

# CHICAGO SUN★TIMES

ENTERTAINMENT

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## Theater pros gather in Chicago to promote more Asian representation



Christopher K. Morgan will perform "Pohaku," a blend of modern dance and a form of hula that traces Hawaiian history, on Wednesday and Thursday. | Brian S. Allard

By Catey Sullivan - For the Sun-Times [@CateySullivan](#)

For decades, “Chicago Med” regular Mia Park has seen race used as an excuse for lazy or uninformed casting. On the one side, she constantly hears the refrain that Asian-

American actors — whether their roots are in Hawaii or India or China or Pakistan — are hard to find. On the other edge, there's the belief that they simply aren't right for shows that don't deal specifically with Asian storylines or characters.

Park has a succinct response: "It's all bulls—," she said. "The talent base in Chicago alone is huge. And unless ethnicity or culture is specifically written into a character to help drive a story? There's no reason you can't cast someone who looks like me."

Though Aug. 19, Chicago offers a glimpse at the tip of the iceberg that is the wildly diverse, pan-continental talent pool of actors with Asian roots. Revolutionary Acts: The 6th National Asian American Theater Conference and Festival (or Confest) includes readings, workshops, panels and full stagings of plays from across the country, telling stories from across the world.

## **REVOLUTIONARY ACTS**

### **6th National Asian American Theater Conference and Festival**

When: Through Aug. 18

Where: Various venues

Tickets and schedule: *caata.net*

The program curated by the Consortium of Asian American Theaters and Artists (CAATA) is as diverse as you'd expect from a geographic area that stretches from the Middle East to the far reaches of Mongolia to the Pacific Islands. There is a violent thriller about the Japanese mafia, a piece that welds dance with autobiography, a romance about a troubled gay couple, a drama about imprisoned Pakistani women and a drag bingo night.

There are speakers and breakout sessions taking on everything from yellowface (casting white people in Asian roles) to the Asian diaspora. It takes place at venues in Lincoln Park and the Loop and is open to the public.

"Revolutionary Acts" isn't just the overarching theme of ConFest. It is embedded in the content and the actions of the artists involved — both offstage and on.

Take, for example, Christopher K. Morgan's "Pohaku." It fuses modern dance with kahiko (a traditional form of hula) and English with the indigenous Hawaiian language that was banned from schools shortly after Hawaii's overthrow as a sovereign nation in 1893 until 1986.

"It's about my family's history and history at large," said Morgan, who grew up in the continental United States but traces his ancestors to Hawaii, Japan, China, German and Ireland. "When people close their eyes and imagine Hawaiian culture, I think they see long-haired, beautiful, dark-skinned women with flowered leis.

"Hula is much more than that — it's percussive, closer to the ground," he said. "It's not just entertainment; it's the vehicle that carries our culture from generation to generation."

Chicago poet and playwright Hannah Ii-Epstein ("Not One Batu") will perform poetry alongside drag queen Cocoa Chandelier at Tuesdays drag bingo night. "I believe all art is saying something about our society and our environment. Art — our very words — can be a political movement and a rebellion," she said.

CAATA board member and Silk Road Rising Founding Artistic Director Jamil Khoury is no stranger to the intersection of race and geopolitics and entertainment, or the vitriol that can explode at its epicenter. Over the years at Chicago's Silk Road Rising, he's gotten emails accusing him using the theater as a front for his true identity as a CIA spy, a radical Islamist and a Zionist, among other things. He brushes it off.

"What we're trying to do is expand representation. ... 21st century America is being shaped, in part, by conflicts with countries along the Silk Road. Concurrently, animosity towards Americans of Asian and Middle Eastern backgrounds is being stoked at the highest levels, with increasingly dangerous consequences," he said "Which is why it is more important than ever that we not only own our stories, but that our stories get heard."



Generic Ensemble Company will present Daria Miyeko Marinelli's  
"893/Ya-Ku-Za" on Thursday and Friday. | . COURTESY  
GENENCO

Those stories are potentially limitless, but you wouldn't necessarily realize that by looking at the world of theater. Or so Japanese-Italian American playwright Daria Miyeko Marinelli ( "893/Ya-Ku-Za") realized one night while attending the Broadway musical "Allegiance," about the Japanese internment camps during World War II.

"I opened up the program, and every Asian actor in the cast had been in 'Miss Saigon.' You can see right away there's a dearth of work where Asians are cast. With other shows, you don't see this kind of overlap. It's not like all the [white] actors have been in 'Les Mis' or 'Phantom.' "

If the roles are limited, they're made even more so by the practice of yellowface — which is slated for discussion in Confest's closing conversation between Khoury and award-winning playwright David Henry Hwang ("M. Butterfly," "Chinglish," "Golden Child"). Silk Road Associate Producer Corey Pond was part of a small crowd that made headlines in June by booing a yellowface performance of "The King and I" numbers to a halt at the MUNY Theater in St. Louis in June. The performance was part of the national Theatre Communications Group's annual conference.

“We expected to be escorted out, and we were,” said Pond. “We all just kept changing ‘boo, no yellowface’ until we were gone.”

Said Confest organizer Leilani Chan, artistic director of Los Angeles’ TeAda Productions, “What yellowface says is that we’re not even good enough to play ourselves. CAATA has been on the forefront of the resistance.”



## Mia Park | Liz Liu

For Park, events such as Confest illustrate depth and breadth the talent pool. Opening night alone, she pointed out, featured an embarrassment of local riches, including Bollywood Shakespeare (Shishir Kurup’s “Merchant on Venice”), sketch comedians (Stir-Friday Night), drama (Anu Bhatt’s “Hollow Wave”), dance (Moses Goods’ “Kinolau”) and sci-fi (Prince Gomovilas’ “The Brothers Paranormal”).

For Confest panelist and performer Moses Goods, founding Hawai’is Inamona Theatre Company and performing the world over is all part of the revolutionary impact of art. “Art has the ability to reach people on a human level, “ he said. “You touch people where they live. There’s power in that.”