

# ‘The Joy Luck Club’ Makes Theater Comeback in Tacoma

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Photo caption: Front row, left to right: Susan Mayeno, Aya Hashiguchi Clark. Back row, left to right: Joy St. Germain, Narea Kang, Ruth Yeo, Leilani Berinobis. Photo credit: Jason Ganwich

A decade after local director David Hsieh’s adaptation of Amy Tan’s novel “The Joy Luck Club” premiered in Seattle, Tacoma Little Theatre (TLT) is remounting the show.

“I’m delighted that TLT has decided to produce it here locally and asked me to direct it,” says Hsieh.

Hsieh is taking on the project, in addition to serving year-round as Artistic Director for ReAct Theatre. “Scheduling wise it worked out for me so I agreed,” Hsieh says. “Since my theatre, ReAct, did the world premiere, obviously we have a lot of resources from that original production that are available for TLT’s new staging.” Tan’s novel has been a favorite of readers, book clubs and cinema since its 1989 publication.

“Back in 2003 when I was looking for a project for ReAct Theatre to present for our Tenth Anniversary Season, I thought Joy Luck Club would be a great choice considering the local talent pool,” Hsieh explains.



Joy Misako St. Germain (left) plays the role of Suyuan Woo, the mother of Jing-Mei Woo (right), who is portrayed by Seattle actor Narea Kang. Photo credit: Jason Ganwich.

But he was uninspired by the existing stage adaptation that was available. “So I thought to myself, ‘Well, why don’t we do our own?’” Hsieh remembers. “I contacted Amy Tan’s literary agent as well as the wonderful folks at Buena Vista — which controlled the property rights to the story due to Oliver Stone’s movie adaptation — and got permission from them to make this adaptation.”

Developing the adaptation has been a multi-phase process over time.

“I basically took Amy’s bestselling novel, transcribed it word for word into my computer, and then slowly consolidated the text down to a two-act play, borrowing very slightly from Amy’s screenplay adaptation and a little bit of artistic license necessary for staging,” Hsieh says. “I made a lot of changes in the development process of the original production, and some minor ones in getting the script ready for publication.”

The next challenge is casting the shows with the right actors.

“Casting is always an interesting process, particularly when you need so many Asian performers,” Hsieh says.

Other difficulties arose from the structure of the script.

“The show requires each performer play a variety of roles, both older and younger,” Hsieh says. “Finding the right mix of versatile actors makes things easier overall. My challenge was that just due to scheduling, a good number of local Asian talent I was hoping to use had scheduling conflicts with other projects they were working on, recently moved away from Seattle or didn’t have the means

of commuting down to Tacoma.”

But, Hsieh says, “I’m happy with the results.”

The actors report being thrilled too.

Aya Hashiguchi, who plays the role of Ying Ying, had appeared in the original staging of Hsieh’s adaptation in 2003.

“This is a story I have always wanted to do again,” Hashiguchi says. “Even though I am Japanese, not Chinese, this speaks to me. It could very well be my own family’s story.”

Leilani Berinobis, who plays Lindo, agrees.



“It excites me to be able to do this adaptation now, at this time of my life, because I feel like I finally understand where my mother is coming from,” Berinobis says. “The hopes, fears, and love for me that she has always felt but neither of us knew how to convey to each other when I was younger: these are the same hopes, fears, and love I feel when I look at my own daughter and hope to be able to tell them to her in a way she’ll understand.”

Berinobis also reports that she, among the other actors, faced challenges in rehearsing this show.

“The biggest challenge for me is to make sure Lindo is coming from a place of love with a bit of vulnerability,” she says. “When it appears she’s criticizing Waverly,

she wants what's best for her daughter, and this is the only way she knows to communicate that.”

Joy Misako St. Germain, playing the role of Suyuan, describes another complex challenge.

“The biggest challenge has been to portray the trauma of living through a war, having to be separated from one’s twin babies, losing one’s entire family and moving to a foreign country,” St. Germain says. “I’ve addressed the challenge of the role by focusing on one of the messages of the story – to have hope – that carries one through such tragedies.”

A more light-hearted, but no less important, struggle was learning to play mahjong, says Narea Kang, who plays Jing-Mei (June) Woo.

“Three of the moms and I sit down to play mahjong periodically during the show, and due to timing, we need to be comfortable enough to set it up very quickly,” she says.

Berinobis shared King’s mahjong struggle.

“The first time we had the mahjong set during rehearsal, the four of us moms under our breaths kept asking each other, ‘What’s next?’ and ‘Where does this piece go?’ — all while Narea was trying to work on her monologue,” says Berinobis.

Regardless of these complications, St. Germain reports that Hsieh’s directing has been “supportive and kind, allowing the actors to organically do their creative work. This is an important part of the experience.”

Hsieh says that TLT’s production isn’t touring to Seattle. But, he says, “Tacoma really isn’t that far away, and I hope and I’m certain many Seattle (and Olympia) folks will drive over to see this new production. ... When ReAct did the world premiere, we had people coming from all over the region and the country.”

Hashiguchi is grateful for to be able to present “The Joy Luck Club” in a new light. “I am excited that Tacoma Little Theatre has caught the vision, so we now have yet another chance to tell this beautiful story to a whole new audience.”

“The Joy Luck Club” runs March 15 through April 7 at Tacoma Little Theatre, 210 North I St., Tacoma, Wash. More information at [www.tacomalittletheatre.com/Mainstage.php#joyluckclub](http://www.tacomalittletheatre.com/Mainstage.php#joyluckclub).