

The wash by philip kan gotanda essay sample



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As a third-generation Japanese American, Gotanda is the leading Asian American dramatist. Since the 1970s, Philip Kan Gotanda has been at the center of the Asian American theater movement, creating a body of theatrical work that speaks in the many voices of Japanese America and encompasses a broad spectrum of dramatic styles. All his plays deal with diaspora experience in the USA. Gotanda's plays have been produced extensively throughout the country. His works have played at Berkeley Repertory Theater, East West Players, Manhattan Theater Club, Asian American Theater, A Contemporary Theater, Group Theater, Northwest Asian American Theater, Playwrights Horizons, Wisdom Bridge, Los Angeles Theater, Asian American Theater Center, Studio Theater, Mark Taper Forum, Eureka Theater, Asian American Repertory Theater, Toronto Free Theater, ESIPA, Pan Asian Repertory Theater, and Theater of the Open Eye.

He was recently a recipient of the prestigious National Theater Artist Residency Program. Among his other honors are the Guggenheim Fellowship, the Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Writer's Award, as well as the National Arts Club's Kesselring Prize and the Ruby Schaar-Yoshino Playwright Award.

Critically acclaimed plays and productions that Gotanda has written include *Fish Head Soup* (1991), *Yankee Dawg You Die* (1988), *Jan Ken Po* (1986), *The Wash* (1984), *The Dream of Kitamura* (1982), *Bullet Headed Birds* (1981), *A Song for a Nisei Fisherman* (1980), and *The Avocado Kid* (1980). The screenplays he has produced include *The Wash*, *Aiko Yoshinaga Story*, and *Play of Light and Shadows*. *The Wash* has been characterized as lyrical and naturalistic. The play, in its exposing of institutionalized racism in the

American entertainment industry, has inspired critical response from negative to appreciative.

Originally, *The Wash* was workshopped at the Mark Taper Forum's New Theatre for Now Festival (1985). Two years later, the play had its world premiere at San Francisco's Eureka Theatre. It was filmed for American Playhouse (1990), with a powerful cast that included Mako as Nobu Matsumoto, a nisei husband consumed with anger and self-loathing; Nobu McCarthy as Masi, Nobu's wife who leaves him to seek a meaningful and independent life for herself; and Sab Shimono as Masi's lover Sadao. Gotanda's use of stereotypes allows the actors moments of energy and vitality in the perverse enjoyment of these roles.

Philip Ken Gotanda's *The Wash* was seen in various California theatres, which the Manhattan Theatre Club presented for a two-week run. Although they have been married forty-two years, the Japanese-American couple Nobu (Sab Shimono) and Masi Matsumoto (Nobu McCarthy) separate because of long-term differences. While Masi considered herself a new woman free from the Asian ideas of marriage, she still visits Nobu weekly to collect and drop off his laundry and to see how he is faring. Their two grown daughters have opposing opinions on the separation. Marsha (Diane Takei) believes in the tradition of the family and hopes for a reconciliation between the parents. Judy (Jodi Long), who is estranged from Nobu since she married an African American, supports her mother and her newfound freedom. When Masi begins a relationship with widower Sadao (George Takei), Nobu is more frustrated and confused than ever, rejecting his girlfriend Kiyoko (Shizuko Hoshi) and sinking into despair when Masi asks for a divorce. In the final

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scene Masi arrives with clean shirts for the last time, leaving the dirty shirts on the floor. The “entertaining and modest and trustworthy” play won several plaudits from the press.

The Wash was a significant shift in Gotanda’s popularity. His work continued to be produced by Asian American theater companies, and Gotanda has always acknowledged his indebtedness to them, often describing his relationship with the Asian American Theater Company, for example, as a connection to his “life’s blood.” However, since the early 1990s, Gotanda’s play has also been developed and produced by culturally nonspecific theaters.

In her review of Gotanda’s *Fish Head Soup and Other Plays*, which appeared in *Amerasia Journal* (1997), Josephine Lee briefly examines *The Wash*. However, Gotanda’s *The Wash* has received scant scholarly attention. Though his works are certainly worthy of such consideration, the majority of critical response to his plays must be sought in newspaper reviews written in response to specific productions rather than to the literary value of his dramaturgy. These are numerous indeed, and, given the subjective nature of such writing, range from positive to lukewarm to—rarely—outrightly negative. Even when reviewers find fault with the length of a performance, they tend to appreciate the risks Gotanda takes in his writing, the level of sophistication his political thinking exhibits, and the number of subjects he tackles within a single script. His artistic collaborations with directors Sharon Ott (*Ballad of Yachiyo*, *Yankee Dawg You Die*, *Sisters Matsumoto*) and Oskar Eustis (*Day Standing on Its Head*) have been especially successful.

