

**Broadway Star Michael K. Lee
Makes Village Theatre a Second Home**

Judith van Praag

You want to see a good musical? Go east. No, not back East, east on I-90. If you want to see an enchanting performance of "The King and I" this holiday season, get Rudolph to take you across Lake Washington, to the foothills of the Cascades. For it's in the old miner town of Issaquah that dedicated, musical-theater artists offer a first-rate presentation of Rodgers and Hammerstein's Tony Award winning classic.

Fifty-six years after the first version of "The King and I" opened on Broadway, Margaret Landon's story still offers more than a mere flirtation between people of different cultures. This becomes apparent in a conversation with Broadway star Michael K. Lee, who portrays the King at the Village Theatre production, his fourth show with the company (last summer he had the title role in "Tommy".)

After playing Thuy in the "Miss Saigon" World Tour during his senior year of high school, Mr. Lee went to Stanford to study sciences. During summer break he and some friends went to Los Angeles to pursue careers in the entertainment business. He got a production job, sweeping floors and getting coffee.

"What I was doing was nowhere near creative expression, but the exciting thing was to be in that artistic, creative environment," the Broadway star says. One thing is sure his interest in pursuing film studies was established.

The L.A.-based "East West Players", founded to give visibility to Asian American actors, and to assure them presence in the entertainment business, offered a singing and music class. While EWP's "outfit" didn't impress him at first, he stuck around and wound up performing in several plays, and the rest is history, as we like to say. But it is history that should not be forgotten, since it's history that makes us who we are.

"In an ideal world, organizations such as EWP wouldn't have to exist, type casting wouldn't be part of our vernacular, although stories of [our different] cultures always need to be told -to know, and show what we are, in symbiotic peaceful collaboration. We are blessed to live in a country, in a community where we can show what it IS to be an American. We can show the American fabric, made of one of each color..."

That the role of the King truly has meaning in this day and age, and for himself speaks from Lee's remarks about the "Puzzlement" song which he performs with much conviction in Act I.

"This song encapsulates the struggle of a man who thinks about staying put, continuing life the way he knows it, or moving

forward. All change involves pain and discomfort, bravery and trust, and [the King knows] change will affect those around him, and those who come after him."

On a personal level the actor relates to the material with which he works. "To stop thinking about where your place is as an Asian American -but really, this is true for anybody else- that would be heaven."

He muses that such a moment might occur when you hold your first child in your arms, and no, he hasn't experienced that yet. "When I got married, I knew I was in the right place, there, with that particular woman..."

As an actor Lee feels lucky to be part of the Issaquah theater family, especially now that live theater is becoming less accessible outside the big cities.

"What they [Robb Hunt and Steve Tomkins] do here is so important, they dare take chances, such as producing "Tommy". There's truth in story telling. I've got nothing against the Internet, on the contrary, but people are missing out. Spoken word is deemed less necessary, while theater engages people one on one, communicating thoughts through live storytelling. Theater is a necessity. Because of video games and the Internet, people engage in virtual, not in real communities.

"There's so much tragic stuff happening these days, What if kids would go to the theater instead of connecting online with others, talking about shooting and about committing suicide..."

Lee will turn down parts that are written poorly, or that are stereotypical portrayals, but he wouldn't turn down the role of a "bad" or "troubled" character.

"For instance, if someone would write a play about the Virginia Tech massacre, I would consider a role, not because of [embracing the] values, but in order to explore the stresses and pains of a young person. I would want to 'show' what goes on in the mind of this character."

On a lighter note, Michael Lee and his wife Kim Verhola are adapting a traditional Korean story for the stage. And at the end of the workday, when Anna Leonowens and her son leave for England, the King and his first wife Lady Thiang continue their romance, for in real life this first lady is Lee's lovely number one as well.

Previously published on December 19, 2007 in the International Examiner.

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