

Play by Play: A Filipino Actor Reflects on His Theater Work

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After beginning his acting career in 1996, actor Ray Tagavilla has been performing on Seattle stages for over a decade. Born in the Philippines, Tagavilla earned a BA degree in Drama at the University of Washington and has portrayed classical and contemporary roles for a dozen Seattle theatre companies. He has deployed skills onstage including stage combat and playing the clarinet, and recently agreed to share his thoughts about his acting career with the Examiner:

IE: What inspired you to become an actor?

Tagavilla: An old high school friend of mine named Pete Michaud did a favor for me (I forget what it was). When it was time for me to pay back, he asked me to audition for "A Midsummer Night's Dream." I of course refused at first, but I eventually relented since it was a matter of honor. I auditioned and got the part of Demetrius. The rest is history.

IE: You've done a mix of classical and contemporary work. What draws you to audition for a particular role or play?

Tagavilla: I have a tendency to try to go for roles that people don't see me in. Whether that's due to physical type or demeanor, it doesn't really matter. It's a way for me to continue challenging myself and my limits. I've been pretty lucky in this town to get cast in parts that normally wouldn't be given to an ethnic or Asian actor. Seattle's great when it comes to hiring people for their talent, not just their looks.

IE: What challenges have you faced in working as an actor? And how have you addressed those challenges?

Tagavilla: I never stop learning as an actor and as a person. For me, continuing to audition and getting cast is the best education I can get. I've never been a person who takes a lot of classes and buries himself in books about the craft. I learn only by doing and seeing other actors and directors. They are my professors.

IE: How do you balance theater work with other types of work?

Tagavilla: I have a day job. My mom has always been concerned about where the money is coming from and my dad's kind of the hippie. I think I've found a nice cohesion of work and play in my life so far.

IE: Who are your favorite theater colleagues in Seattle to work with, and why?

Tagavilla: Rob West is the director I've worked with in this town the most, so there is a strong relationship there — almost to the point of us finishing each other's sentences. He's an English major so he knows how to speak to me quickly and

clearly to keep things moving. We also have the same type of humor, which helps. As far as actors, there are way too many to mention. I love them all for a variety of reasons.

IE: What has been your favorite role that you've portrayed? Why?

Tagavilla: Wilson from "Mistakes Madeline Made" that was produced by Washington Ensemble Theater. Wilson was a character who communicated not just through words but sounds, gestures, and mannerisms. He was like an animal: all instincts. Great script, great actors, great director and great audiences. It was one of the few shows that I did that was also very profitable.

IE: What role is at the top of your wish list to portray in the future, and why? Do you have any plans to bring this role to fruition (i.e. self-production, member's project, etc)?

Tagavilla: I just finally did it!! It's called "A Lie of the Mind" by Sam Shepard, and played at ACT Theater from September 8th thru October 1st. It's been over ten years that I've been trying to make this show happen. It was the last show I did at the University of Washington before graduating and I thought the lead role of Jake was a challenge I had to take. I was obsessed. The character experiences every emotion a human being can have in this play and it's exhausting. Rob West directed it, and he and his wife, Jennessa, helped me produce it. It was a dream come true for me and I'll never forget it.

IE: What is your biggest lifetime goal in theatre?

Tagavilla: To always have this as a part of my life and maybe even do this for a living.

IE: What would you most like the public to know about the acting profession? Or about your career in particular?

Tagavilla: The arts are my outlet. I get to act out and feel emotions in an arena that is, at times, the antithesis of me. It keeps me in check; it keeps me sane; it keeps me aware. Without it, I would've died a long time ago.