James Moy's article, "David Henry Hwang's *M. Butterfly* and Philip Kan Gotanda's *Yankee Dawg You Die*: Repositioning Chinese American Marginality on the American Stage" (1990) evolved into the chapter entitled "Flawed Self-Representations: Authenticating Chinese American Marginality" in Moy's full-length study *Marginal Sights: Staging the Chinese in America* (1993). Moy pairs Gotanda's *The Wash* with David Henry Hwang's *M. Butterfly* (1988), which also seeks to displace Asian stereotypes by, in Hwang's words, "deconstructing" them. Nevertheless, Moy considers debunking stereotypes by appropriating them to be extremely dangerous. He asserts that such a dramaturgical strategy validates rather than defuses the power of the stereotype for Euro-American audiences when the stereotypes are "authenticated by Asian American authorship" ("Flawed" 126).

Gotanda's *The Wash* is acknowledged to be sensitive in addressing the extent to which Asian Americans are forced to go to seek viable role models. However, Moy objects to the conclusion of the play, in which the two actors "trade places," which Moy interprets as simply reinforcing the marginalization of the Asian American actor as a "given" of the acting business. According to Moy, *The Wash*, as well as *M. Butterfly*, represents the "genesis of a new representational strategy, one in which the words offer a clear indictment of the cultural hegemony of the West, while the characters empowered to represent and speak on behalf of the Chinese or Asianness are laughable and grossly disfigured" (125). As such, they are merely "old wine in new bottles"—recycled stereotypes—since they constitute no threat to the Euro-Americans watching the show.

Josephine Lee considers the co-opting of negative stereotypes in order to neutralize their power in *The Wash* to be more productive. In "The Seduction of the Stereotype," chapter 4 of her study *Performing Asian America* (1997), Lee concedes that it is nearly impossible to rupture entirely the connections between any stereotype and the ugly historical facts of the racism that engendered them. However, she parts ways with Moy's assertion that Gotanda's "self-subverting Asian American tendency" (Moy, "Flawed" 128) has simply resulted in a new stereotype easily digested by whites. Lee does not consider Asian performance stereotypes to be "playful or neutral" (98), but rather argues that Gotanda's approach has neutralized their racist implications by shining the light on the facts of their sociohistorical emergence. Thus, while the audience sees Nobu portray the bowing and scraping Asian male character, Gotanda is able to delineate the reasons for its historical existence in the context of the play. According to Lee, Gotanda also plays off the "stereotype's inability to account fully for the body of the Other" by writing this role specifically for an Asian American actor (30). Finally, Gotanda seeks to enlighten spectators to share their ethnicity with his characters by relying upon the self-conscious acknowledgment that Asian Americans in the audience position themselves in different ways relative to the stereotype (98).

Lee identifies Gotanda's use of stereotypes as unique in their construction for theatrical roles, which actors must play as necessitated by the racism of the industry, rather than as actual persons. Gotanda succeeds because he "insist[s] that the actor has a coherent self distinct from the stereotype he plays," constantly evoking the mask that is taken on and off (103). The

fallacies that the actors within the play expose make use of the stereotypes a reasonable dramaturgical technique. In other words, Gotanda successfully “parod[ies] the stereotype in order to reveal a true, authentic self,” showing the “Asian body as something that can be seen through the stereotype as real” (119-20).

Robert Vorlicky contributes the most positive, and a distinctly ethnically nonspecific, scholarly response to *The Wash* in his study of all-male-cast plays, *Act Like a Man: Challenging Masculinities in American Drama* (1995). Instead of focusing on Asian American concerns, Vorlicky instead considers Gotanda’s representation of male-gendered objectivity and subjectivity, analyzing the gendered and sexual anxieties depicted in the play. Vorlicky sees the play’s central issue as the “impact of racial and gender codings upon the development of the self-identified, marginalized American character” (195).

