

# THEATRICAL LABOR IN THE WAKE OF COVID-19

CREATING NEW AUDIENCES THROUGH NEW MEDIA PLATFORMS

SEAN METZGER

JANINE SUN ROGERS



East West Players. Photo credit: Steven Lam

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## Disclaimer

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## Contact

Sean Metzger, [smetzger@tft.ucla.edu](mailto:smetzger@tft.ucla.edu)

Janine Sun Rogers, [jsunrogers@g.ucla.edu](mailto:jsunrogers@g.ucla.edu)



Theatre of Yugen. Photo Credit: Shannon Davis



TeAda Productions. Photo credit: Somsy Vejsir



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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This study addresses Asian American and Pacific Islander theatre workers in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, illustrating the wide range and depth of community engagement and service these organizations provide including, but also far beyond, entertainment. Ultimately, it requests that the state legislature create more grant schemes to fund AAPI theater and performance organizations in California. These three recommendations are: Increase state funding opportunities for AAPI cultural workers, offer collaborative grants to meet shifting technological needs and provide the experts required to maximize use of those technologies, and offer major grants to fund archiving of these companies which constitute the rich cultural heritage of AAPI communities in California.

## KEY FINDINGS

### Affordances of COVID-Era Programming Shifts:

1. **Expanding community:** Digital programming has facilitated collaboration with those living in geographically diverse areas and reached wider audiences.
2. **Addressing AAPI hate:** Artists have worked to educate and increase awareness regarding AAPI communities in order to respond to anti-Asian hate.
3. **Community action:** In times of crisis, organizations have mobilized to care for communities via workshops, resource distribution, and personal security.

### Challenges Associated with COVID-Era Programming Shifts:

1. **Loss of work and revenue:** Companies faced losses due to cancellations and pressure to devalue ticket prices for virtual productions.
2. **Lack of training/time:** Companies are interested in innovation using digital platforms, but lack knowledge and resources required to do so.
3. **Cost of transition:** Many companies are unable to invest in new technologies in order to keep up with production quality of competing organizations and platforms.

### Recommendations

1. **More state funding opportunities for cultural workers:** AAPI theatre companies in California are serving their communities in diverse ways, through and beyond performance work. Therefore, arts grants should, where appropriate, be commensurate with those available to education and social service providers.
2. **Collaborative grants:** Many companies are too small to fund a full-time technologist; it would be useful for a grant to fund a FT technologist who can work with several different companies. Similarly, funding one or more studios for filming high-quality work at no additional cost to small companies would be greatly beneficial.
3. **Funds for archiving:** Many companies have expressed a need for more reliable archiving infrastructure. Funds must be made available to help preserve this rich component of CA's AAPI cultural heritage.

## INTRODUCTION

Asian American theatre companies employ hundreds of people throughout the state and reach thousands of spectators. The COVID-19 pandemic foregrounded the relationships among theatres, markets, and labor. Most obviously, many cultural workers lost employment, and the normative revenue streams on which theatres rely (ticket sales) as well as the ways in which they use and engage their own architectural spaces radically shifted. Theatre artists are experiencing extreme precarity in terms of their livelihoods, but this situation has also encouraged innovation and flexibility in terms of trying to move media platforms from physical spaces to online environments. However, even when physical spaces become relatively safe again, it is not clear what lasting impacts COVID-19 will have had on the cultural sectors, its workers, and its audiences.

In this project, we convened nearly a score of Asian American theatre companies in California to assess their needs in the wake of COVID-19 and to investigate how their work has shifted over the last couple years since the pandemic shuttered theatre doors. Our lead community partner for this endeavor was Snehal Desai, the artistic director of East West Players, which was the largest of the organizations (in terms of budget) with which we worked. Desai helped us think through the logistics of the study. We did qualitative interviews with representatives of the following organizations in northern California: Bindlestiff Studio, Chikahan Company, Community Asian Theatre of



East West Players. Photo credit: Steven Lam

the Sierra, Contemporary Asian Theatre Scene, EnActe Arts, Eth-Noh-Tec Asian American Storytellers, Eugenie Chan Theater Projects, First Voice, Ferocious Lotus, Naatak, Theatre of Yugen. The southern Californian companies that we interviewed were the following: Artists at Play, Asian Story Theater, Cold Tofu, East West Players, FilAM Arts, Grateful Crane Ensemble, and TeAda Productions. We tried to reach roughly a half dozen other companies but were without success. Engagement consisted of a qualitative interview with representatives of each company and, for several of the participants (those who could attend), a follow-up half-day workshop to explore needs and ideas for new technologies and new relationships among the various companies.

