

“Insatiable!” whets the appetite for APA playwrights

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Local Asian American playwrights are hungry for camaraderie, community and opportunities to share their work – and “Insatiable!” is the banquet provided by local theatre company SIS Productions to both the playwrights and Seattle audiences.

The presenters of the long-running “Sex in Seattle” serial drama, SIS Productions is now hosting Seattle’s first Asian American playwright’s festival. With plans to present additional festivals, SIS will offer works at the upcoming festival by six writers who have been participating in the SIS Writers Group for the past two years.

Among the works to be included in the noon-to-midnight festival on Dec. 2 is a new play by SIS Creator and Executive Producer Kathy Hsieh entitled “B4.” Hsieh’s play explores the lives of three different couples who have lived in Apartment B4 at different times during the last century, delving into issues ranging from Japanese internment during World War II to the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001.

Although Hsieh has regularly completed scripts for SIS Productions’ “Sex in Seattle” series, she credits the SIS Writers Group with encouraging her to write “B4.” “What the Writers Group has given me is a group of other writers who are cheering me on and encouraging me to write and who I’ve made a commitment to,” Hsieh says. “And by establishing a mutual festival, we’re all counting on each other to get our scripts done.”

Also included in the festival is “Peace & Truth,” a new play by Serin Ngai that explores the approaching death of an elderly Chinese woman. Ngai is participating in “Insatiable!” because “it’s a unique and rare opportunity to partake in a playwrights festival that features only Asian American writers.”

A third-year law student, Ngai adds that working on “Peace & Truth” with the SIS Writers Group has “really focused my craft as a

playwright.” She states that “learning from my colleagues in the group and hearing their critiques and comments about my work were also critical in shaping my play and motivating me to complete the script.”

Another play in the festival that ranges from World War II to the present is Roger Tang’s “Third Generations Nikkei.” As the current literary manager of SIS Productions, Tang is responsible for evaluating plays submitted to the company, but with “Insatiable!,” Tang is stepping into the role of playwright.

“The staged reading itself is a necessary part of the process – you need to hear your words spoken out loud in front of an audience to see whether it lives and breathes,” he said. As Tang has discovered in his roles as writer and managing director for Pork Filled Players, Seattle’s second-oldest sketch comedy group, “you sometimes don’t know where the funny is until it’s discovered by an audience.”

Collaboration is a key focus of the SIS Writers Group. Hsieh says, “several of us also have experience doing dramaturgy or directing, so we’re all able to view the scripts from many perspectives.” Tang adds, “It’s also helpful to enlist the help of actors to shape the dialogue and characterization.” The writers also look forward to receiving feedback from the audiences who attend the “Insatiable!” readings, and according to Hsieh, “using that experience to further develop each script.”

Beyond greater exposure for local Asian American playwrights, future plans for the SIS Writers Group include future festivals, as well as holding workshops with more established Asian American playwrights. According to Hsieh, plays developed by the Writers Group will be considered for SIS Productions’ mainstage season, and local literary managers will also be invited to attend “Insatiable!” in hopes of sparking interest in the plays by Asian American playwrights at theatres region-wide.

Tang concurs. “I think it’s needed and necessary to have a vital center of writers creating new stories here in Seattle for it to be a living, breathing center of Asian American theatre.” He adds, “Make no mistake about it – with three to four groups in town, Seattle is one of the thriving centers of Asian American theatres in the country, along with New York, L.A., Honolulu, Minneapolis and San Francisco. That

means a regular presentation of new works and probably full productions.”

SIS Productions creator Hsieh explains the choice of the festival’s title, “Insatiable!” by attributing the idea to playwright Serin Ngai. Ngai says she suggested the title during an open call for ideas from the entire SIS Writers Group “because it sounded fun and subtly hints that the audience will want to see more of our group’s work after attending the readings.”

Hsieh adds, “We also liked the idea that ‘insatiable’ described the appetite of Seattle theatre-goers - that perhaps they had a desire for wanting something more than what was currently being offered in Seattle’s theatre scene.”

Hsieh notes that almost 13 percent of the Puget Sound population are Asian Americans, and says, “We are the largest minority group in the county [more than African Americans and Hispanic Americans combined] and yet, if you look at any theatre in the area, you rarely see an Asian American face on stage and you almost never see scripts written by Asian Americans, so there is definitely a huge void in what is being offered.”

SIS Productions intends for “Insatiable!” to serve as an appetizer in response to that hunger. Other plays to be presented in the festival include “Dome Light” by Daniel Arreola, “Cracks in the Ceiling” by Richard Sloniker, and a new work-in-progress by Kimber Lee.

“Insatiable!: Seattle’s First Asian American Playwright’s Festival.” Dec. 2. NW Actors Studio, 1100 E. Pike St. Tickets: (206) 323-9443 or tickets@sis-productions.org.