

# “Take Me America”: A Play Explores the Asylum Experience through the Fictional Characters of a Chinese Poet and his Wife

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*“Take Me America”. Photo credit: Jay Koh.*

When is a refugee granted asylum in the U.S.?

That is the question explored in Village Theatre’s current production of “Take Me America.” Written by Bill Nabel with music by Bob Christianson, this new musical foregrounds the private struggles of immigrants to America from around the world.

Writer and lyricist Nabel explains that the inspiration for “Take Me America” was a documentary film entitled “Well Founded Fear,” by Shari Robertson and Michael Camerini.

“The refugee stories were hair-raising, compelling, and absolutely engrossing,” said Nabel.

What Nabel discovered is that the intersection of individuals, cultures, nations, and laws provided a platform for the dramatic presentation of America’s diversity.

“Asylum is the place where the compassion of the United States interfaces with injustice in the world,” Nabel said.

At its most basic, asylum law appears simple: Asylum is granted with “a well founded fear of persecution based on race, religion, sex, nationality, social group or political belief.” However, the deployment of this law by U.S. immigration and asylum agents

quickly becomes complicated.

Complications arise at the many intersections in these refugee stories, and Nabel and Christianson sought to share these intersections with American theatre-goers. Nabel asserts that stories of "the nexus of asylees and asylum agents, the nexus of persecution and compassion, the nexus of danger and sanctuary, the nexus of America and the rest of the world, and the nexus of human beings on the planet," are truly American stories.

After a lengthy period of research, interviews, and reviews of film footage, Nabel and Christianson chose to explore the Asian asylum-seeking experience through the characters of a Chinese poet and his wife.

"We looked at the time period around Mao Tse Tung's 'Hundred Flowers Movement,'" said Nabel. He examined its mantra to "let a hundred flowers bloom and a hundred schools of thought flourish in our land."

Nabel found that the Hundred Flowers Movement lasted only six weeks, and that many artists and free thinkers were then imprisoned.

Nabel next explored China's Enlightenment Society, an underground movement of poets in China. "We read the works of many Chinese poets and were struck by the humanitarian chord that resonated through their writings," said Nabel.

"The vibrant imagery was particularly striking," Nabel said. "The images were specifically Chinese, rooted in a native Chinese experience that Westerners don't see."

It is this range of immigrant experience, invisible to Americans, that Nabel aims to share in "Take Me America." And it is the rich diversity that America enjoys as a result of our willingness to grant asylum that he, Christianson, and Village Theatre seek to emphasize.

As Nabel said, "The poetry was a revelation."

*"Take Me America" runs from September 14 to October 23 at Village Theatre, 303 Front Street North, Issaquah, and from October 28 to November 20 at Everett Performing Arts Center, 2710 Wetmore Avenue, Everett.*