Philip Kan Gotanda relishes role as UC Berkeley professor

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Playwright Philip Kan Gotanda is Professor Gotanda now, and no one seems more surprised - or delighted - with the transformation than he does. There's nothing mutually exclusive about the two roles. As if to celebrate his new appointment, he's producing one of his most prominent plays so far in a radically reconceived and rewritten version.

"I'm allowed to work on plays here," says the 62-year-old new tenured professor at UC Berkeley's department of theater, dance and performance studies. "They want me to. I've been hired in the category of producing artists. So it's similar to all the people here who have to publish. I have to produce work. And I want to produce work."
He’d begun to do that at UC as an artist, premiering his "I Dream of Chang and Eng" (about the 19th century’s original "Siamese twins") there three years ago. This time he’s revisiting "After the War," which premiered as one of the anchor productions of American Conservatory Theater’s 2006-07 40th anniversary season.

The retitled "After the War Blues" is almost unrecognizable as the same show. The setting is the same - San Francisco's former Japanese Town and Fillmore District after World War II - but the three-story, rotating Victorian house set that dominated ACT's stage is gone. The intertwined central stories are the same, but, as Gotanda says, "leaner and meaner," infused with live period jazz and blues.

"I have this thing I call Philip's Rule of Three," Gotanda says. "I've always felt that it takes three productions to get a play right. The first time you do it, especially in a large venue, it's really hard. I was really happy with the production at ACT, but as soon as I saw it, I thought, 'I know what it needs to work better.' But I didn't get that chance until now. It never got another production."

A tough living
A lack of second and third productions of new plays has been a major problem for new and even established playwrights for decades. Various companies have tried to come up with solutions, most notably on the model of the National New Play Network, a nonprofit group in Washington, D.C., that guarantees at least three productions for its world premieres. But playwriting remains a hard way to make a living.

Gotanda, who has said he drifted into theater in the mid-’70s as he earned a law degree at Hastings College of the Law, quickly emerged as one of the two principal new voices of Asian American theater, alongside David Henry Hwang. Both became overnight stars of San Francisco's Asian American Theater Company and Los Angeles' East West Players, quickly picked up by mainstream regional theaters.

Gotanda's work has been staged at many of the top American companies - including ACT, Berkeley Rep, L.A.'s Mark Taper Forum, New York Shakespeare Festival, Manhattan Theatre Club and Seattle Rep - as well as abroad. He never had the kind of commercial success Hwang achieved with "M. Butterfly," though, and he was beginning to think about finding a new, more stable career.

"This is what I fondly call my second act," he says. "After 35 years of making my living as a playwright, I was tired. My body was different. The world was different. I wasn’t getting productions anymore. Something had to change, and I decided to try something I’d never wanted to do.

Connected and inspired
"I'd always actively avoided teaching, so I thought I'd give it a try about five years ago. I discovered it suits me as I am now. For one thing, it’s not about me: What am I thinking? Where is the next story going to come from? It’s all about
the students. I find I actually have something to offer in helping them learn, and it's hard to describe, but that makes me feel connected and inspired again."

Gotanda teaches playwriting each term as well as another course, currently contemporary American drama. And he teaches through developing productions. For "After the War Blues," that has meant not only the 14 students in the cast but also those who've worked with the professional theater artists brought in to design the set, costumes, lights and sound, choreographer Erika Chong Shuch, fight director Dave Maier and - his primary collaborator - director Steven Anthony Jones, longtime member of ACT's core company and now artistic director of the Lorraine Hansberry Theatre.

"I jumped at the opportunity," says Jones, who was a member of the original ACT cast and has been working with Gotanda on a Jamaican American rewrite of one of his most widely produced plays, "The Wash," for Jones' company.

Jones and Gotanda began talking about rewrites for "War" during the ACT production ("We both felt there was something more we could do with these characters and stories," Jones says). And though Jones credits Gotanda with most of the ideas, Gotanda says his director came up with the play's new opening, a moody blues duet between trumpeter Brendan Liu and scat singer Mark Vinzant.

With the main character, jazz musician and internment camp returnee Chet (Intae Kim) shadowed by Liu as what Jones calls "his inner jazz self," "War Blues" takes on the aura of a dream play. But Gotanda and Jones have also made more explicit the racial tensions between the returning Japanese and the African Americans who moved into the neighborhood in their absence, adding more of an edge to the play's interracial friendships and romances.

"I wanted those tensions to be more naked," says Gotanda. "And I wanted more music, live music. Whenever you do a play about a musician, it always seems the actor can't play the instrument. You have to work around that. But one of my students is in a band called Mad Noise, and they had this horn player, Brendan, who was just graduating from the music department, who can really play. Then in another class, I was talking with this older student and it turned out he could really sing the blues. He used to run a club in Louisiana."


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