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How to bring theatre to an increasingly multicultural Canada

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Has Jovanni Sy solved the biggest problem facing Canada's theatre establishment – what to do about shrinking (white) audiences in a growing (multicoloured) Canada? As he prepares to unveil the programming for the first Chinese-language Gateway Pacific Theatre Festival this week, the artistic director of Richmond's Gateway Theatre is certainly pointing toward a possible solution.

“I think we're the first professional Canadian theatre to want to program in another language than English and French,” says Sy, looking positively prophetic in his theatre's upstairs lobby, bathed in the sunlight streaming in through windows that look out over neighbouring, rabbit-filled Minoru Park.

Let's bunny-hop back for a moment: Here's what Sy found when he took over at the Gateway in 2012: a conundrum familiar to pretty much every major theatre company in the country, if different in the specifics. The Gateway, an enterprise with a \$2.4-million budget that had been transformed from suburban roadhouse to regional theatre producing a six-show season under previous artistic director Simon Johnston in 2000, had healthy finances and a stable subscriber base.

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But just as Sy has seen in theatres back in his native Toronto, Gateway's audience did not look like the population that surrounded it. And strikingly so: Richmond's population is 60 per cent immigrants, and about half of the community's total population is of Chinese descent. The people coming to the Gateway, however, are mostly white; Sy estimates that no more than 10 per cent of the audience are Chinese.

As Sy – whose family from the Philippines is ethnically Chinese – points out, there is great diversity even within those who identify as Chinese in Richmond. They range from first to fourth-generation, and have histories in Hong Kong, Taiwan, mainland China and other Chinese-speaking countries.

So how do you get this potential audience into the Gateway without alienating the established audience? At first, Sy considered a familiar approach – programming more shows by Chinese-Canadian playwrights such as David Yee or Marjorie Chan (or, perhaps, himself).

But then, as Sy got to know Richmond better, he had a more original idea. “I knew we didn't need to just change the existing programming, we needed to do something that was additive,” Sy says. “We needed to do a ‘Yes, and ...’ kind of programming.”

Enter the Gateway Pacific Theatre Festival. This August, Sy and festival producer Esther Ho will bring in three productions from Hong Kong and present them with English surtitles: *The Isle*, by leading Hong Kong playwright Paul Poon; *Fire of Desire*, a contemporary Chinese-language adaptation of *La Ronde*; and *Detention*, a “non-verbal physical comedy” by Tang Shu-wing.

And this festival is only a pilot project to measure the demand for what Sy plans to roll out in 2016 – the Pacific Series, a year-round, Chinese-language (English-surtitled) alternative to the Gateway's subscription series of English-language plays.

Rupal Shah, a Toronto producer who holds the Cultural Diversity Portfolio on the Professional Association

of Canadian Theatres (PACT) board of directors, thinks Sy may be on to something. She's been hired by theatres in the past to do community outreach to the South Asian community, but has given it up lately. She's disappointed that producers will lure in new audiences to an individual play that may appeal to them, then simply cross their fingers that those new spectators will stick around for the Chekhov and Shakespeare to come.

"I don't think that strategy is working," says Shah. "You have to put sincere effort into building a relationship – and that sounds like what Jovanni is doing."

Sy's "Yes, and" plan for the Gateway rests on his own discovery upon moving West – that Richmond's Chinese population isn't in need of conversion to live performance. It is already a huge consumer of live performing arts – in either Cantonese or Mandarin. There are regular performances by pop singers, contemporary dancers and Chinese opera – producers either rent the Gateway or play at the nearby River Rock Casino. "People from all over the Lower Mainland, and even from as far as the [U.S.] Pacific Northwest and northern California, already regard Richmond as a hub for cultural events in Chinese," says Sy.

Those who spend their leisure time consuming Chinese-language culture comprise an untapped market for Canadian theatre producers. "A lot of the Chinese Canadians here haven't been gone [from their homeland] all that long, and left in the age of Skype and Twitter where the connection to their ancestral country wasn't cut off the way it would have been if you were, say, fleeing Budapest in 1956," Sy notes. (It's worth adding that the market for third-language theatre is not entirely new: Many of Canada's earliest homegrown theatre companies performed in Ukrainian or Yiddish.)

Sy has big future plans for his company, which is already the second-biggest regional theatre in the Lower Mainland. But for now, the Chinese-language series is his most innovative idea – one that he hopes will lead to producing new Canadian productions in Cantonese and Mandarin within a few years, rather than just importing them. After that, the idea is to export Canadian Chinese-language productions back across the ocean. In this, Sy is thinking like today's most forward-thinking Broadway producers, who already see New York as a try-out for the bigger, potentially more lucrative Asian market.

"How great would it be if we could actually do George Walker or Judith Thompson in translation – regional Canadian production that we can then export overseas?" Sy says. "We see our role down the road of being that gateway between Chinese-speaking countries and English-speaking Canada."

Pay attention, Canadian theatres: Maybe your lack of culturally diverse audiences isn't a problem after all, but an opportunity.

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