

Fill Your Appetite for New Asian American Theatre at “Insatiable!”

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Posted in [Arts](#), Volume 38 No. 21

Playwrights are hungry for opportunities to present their work, and this autumn, the SIS Writers Group hopes that its audiences are “Insatiable!”

Sponsored by SIS Productions, the SIS Writers Group is in its sixth year of fostering the development of local Asian American playwrights. This year, three new full-length plays and three new one-acts will be served up.

The featured playwrights bring to the festival a range of experience. Maggie Lee has participated since 2007 and is presenting “The Tumbleweed Zephyr,” about two brothers on a transcontinental train trip, directed by Zanne Gerrard. “With Insatiable! every year,” Lee said, “it helps me to focus on finishing my piece in a timely manner.”

The other three playwrights are also pursuing specific challenges in this festival. May Nguyen, who is presenting three one-act plays, directed by Agastya Kohli, said, “I wanted to push myself to write different stories in a short format.”

Daniel Arreola, who is presenting a two-character language-based piece inspired by Terrence McNally and entitled “The Best Time You’ll Never Talk About,” reported, “I have been away from writing and wanted to get a new piece out.” Arreola’s play will be directed by Richard Sloniker.

In contrast, writer Zheng Wang said, “As a filmmaker looking to improve my writing ability, as well as a fan of theater, I see Insatiable! as a great opportunity to write and present my first play.” Wang will present “Double Happiness,” directed by Maria Batayola.

These presentations are the culmination of the peer support that the SIS Writers have been giving to each other each year since 2005.

“The initial group wanted a year-end showcase because they felt that would be the carrot to keep them on-task in their writing,” said SIS Producer Kathy Hsieh. “There’s nothing like knowing that the public is going to hear your piece to get you into writing-mode.”

Beyond a hearing, the key goal of these playwrights is to solicit the feedback of their viewers.

“The festival is fantastic because the most elusive collaborator is the audience,” said Nguyen. “Getting their feedback is invaluable in the continued development of my work. I hope to polish these short plays and submit them to theater companies locally and nationally.”

Director Batayola works to support these goals. "My job in directing a play reading is to present my author's writing as-is on paper so the actors and the audience can experience it as-written and give constructive feedback," she said.

To encourage audience participation, the playwrights helped to publicize the festival through activities with Arts Crush, particularly a walking tour through the International District entitled "Revealed: Immigrant Stories from the Urban Jungle."

In addition to the four playwrights and four directors, about twenty actors will lend their voices to these new scripts. The playwrights assert that the rehearsal process with these collaborators has enriched their work.

Wang said, "I have been working with my director, Maria Batayola, who is also a dramaturg, and that has been very helpful in my writing. She brought in a new perspective and asked many great questions about the characters."

Nguyen concurs. "The biggest revisions occur after my first meeting with the director," she said. "The second biggest are after the first reading with the actors. The director can help see the bigger picture, while the actors help with finding the characters' voices."

"Hearing a play read out loud by actors," added Lee, "is one of the most important steps in the process, because it brings the story to life in a way that just can't be done by reading the words on a page. I feel that theatre is such a collaborative art by nature, it's nigh impossible to write a play in a vacuum."

These three dozen theatre artists will assemble together with the full support of the SIS Productions principals.

"It's fun to see so many of our actors together and to give them an opportunity to perform new works," said SIS Producer Lorna Chin. "I like how they have evolved the festival to cover several days, allowing for multiple opportunities to see the shows."

Hsieh added, "All of our executive producers attend every reading of every festival in order to scope out potential scripts to produce. We would love nothing more than to be able to produce one of them on our mainstage."

Chin agrees. "It would be wonderful to be able to produce a show from our SIS writers group!" she said. "I'm always hopeful that the shows and our mission will align so that we can bring these shows to a broader audience."

"Insatiable!" runs from November 10 to 14 at the Prima Vera Arts Center, 112 5th Ave N, 2nd Floor, Seattle.