

SIS Productions' 'Paper Angels' Tells Stories of Immigration

By [Roxanne Ray](#)

Posted in [Arts](#), Volume 42 No. 15



Pictured left to right: Allen Go, Kathy Hsieh, Austin Harry, Denny Le, Andy Tran, Cris Berns, Maydene Pang, Joanna Goff, Serin Ngai, Ian McIntire, Phoenix Ever, Tina Yu and Steve Sumida.

• Photo by Rick Wong (c)

As the next U.S. Presidential campaign heats up, the issue of immigration continues to be a hot topic. Local theatre company **SIS Productions** is highlighting the challenges of immigration faced by Asian Americans with a presentation of Genny Lim's play *Paper Angels*.

First produced 35 years ago in 1980, *Paper Angels* was seen in San Francisco, New York, and Seattle, before appearing on PBS' *American Playhouse* in 1985 and winning the Villager Award at The New Federal Theater in New York.

The play centers on the experiences of Chinese immigrants whose first stop entering the United States was at Angel Island. "I started writing *Paper Angels*

while working on the book, *Island: Poetry and History of Chinese Immigrants on Angel Island*,” Lim said. “I wanted to reach a wider audience than just Asian American Studies students and Chinese history buffs, which I thought would be the main readership of our then self-published book.”

Lim chose the theatre because of her own experience during college. “I had been a theater arts major in college and loved the stage,” she said. “I wanted people to know who these people were who risked everything to come to the U.S. and why. Bringing their stories to life would be the best way, I thought.”

But writing her first play was a big leap for Lim. “I had never before thought of writing a play myself,” Lim said. “My experience in theater, however, led me to realize that if there were no roles for Asian Americans, we simply had to write plays ourselves. We had to take the initiative to tell our own stories.”

Lim considers it crucial to continue telling the stories of immigration. “I don’t feel it’s an accident that *Paper Angels* is being produced today,” she said. “With immigration reform being one of the hottest and most controversial topics today, the questions the play raises are more relevant than ever.”

Lim highlights the legal and political issues that have continued to face the United States. “It’s no secret that our immigration system is broken and that exclusionary immigration policies targeting any one specific racial group unfairly and inhumanely, be they Chinese, Mexican, Arab, or other are discriminatory and racist,” she said.

She is especially concerned about the children who are affected by immigration challenges. “We are facing a humanitarian crisis of epic proportions with upwards of 90,000 unaccompanied children crossing the Southern border without parents or relatives in one year,” Lim stated. “God knows how many have or will perish along the way and the ones caught are held in overcrowded and unsanitary conditions. Children stare at the walls with blank eyes, the same way the Chinese youths did on Angel Island.”

Director David Hsieh has appreciated the opportunity to direct this production. “Many consider *Paper Angels* to be one of the modern classic Asian-American plays,” he said. “It tells part of America’s history that is often overlooked and that very few people actually know about.”

But Hsieh believes that the play is not just an important history lesson. “The one-act is rife with iconic characters in dramatic situations that an audience can easily relate to, and the poetic structure of the play is intriguing to me,” he said.



Pictured left to right: Phoenix Ever and Serin Ngai.
• Photo by Rick Wong (c)

This production is unusual in that SIS Productions sought to maximize opportunities for actors by selecting two full casts, instead of just one. “I applaud the opportunities for artists that this production has created,” director Hsieh said. “For many of our cast members, this is like their first or second production and it has been a joy to work with them and helping develop their skills and talents.”

This double cast has not been without challenges, but it has led to great collaboration. “It’s always more tricky double-casting a show. You often end up with fewer rehearsals because your time is spent divided among two instead of just one,” he said. “But on the flip side, I also find that while I end up often having to give the same notes twice ... the casts can also often learn from each other and glean what works best or improve their performance based on that their counterparts are doing.”

Other collaborations occurred between director Hsieh and the producers at SIS, due to Hsieh's heavy commitments to two other concurrent productions. "There were several run-throughs which were videotapes for me to watch later," he said, "and I was lucky to have the trust and talents of the producers to rely on to work on certain elements in my stead."

Beyond that, the SIS producers teamed up with the new **INScape Arts Center** space to highlight Lim's theme of immigration. "The idea first came when, back in 2010, I went on the first open house tour for the new INScape Arts Center, where Seattle's immigration center known as the INS Building had been reconverted into arts spaces," said SIS producer Kathy Hsieh (and sister to director David Hsieh). "As I was walking through the halls, I could feel the history of the building and thought it would be great to do a play about immigration in the building."

As she continued to tour the new space, producer Hsieh felt a flash of inspiration. "I came upon the outdoor courtyard at INScape—it's an enclosed exterior space on the second floor of the building and the only place where those detained at the center were allowed to get fresh air and some exercise," she said. "A scene from the play *Paper Angels* by Genny Lim flashed in my head."

After sharing her idea with the other SIS producers, their artistic team explored the project further. "Our Literary Manager, Roger Tang—having produced the local student production decades ago—was able to get a hold of Genny Lim to inquire about doing the show and she's been incredibly gracious," producer Hsieh said.

Kathy Hsieh explains that the logic behind the double-casting and the wider community collaborations is to expand the outreach of *Paper Angels* as much as possible. "We thought, if we ever did *Paper Angels*, we should do it with the possibility of being able to tour it in mind," Hsieh said. "This would mean double-casting the show so that, between all the actors, we might be able to pull one cast together for any tour."

To test that idea, SIS has performed the show in Tacoma before bringing it to Seattle for the latter half of August, and they are actively seeking additional opportunities. "We and the cast are still looking for colleges and other groups that may be interested in booking the show," she said, welcoming interested parties to contact SIS Productions directly.

While Lim is unable to attend SIS' Seattle production, she has fond memories of the 1983 production of the play by the Asian Theater Group at the Ethnic Cultural Center in Seattle's University District and would welcome a new life for the play. "I would be very curious to see how the production looks today," Lim said.

Lim also has aspirations to continue her work in theatre. “I would like to write another play, possibly trying to tie the connective threads among the oppressed and occupied of the world,” she said. “There’s a common theme that underlies the seemingly unrelated man-made phenomena of Gaza and Ferguson, Tibet and Afghanistan, etc. It’s still too big and broad for me to wrap my head around as yet.”

However, Lim expressed an interest in seeing a revival of Asian American theatre nationwide, and adding her voice may help this goal come to fruition. “I’d like to find the through-line,” she said.

‘Paper Angels’ runs from August 20 to 31 at INScape Arts Center, 815 Seattle Boulevard South, Seattle. For more information, visit celebr8women.wordpress.com/events-2/paper-angels.