

Sex in Seattle stays true to its roots in Episode 15: “The Anatomy of Love”

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Sex in Seattle is hot.

The proof? Local theatre company SIS Productions heats up for another presentation of their episodic live dramatic sitcom that has run since 2000. Episode 15, “The Anatomy of Love,” promises to continue to explore the lives and passions of Asian American women.

The aim of the “Sex in Seattle” series is twofold: The SIS Productions artists seek to “portray contemporary Asian Americans in a truer light,” while also attempting to “believably address and explore the issues of womanhood ...”

To achieve these goals, the SIS artists use a variety of dramatic methods. “Even though our platform is theatre, we don’t fit in the traditional ‘theatre’ model,” says co-executive producer and writer/actor Kathy Hsieh.

“Format-wise, we’re definitely more interactive than traditional theatre,” Hsieh says. “Our characters often break the fourth wall and talk to the audience, our audience often talks back to our characters — which we love! Especially when they get so carried away with a storyline that they can’t help but shout out advice to our characters!”

The SIS artists also incorporate a range of technology into their live performances. “We use a lot of multi-media as well as everything from shadow-puppets to music-video-type sequences,” Hsieh says, all with the aim of exploring the Asian American female experience.

The intersection of ethnicity and gender also takes prime focus in the Mission Statement of the SIS Productions theatre company itself: The company “strives to create, develop and produce quality works that involve Asian American women, their themes, and Asian American issues. SIS Productions encourages opportunities and support for Asian American women to be involved in all aspects of the production of artistic endeavors.”

Originally, in 2000, the Mission Statement emphasized opportunities for Asian American women to create theatre, with the dramatic themes and issues of the actual shows presented taking secondary status. Serin Ngai, vice president of the board, reports that the company's four co-founders were in such agreement on the importance of these goals that the statement was drafted in about 30 minutes.

However, co-founder Hsieh states that, in 2003, the company decided to reverse the order of these two values, placing the dramatic work first. "We felt that it's the quality of our work that is going to make it meaningful for Asian Americans to want to be involved with our company," Hsieh says, "and it's the work that is going to create the opportunities for Asian American women."

Hsieh and her co-founders worried that audiences and the media might show little interest in their work, but *Sex in Seattle* has proven to be a popular and financially stable series over the past eight years.

"I don't think we would have gotten that much coverage if it weren't for the fact that we were a group of women who happen to be Asian American doing a show that uses humor to address racial issues and stereotypes surrounding relationships," Hsieh says. "I really think it's the combination of all of those factors together that has garnered us so much attention."

But the SIS Productions Mission Statements don't simply sit, gathering dust as the company's founding documents. "The mission statements serve to really guide us in our work and the kind of shows that we select," Hsieh says.

"Every time we're unsure of what might be the best decision (whether it's a script we're considering or who to choose as a director or designer, etc.), we always go back to our mission statement for the company and/or the show and weigh which choice really fits best with our mission," Hsieh says.

"Even though mission statements are often used by companies more as a PR statement, for us, the mission statements are really used as our guiding light — they really help to keep us focused and on track" — a focus that prevents distraction from prejudices about the kind of work that Asian American women should be doing.

"Our biggest challenge is probably about perception," reports Hsieh. "A lot of

non-Asian theatre critics in particular will look at us and, because they see primarily Asian American faces, they will actually question us in print and in interviews why our material isn't more political or more culturally Asian."

How do the SIS Productions artists respond? "We're Asian American, which means that we're pretty much brought up like any other American."

Hsieh says, "Our culture is far more American than Asian because this is where we were born and raised. It's frankly sometimes offensive that there's an expectation that we should be incorporating more traditional Asian art forms into our work or that all of our work should always be political because of where our ancestors came from or because we're people of color."

The Sex in Seattle series hasn't shied away from addressing serious racial issues and stereotypes. "But no Asian American," Hsieh asserts, "spends 24/7 talking politics or talking about their Asian roots. That's not who we are."

Hsieh explains that the SIS Productions artists find such expectations offensive "because there's a double-standard in the sense that an artist whose ancestors happen to have come from Europe isn't expected to only address German or Irish or Scandinavian issues/culture in all their work." But Hsieh says, "there is an expectation that Asian Americans should."

In addition to focusing on the Asian American experience, the SIS artists seek out dramatic situations common to most Americans. "A lot of our issues are no different than anyone else's," Hsieh says.

The SIS series asks: Where do singles meet in Seattle? How can I get my parents to stop pressuring me about getting married? Should I keep working on this relationship or move on?

But, Hsieh adds, "since race is a factor in our lives, our shows usually explore these universal issues with a twist."

The SIS spin on these issues might include: "My parents want me to date Asian and I want to make them happy, but I'm in a really great relationship with a white person — how do I break the news to my parents?"

Or, "will I find more in common with someone just because they happen to look like me and we have a similar heritage, or someone who's not Asian

American but actually has the same interests that I do?"

Or, in the context of Asian American society, "If I date someone who isn't Asian American, will other Asian Americans think I'm a traitor or a sell-out or trying to be white just because of my choice in partners?"

Rather than approach these questions from a stance of already having all the answers, SIS artists report that they explore these dilemmas alongside their characters. Assistant Producer Miko Premo says, "I grew up in a primarily white community, so being a part of an Asian American theatre has really given me a chance to discover different parts of myself and to really converse about what it is to be Asian American."

The SIS artists feel they've been able to explore these topics unique to Asian Americans, while also reaching out to audiences beyond local Asian American women. Lorna Chin, co-executive producer, says that while her company is sharing the Asian American voice that is not often heard, the Sex in Seattle series offers spectators something they can relate to — "no matter where they come from."

"The Anatomy of Love" runs Oct. 18 – Nov. 10 at Richard Hugo House Theatre, 1634 – 11th Ave., Seattle. www.sexinseattle.org.