We specifically sought to learn what kinds of arts grants the state might make available given the new ecology for performance creation. All companies were compensated financially for participation in the study.

## METHODOLOGY & RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Our research built on the Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC)/ Black, Indigenous Theatres of Color (BITOC) survey: <https://www.bipoctheatresurveys.com/>; we hoped to elaborate on two of the national survey's findings in relation to California AAPI theatre companies. First, we aimed to expand upon the study's recommended strategy to "support organizational infrastructure development for long-term sustainability." Second, we sought to pilot a response to the suggested strategy to offer "subsidized, fee-free skills training opportunities in online technologies": our workshop began this process by introducing some of the technologies, tools, and personnel for creating and enhancing online theatrical work.

Regarding our first elaboration, the nineteen companies we interviewed throughout California responded in recorded Zoom conversations to the questions below.

1. How has COVID-19 impacted your organization? In the wake of COVID-19, what shifts is your organization making in terms of programmatic priorities? What kind of work would you like to produce?
2. Have you moved to digital programming? Are you using your own platform that you created or linking to existing platforms? What challenges did you experience?
3. For digital programming, where is funding coming from?
4. Have you seen (or done) digital productions before that you thought were successful? Can you describe what was successful about one or more of the productions?
5. If you are interested in sustaining or moving to work on a digital platform, how does it connect to your organization's mission and your season?
6. With digital programming:
  - a. Are you interested in new work development (theatre originally created for digital spaces)?
  - b. Filming or otherwise capturing live work?
  - c. Adapting work originally written for the stage to a digital platform?
  - d. Some combination of the above? What obstacles do you foresee?
7. How many digital productions and of what type might you anticipate doing in a given year?
8. What affordances might be provided by digital work (e.g. greater audience reach, extension of "run", etc.)?
9. What specific technologies would artists and/or theatres like to be trained in?
10. Given the above, what kinds of equipment would a grant funding need to support?
11. What needs are there for particular personnel that might be covered through grant funding (e.g., technologists, projection designers, sound designers)?
12. What kinds of costs might you anticipate for archiving (or is archiving even desirable?)

Based on the answers to the above questions, we developed a workshop that introduced the companies to each other and to some models for online performance. This workshop was also designed to strengthen the ties of UCLA to these



community organizations around the state, with the idea that collective learning and advocacy could lead to novel ways of engaging AAPI populations across California. For the workshop, we engaged the following presenters: Jeff Burke (Associate Dean for Research in the UCLA School of Theater, Film, and Television), Snehal Desai (Artistic Director of East West Players), Hana Kim (an independent designer who focuses on projection design and has worked on a variety of new media projects), and Marike Splint (Associate Professor of Directing in the UCLA School of Theater, Film, and Television, who specializes in site-specific/responsive theatrical production and successfully pivoted to online platforms).

## DATA & FINDINGS

### THE ECO-SYSTEM FOR SUPPORTING AAPI THEATRE COMPANIES

The findings were diverse given the disparate organizational structures that each company has—from East West Players, which has several full-time staff members, to First Voice, which is the effort of two people who produce work in an entrepreneurial fashion. Other differences were made apparent as companies run by more senior generations were, by their own admissions, sometimes a bit slower in picking up and integrating technology into company missions. Nevertheless, all of the companies articulated both

affordances of the shift to new media platforms as well as the pitfalls of such moves.

The wide-ranging interview responses provided insight into the general health of AAPI theatre companies in California, including but not limited to the COVID-19 era. For example, the grants ecosystem to support specifically AAPI companies was frequently described as limited, especially at the state level; indeed, some existing grant schemes were frequently seen as supporting large theatres, the staff and repertoire of which were primarily White. One respondent said,

“I feel like a lot of . . . mainstream theatre companies . . . have access to a lot of this money; they get money for doing diversity. But I think it’s [better spent] supporting the existing companies that have never been paid for their labor, supporting that ... not to stop giving grants to other theatres, but who are the groups that could really use the help? And who’s actually doing the work, and who understands the community?”

