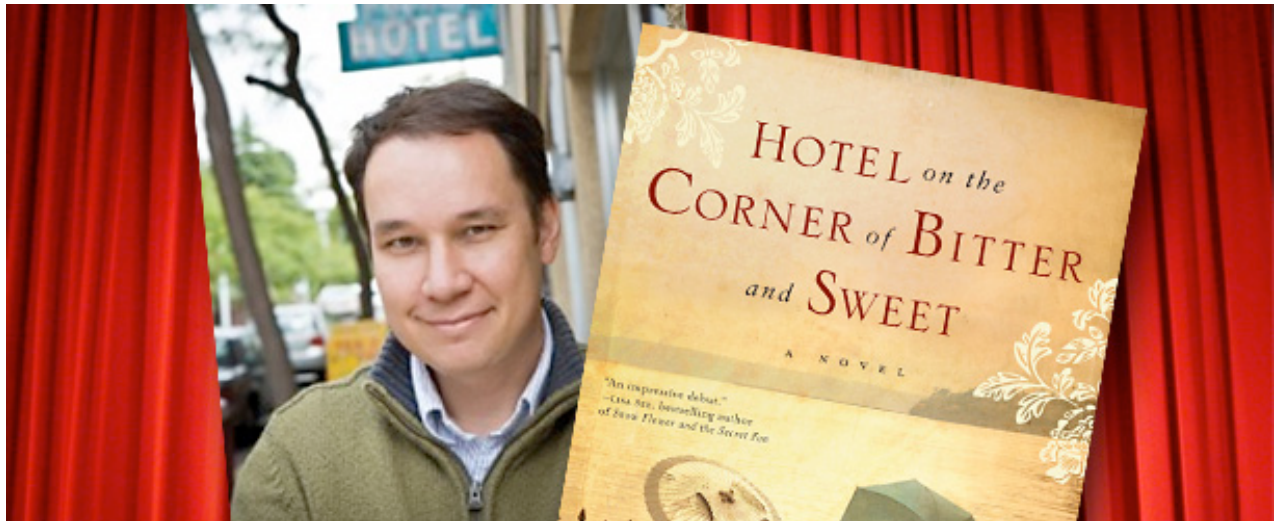


It's Open Curtains for Jamie Ford's "Hotel" Turned Play

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A novel set in Seattle's Chinatown is coming to a local theatre stage near you.

Book-It Repertory Theatre presents an original adaptation of Jamie Ford's popular novel "Hotel on the Corner of Bitter and Sweet," featuring numerous local actors.

Book-It's Education Director Annie Lareau reports that this project came about unexpectedly. "We had previously thought the rights to 'Hotel' were taken," she says.

But then, Lareau says, "I was on the phone with an agent about another book we were seeking rights to, when the agent mentioned that Jamie's book was up for grabs." The Book-It staff's decision was quick. "All of us had read it; it was a no-brainer."

From there, the process of adapting the novel for the stage went through several phases. "We had three official workshops for which I invited professional actors to come and read the script," Lareau says. "The artistic staff gave me feedback and I went back to the drawing board each time and produced another script."

Lareau says she sought feedback from a diverse group: "I was able to get lots of

opinions and thoughts from a variety of folks, many of whom are part of the Asian community here in Seattle and can see cultural issues more clearly than I can.”

Included in this group is Ford himself, once the adaptation process was complete. “Jamie was particularly wonderful,” Lareau says, “in that he came all the way to Seattle to sit in our first rehearsal, meet the cast and listen to our first reading. He was very pleased with what he witnessed and is now waiting ‘til opening night to be surprised.”

Lareau hopes that this will start a long relationship between Ford and Book-It. “I am a huge fan of his work, his language, and his stories, and it would be a great honor to continue to work with him.”

In this adaptation, Lareau has focused on combining the thread’s of Ford’s story with the Book-It “style” of presenting literature onstage. “This style of theatre, instead of creating the world on stage fully, has the ability to use the author’s language to create the world for each audience member individually, much like a book,” she says.

“Though we solidify some images via our casting choices or set choices,” Lareau elaborates, “the details of the world are left to the audience to create in their own minds.”

For this show, the casting choices included the Seattle acting community. “It was very important to me to cast and use all local Asian American actors,” Lareau explains. “One, because there just isn’t enough work in Seattle for them in our theatre community to showcase their incredible talent, and two, because this is a local story and I felt it was imperative that we told it with local people.”

One of those actors is Kathy Hsieh, who has performed with Book-It twice before. “Having read many, many novels and books about the internment,” Hsieh says, “I think what I love most about ‘Hotel on the Corner of Bitter and Sweet’ is that the many diverse communities that made up this particular Seattle neighborhood at the time are included in the story. Jamie covers not only the Japanese American experience, but also that of the Chinese and Black experience as well.”

Hsieh reports that the rehearsal process has been a learning experience for the actors. “The role I play, Mrs. Lee, is actually a lot more complex than I ever imagined when I read the book,” she says. “I’ve been discovering so much about what it was like being a Chinese woman during this time period. It’s amazing how very little is written and documented about the wives and mothers in Chinatowns.”

The biggest challenge for Hsieh is linguistic. “I speak Mandarin and the characters

are Cantonese so having to learn the Cantonese is an interesting challenge,” she says. “And in the book, Jamie writes that they’re speaking in Cantonese, but of course it’s written in English. But on stage, it’s much harder to create the effect of people speaking Cantonese when you’re performing it for an English-speaking audience, so we’re also doing a Cantonese accent.”

Lareau agrees that the mix of ethnicities and accents has added complexity to the rehearsal process. “It was my initial hope to cast Chinese actors in the Chinese roles and Japanese actors in the Japanese roles,” she says. “But after auditioning for many weeks, it became clear that in order to cast the right actor for each role and stay within the local community, I had to go outside ethnicity and ended with a very multi-cultural cast.”

The actors are learning about and from each other, Lareau reports. “I have a Japanese actor playing a Chinese man working night and day to learn the right inflections to speak Cantonese to perfection and Vietnamese actors learning Japanese language so that we can use both in this production.”

“I have lead actors,” she elaborates, “who have spent months deep in research so that every aspect of their character can be as true to the history of this person as possible. Everyone is striving for historical accuracy even performing this work of fiction, because it is personal for them and their community.”

“I am very passionate about the way it keeps the author’s voice and intention intact,” Lareau says. “You walk away feeling as if you just read the book.”

Hotel on the Corner of Bitter and Sweet runs Sept. 18 to Oct. 21 at Book-It Repertory Theatre, 305 Harrison Street, Seattle.