

WHAT'S WRONG WITH STEREOTYPES?

by Kat Avila

In the United States, we still watch black-and-white TV. When you get color, it is filtered through straitjacket stereotypes of Asians and Latinos given life by writers whose major interaction with the two ethnic groups consists of giving instructions to their house and garden help.

About ten years ago, I listened to keynote speaker Carmen Zapata, the co-founder of the Bilingual Foundation of the Arts, as she made a point that everything should be done to destroy stereotypes; that is, these ignorant media images that paint us as disenfranchised culturally and economically from American society, the effect being to dehumanize us in the eyes of other Americans and/or position us as permanent foreigners. Not much has changed for either the Latino or Asian acting community, I thought, as I recently sat in the audience for a panel discussion of "Asian Stereotypes in Hollywood: Past and Present Portrayals" at the Autry Museum of Western Heritage in Los Angeles.

For Latino actors, there are one too many Latino lover, bandito, drug seller, gang member, prostitute, and housemaid roles in television and film. The roles for Asian actors somewhat overlap those offered to Latino actors, though computer geek isn't a role I've ever heard a Latino actor being asked to audition for. Tim Dang, artistic director for the Los Angeles-based East West Players, pointed out that one out of six doctors in the U.S. is Asian/Pacific Islander, but not on TV. Another panelist, actor-activist Jack Ong, was auditioning for his sixteenth role as a restaurant waiter with an accent. Sumi Haru, First V.P. of the Screen Actors Guild, said she refuses to do auditions where an accent is required, thereby not supporting the fortune-cookie language Asian-American actors often end up spouting on American television. (It's no wonder so many of us are asked how we learned to speak English so well.)

What's wrong with stereotypes? Panelist Beulah Quo, who has been in the entertainment industry for forty-six years, emphatically stressed that stereotypes do not show the whole human being. And what people see on television and film influences their behavior toward us. Only in recent years have there been increased opportunities for interaction between Asians/Pacific Islanders and other American groups to reform the notions we have of one another.

In addition to the usual ethnic stereotypes, Asian/Pacific Islander entertainers have to contend with actor-artist stereotypes: Asians can't sing. Asians can't really act. Asians aren't bankable.

The activism of actors was once restricted to individuals trying to reduce the casual usage of racial epithets on screen. Presently, Asian/Pacific Islander entertainers are more organized in their activism. The same cannot be said of the Asian/Pacific Islander community as a whole since many people are unaware of or insensitive to the issues and what is at stake. The importance of audience feedback from Asian/Pacific Islanders to what is being presented on television cannot be repeated enough. One letter represents 10,000 viewers to a network executive!

Actress, director, and producer Elizabeth Sung expressed hope for change

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in the numbers of Asian-Americans entering film schools who are creating contrastive and authentic material. She proposed independent filmmaking as a tool to combat stereotypes and to create new images: "Think global. Think big."

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