Another respondent stated,

“I was looking for grants and they’re like not accepting grants, not accepting, not accepting. . . I had to lay somebody off yesterday. I’m laying one more person off today right after this call. Life is getting tough. We were congratulating ourselves for having reinvented ourselves and having stayed robust and served many artists and of course, our audiences through the pandemic, but I didn’t think the pandemic would come back with force again in 2022, and I hadn’t planned for that, and maybe I should have, I don’t know.”

Respondents also frequently discussed the impacts that AB5, as well as changing union rules of organizations such as the Screen Actors Guild and Actor’s Equity Association, have had: the rules put forth both by state legislature and unions complicated work for small companies in particular. Issues were discussed primarily involving safety and budgeting. As one respondent said,

“Working with all the regulations is really complicated and that really impacts how pieces are made. Really does. And it’s really interesting how the performing arts, how the theatre industry has adapted, or not adapted, or lagged, or not lagged, and how SAG has adapted, or not adapted, to deal with COVID, and to be safe, not just to follow the COVID protocols, but to be safe.”



East West Players. Photo credit: Steven Lam

Others described the impact of having to go through an immense amount of paperwork and include large budgetary amounts to pay benefits for gig work upon which the theatre world has traditionally relied.

Given that our questions centered technology, most of the responses focused on affordances and pitfalls of the move to digital platforms. We have thus divided the findings primarily into these two categories.

## AFFORDANCES OF COVID-ERA PROGRAMMING SHIFTS

### 1. Expanding community.

The turn to online production extended the reach of theatre both in terms of collaborators and audiences. As one respondent commented, “What turning to digital in a way allowed us to do is to work with artists who were across the country and sometimes who weren’t in this country.” Another noted, “I definitely want to keep moving forward . . . keeping theatre accessible.” Obviously, this move also produced a corollary anxiety. Because of the dangers of assembling in person, many respondents expressed the feeling of being “in a period of extreme uncertainty.”

### 2. Addressing AAPI Hate.

The period of the pandemic also overlapped with increased publicity around anti-AAPI hate. This phenomenon reinforced the importance of all the companies’ missions as they seek to combat stereotypes and the notion that certain populations are disposable. For example, as one respondent remarked,



“the Asian hate that’s been going on, I feel that a lot of what that’s about is that people just don’t know. They’re just not aware. They just don’t know. So our job is to educate and to tell the stories that are not taught in schools.” “What can we do about fighting hate crimes against Asians? Well, one is to raise the awareness that these are American faces. Let’s use our art form to raise that awareness, the culture and storytelling and culture,” said another respondent. The digital space provided a platform for addressing incidents of hate immediately and the communities that were attempting to respond to them. Put otherwise, the environment of Anti-Asian hate led several companies to lean into their missions to serve the communities in which they are embedded. As a concrete example, one company “did a community safety workshop that addressed how Asians could actually keep themselves safe with the leaders of the safety patrols.”

### 3. Moving through but also beyond performance work.

The pandemic also encouraged innovation in terms of community service and engagement. For example, one company “ran a radio play class for seniors and we recruited seniors from community centers or people whose parents were living with them.” Another declared “We were adamant about the fact that artists are frontliners, especially during this time. That was sort of our battle cry in our Filipino community, we have to support our artists because they’re the ones that are keeping you sane and entertained.” Another company turned its cultural workers into food service

providers: “We’re doing a lot of things that aren’t art-related, but still we felt like we had to respond just to, to help out the community,” a leader of that company said.

### 4. Addressing shifting AAPI communities.

These companies worked to reflect and represent evolving AAPI communities. As one respondent said, “I kept saying, ‘Art is what’s moving our culture forward into the future. What artists do is usually ahead of the curve.’ And so what we need to have money for is to pay for the creation of new art that reflects what our community is.”



East West Players. Photo credit: Steven Lam

## CHALLENGES ASSOCIATED WITH COVID-ERA PROGRAMMING SHIFTS

### 1. Loss of work and revenue.

A consistent theme among companies was loss of work and revenue. For example, one company stated: “We had lined up about 26 tours... and they all got canceled. ... Thirty-seven [thousand dollars] was lost for those.” And another company stated: “We have not done any in-person programming in two and a half years, and it looks like the entirety of 2022 will also not have any in-person programming.” Many respondents said that people were used to receiving online content for free.

