thinks as a cultural nation, why should that seem surprising? The same issues that need to be addressed in the country are the same ones that American theater is trying to cope with.

**RBI** *Fish Head Soup* is about a Sansei son who returns to his family to make a film about their lives. In addition to standard Hollywood roadblocks, the son even faces opposition to the film from his mother, who tries to talk him into doing a more

"normal" story, one "not just about Japanese Americans." Do you think this is a fairly common feeling within the Japanese American community, that there just isn't an audience for Japanese American films?

**PKG** The play explores internalized racism, so obviously she is buying into the idea that no one would be interested in a story just about Japanese Americans; you have to include one white character because that's what makes it interesting to other people. Dorothy's a very interesting character in that she is proud of being Japanese and Japanese American and at the same time she also buys into the idea of being a second-class citizen. She believes something is happening beyond them in white culture that is perhaps . . . better and that any kind of alignment with it gives you a certain stamp of credibility. It's a very complicated psychological mind-set but one that I've certainly come across a lot in the Japanese American community, where there's a strong love-hate relationship with the dominant white culture. This would be an expression of it in concrete terms that I've found among a lot of Asian American artists. They say to the community, "We've been slogging around here trying to do our work, and no one supports us. The moment we have some success out in 'white culture' and the press acknowledges it, then in the community everyone goes, Oh, you're a big artist, you're a big celeb, you're a star, we want to come see your work." It's only once you get the stamp of approval from 'the white press and white culture,' outside the community, that you are ever given any credibility and are ever seen in the eyes of the community as being truly an artist. So it's that kind of thing that I've certainly felt and that a lot of other artists have complained about.

**RBI** With the amount of publicity that *Miss Saigon* and *Rising Sun* received, do you think that white audiences are at least a little more aware of some of these issues?

**PKG** Yes, I think more people are aware of them. Everyone says that now the upside is that people are going to be a little more careful in the future. And it is true, now, when all the critics talk about *Rising Sun*, they all talk about the Asian Americans who are protesting and offer some kind of opinion on it. And I'm sure their opinions also take into consideration the whole *Miss Saigon* struggle. But, for me, I think the more things change, the more they stay the same. So many people just don't get it. Asian Americans still remain very fringe. There are ways we're treated and perceived, particularly in my field, in entertainment and in films, that just make me so angry; they just lack so much knowledge and sensitivity to who and what we are.

**RB1** How do you think Asian Americans should respond?

**PKG** For me, the only way to deal with this is to speak out, to say what you have to say. You cannot be silent. And to create new works—put your own works out there, and don't wait for anyone to come to you and offer anything to you. Don't wait for anyone to say, "We're going to help you," because I'd say, in the grand scheme of things, they won't because, ultimately, they don't know how to. They really just don't know how to.

#### **Selected Works by Philip Kan Gotanda**

*A Song for a Nisei Fisherman*. Directed by David Henry Hwang and presented at the Fort Mason Center, San Francisco, 15 August–21 September 1980. Included in the collection *Fish Head Soup*.

*The Avocado Kid*. A musical directed by Dee K. Carmack and presented at the Chinese Cultural Center, San Francisco, 16 May–28 June 1981.

*The Dream of Kitamura*. Directed by David Henry Hwang and presented in San Francisco 19 June–25 July 1982.

*Fish Head Soup*. Directed by Oskar Eustis and presented at the Berkeley Repertory Theatre, Berkeley, Calif., in 1991. Also presented in Los

Angeles by the East West Players in association with the Mark Taper Forum in January 1993. Reprinted in the collection *Fish Head Soup*.

*Yankee Dawg You Die*. New York: Dramatists Play Service, 1991. Included in the collection *Fish Head Soup*.

*The Wash*. Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann, 1992. Included in the collection *Fish Head Soup*.

*Day Standing on Its Head*. New York: Dramatists Play Service, 1994.

*The Kiss*. 1994. A short film presented at the Sundance and Edinburgh International Film Festivals and available through the National Asian American Telecommunications Association; it won the Golden Gate Award at Edinburgh.

*Fish Head Soup*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1995. A collection including *Fish Head Soup*, *A Song for a Nisei Fisherman*, *The Wash*, and *Yankee Dawg You Die*.

*The Ballad of Yachiyo*. New York: Dramatists Play Service, 1996.

*Drinking Tea*. 1996. A short film presented at the Sundance Film Festival and available through the National Asian American Telecommunications Association.

*Sisters Matsumoto*. Directed by Sharon Ott and presented at the Seattle Repertory Company in 1999.

*Tohen*. Directed by Anne Bowen and presented in Los Angeles by the East West Players at the Robey Theater in 1999.

INTERSECTIONS

Asian and Pacific American  
Transcultural Studies

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General Editor

*Words*

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CONVERSATIONS  
WITH  
ASIAN AMERICAN  
WRITERS

Edited by King-Kok Cheung

*University  
of Hawai'i  
Press  
Honolulu*

*in association  
with UCLA  
Asian American  
Studies Center  
Los Angeles*



© 2000 University of Hawai'i Press  
All rights reserved  
Printed in the United States of America  
05 04 03 02 01 00 5 4 3 2

Library of Congress

Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Words matter : conversations with Asian American  
writers / edited by King-Kok Cheung

p. cm. — (Intersections)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-8248-2134-3 (acid-free paper). —

ISBN 0-8248-2216-1 (pbk. : acid-free paper).

I. American literature—Asian American authors—  
History and criticism—Theory, etc. 2. Authors,  
American—20th century—Interviews. 3. Asian  
Americans—Intellectual life. 4. Asian Americans  
in literature. 5. Asian Americans—Interviews.

6. Authorship. I. Cheung, King-Kok, 1954—

II. Series: Intersections (Honolulu, Hawaii)

PS153.A84W67 2000

810.9'895'0904—dc21

99-36654

CIP

University of Hawai'i Press books are printed on acid-  
free paper and meet the guidelines for permanence and  
durability of the Council on Library Resources.

Designed by Barbara Pope Book Design

Printed by The Maple-Vail Book Manufacturing Group

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