Vorlicky applauds Gotanda’s portrayals on a number of levels. Rather than seeing the reversal that occurs at the end of the play as a sellout to Euro-American sensibilities, Vorlicky interprets it as enabling the man and woman to comfort each other after grappling “publicly with the ethical issues involved in accepting roles that are racist portrayals of Asian Americans” (193). Noting that male-to-woman confrontation in other American plays derives predominantly from alcohol abuse and violence, Vorlicky applauds Gotanda’s sensitive handling of the sex relationship, which enables both characters to move to the center of their own histories. For Vorlicky, the play proceeds from a point of racial and ethnic concern to a consideration of “gender codings” among people of color (196). Unlike Moy, who considers <https://assignbuster.com/the-wash-by-philip-kan-gotanda-essay-sample/>

Nobu to be “ disfigured,” Vorlicky sees Vincent as empowered by his ability to embrace his sexuality and thereby redefine himself.

The debate surrounding *The Wash* provides varying fascinating perspectives, to be sure, but the general lack of scholarly attention to Gotanda’s body of theatrical work can prove frustrating indeed for the student of his dramaturgy. Quite possibly the notoriety of the “ Miss Saigon controversy,” which publicized the issues Gotanda had previously addressed in *The Wash*, has led critics to consider the work to be his most popularly accessible. Nevertheless, with thirteen plays and five films produced over twenty years’ time, Gotanda is a prolific playwright of artistic stature. Gotanda has his own take on the critical consideration of *The Wash* to the exclusion of all his other works:

I think the incentive for critics unaware of the Japanese American experience to understand the nature of unspoken, non-verbal, restrained, indirect, repressed, internalized racist psychological and behavioral dynamic—is not there. Perhaps ... academicians are to some degree also guilty of a similar bias. That is, looking to the plays that are the easiest to access, like *The Wash*, because it requires on the surface no need of shifting of psychological and cultural reference point, due to its mainstream references, and provides a story telling that is more direct and immediate, instead of looking at a piece *Sisters Matsumoto*, which demand a stepping out of worlds known and stepping into worlds of the other, worlds where communication is perhaps done in a different modality—through indirection and unspoken argument, in forms of seemingly unaffected delivery, inappropriate restraint with sudden explosions of intensity. A language of behavior which, though not as readily

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apparent to the unschooled eye, is not any less humanly expressive in depth, pain and complexity. (Letter)

Given the way that Ethnic Studies has been institutionalized in the general education requirements at universities and colleges, and the ways that minority student enrollments have plateaued and in some cases begun an anticipated decline because of the erosion of affirmative action, the consumers of Ethnic Studies have changed dramatically from the early days. Coupled with these institutional realities, the advent of cultural studies and the shift of English from a text-based to a broader cultural field in which film and popular culture are also objects of study have changed the humanities and literary studies in unprecedented ways. This disciplinary shift in English can be helpful when considering some of the challenges currently facing in teaching the play *The Wash* in the Ethnic Studies classroom to an increasingly diverse student body.

In the opening scene of the film version of the play, Nobu eats a hot dog with chop sticks, indicating his hybrid American and Japanese identity. Yet this text trips up many students in a classic way. They read one text in which the characters are of a given ethnic group and, given their hunger for the “facts” about a group of people with which many of them have had limited contact, everything read is related to an essential cultural, even racial, quality distinct from the reader’s.

Students are frequently inclined to view Nobu as flawed, because he is insufficiently “Americanized,” due to his age and generational status. This is the case even though the model for the sensitive “modern” man in this play

is a man of Nobu's generation. In addition, a much younger Sansei character, Brad, exhibits many of the same views toward women that Nobu does, in spite of his apparent "Americanness" and youth. Despite all these elements in Gotanda's play, many students are inclined to read this text within what Lisa Lowe (1996) calls the "master narratives of generational conflict and filial relation [which essentialize] Asian American culture." As Lowe argues, the reduction of the problems of Asian American and other marginalized groups into familial and generational disputes reduces the complexities of history and structural inequality to family squabbles which are purely cultural in origin and which can be remedied by adequate assimilation into America's culture and value systems.

While refuting racial stereotypes has been a necessary part of forming an Asian American identity, so also has been learning what is accurate. An informed understanding has been even more important for Asian Americans themselves than for other people, since it has influenced their self-concepts and their children's. Recovering the history of Asian Americans and unsung heroes is important work to be sure, but it can also be depressing. Gotanda has been reconstructing a past that many Asian Americans have been silent about, preferring to repress the painful memories that they have lived with all their lives. Gotanda hopes that the play's audience will no longer look at an Asian American and see a stereotype; instead, he would like them to see the Asian American as a complex human being who is also unique because he or she is an Asian-American in this country.

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