### 2. Lack of training/time.

Many companies said that they lacked the bandwidth to learn new technologies, despite having interest in doing so: “It would be cool if we could have some sort of live situation and then digitally archive and stream that in some way, but that requires a lot of technical know-how, with different camera setups and everything. We’re kind of on the older side of things and so we don’t have that much technical know-how within our company,” said one respondent. Moreover, such work (gaining technical expertise) often competed with other needs, like story development. “Our hands are full, just doing decent programs,” claimed another respondent.

### 3. Cost of transition.

Many companies stated that they could not afford to invest in a slate of new technologies. For example, high-end filming and audio capture were simply beyond the budgets of many, if not most, companies. Moreover, technologies were seen to change quickly and, in any case, learning to use and maximize the capabilities of various technologies is a full-time job. Some respondents cited feeling at a disadvantage compared to larger companies and platforms that have set high standards for streaming content: “There’s never an end to the amount of technical learning and techno equipment that you could develop because we’re up against the big guys like Netflix and Hulu. And so their production value is at a premium. It’s become a standard which people expect.”

### 4. The desire for live interaction.

Many interviewees said that they wanted to do theatre specifically because it puts people in the same place for a particular duration of time. Such interactions cannot necessarily be replicated through online platforms (e.g., viewer Zoom fatigue). The discussion of difficult issues often requires face time. “Live is really a beautiful thing; to me, it’s still the best way to experience, to be in the space with audience members, with your fellow actors. But I mean, if there’s a chance for me to see it and I can’t physically be there, I would rather have that than not be able to see it at all,” said one respondent.



First Voice SF. Photo credit: Mark Shigenaga



East West Players. Photo credit: Steven Lam

## CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

Despite significant setbacks posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, AAPI theatre in California is booming and reflects the diverse populations of California. These theatre companies offer not only entertainment, but also enact and show community building at a time when the nation is increasingly fractured. Moreover, the rich history of these traditions reveals the vitality of California's diversity. More resources should be made available to relieve COVID-19-related cashflow issues, support companies as they adapt to the use of new digital technologies, and ensure that these organizations may continue to engage local and global communities.

We have condensed wide-ranging suggestions into three primary recommendations.

### 1. More state funding opportunities for cultural workers.

Rather than existing grants for the arts (which tend to be limited in relation to, for example, social services grants), the grants need to fund and reward AAPI theatre companies in California that are serving their communities in diverse ways (providing crucial needs like food and education as well as entertainment). Therefore, arts grants should, where appropriate, be commensurate with those available to education and social service providers.



## 2. Collaborative grants.

Many companies are too small to fund a full-time technologist, but it would be useful for a grant to fund a full-time technologist who might work with several different companies, both to build work and to train interested personnel. Such grants might also fund one or more studios that could be used at no additional cost to film work at a high quality.

## 3. Funds for archiving.

Many companies asked whether UCLA could archive their work. Others have archived work on digital platforms (for as long as those last). We discovered neither UCLA nor even the Smithsonian has the ability to archive the cultural legacies represented by these diverse artistic groups. Funds must be made available to help preserve this rich component of California's AAPI cultural heritage.

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Professor **Sean Metzger** is Associate Dean for Faculty and Students in the UCLA School of Theater, Film, and Television. The author of *Chinese Looks: Fashion, Performance, Race* (2014) and *The Chinese Atlantic: Seascapes and the Theatricality of Globalization* (2020), Metzger currently co-edits *Theatre Journal*. His other co-edited works include *Embodying Asian/American Sexualities* (2009); *Futures of Chinese Cinema: Technologies and Temporalities in Chinese Screen Cultures* (2009); *Race, Space, Place: The Making and Unmaking of Freedoms in the Atlantic World* (2009); *Islands, Images, Imaginaries* (2014); *Awkward Stages: Plays about Growing Up Gay* (2015); *Expressions of Asian Caribbeanness* (2019); and *Transient Performance* (2020). He recently worked on the first public presentation of *Osadda's Revenge* (perhaps the earliest play in English by an Asian immigrant to the US) in over a century.

**Janine Sun Rogers** holds a B.A. from Bard College and is a current Ph.D. student in Theater and Performance Studies at University of California, Los Angeles. Her research interests include new media and Asian American and Pacific Islander performance. Janine's writing can be found in publications such as *Variable West*, *Theatre Bay Area*, and *Westwind Magazine*.

Theatre of Yugen. Photo Credit: Shannon Davis





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