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Mia Park Interview

Justin Fernandez
jayfernandez.1@outlook.com

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Interviewer: Justin Fernandez

Artist: Mia Park

Location: Via Telephone

Date: May 12, 2018

Note: The following interview was conducted by a DePaul University undergraduate student enrolled in AAS203: Asian American Arts / Culture during the Spring 2018 quarter as part of the Asian American Art Oral History Research Project conducted by Laura Kina, Professor of Art, Media & Design.



Mia Park

Photo courtesy of the artist.

Bio: Mia Park is a multidisciplinary artist acting, writing, playing music, producing events, teaching yoga, and volunteering in Chicago, IL. She shares her passion for discovery and self-inquiry with hope and optimism. Mia began professionally acting in 1997 hosting the cult favorite cable access dance show Chic-A-Go-Go. Her acting career has brought her on stage, in film, on television and on the radio. Mia currently plays the recurring character Nurse Beth Cole on NBC's Chicago Med. She has advocated for Asian American representation in acting since 2006 when she co-founded A-Squared Theatre and hosted educational theater workshops for the Chicago Asian American Acting Industry Group. Mia now curates Chicago's first Asian American play reading series, "Our Perspective: Asian American Play Readings" and is the Chicago coordinator for the national Asian American Theater Conference and Festival.

Bio from <http://www.miapark.com/>

Interview Transcript:

Justin Fernandez: Mia, can you just tell me a little bit about yourself?

Mia Park: Sure. Well, my name is Mia Chan Mi Park and I am Korean American. I was born and raised in Philadelphia and I've been in Chicago for 20 some years. Philly is my hometown, Chicago is my home. I've lived in Seoul, Korea. I've lived in Los Angeles. I've lived in Austin, Texas. I've lived in quite a few places and I really find Chicago to be the place for me in this point of my life as an adult.

JF: Awesome!

MP: I can go on and on about me.

JF: Yeah! Sure, go ahead continue.

MP: Well I am a multidisciplinary artist as I call myself that. So, which means I am a professional actress and I'm a yoga teacher. I'm also a producer and I'm a brand new playwright. That's kinda my new baby steps, is being a playwright. That's my new craft right now that I'm working on. I kinda have this amazing capability to just have a pretty large bandwidth to just take on projects that involve organizing or communication and I'm good at connecting them. In other words, for example, I'm now a Korean culture consultant for JM Smucker, the jelly company. So that's a freelance gig I'm doing which is kinda interesting and unusual. Another thing I'm doing is sometimes I design websites for yoga teachers who don't have a website and don't know how to get into that. There's a lot of various things that I love doing that are sources of income.

JF: Going back to your acting career, so how and when did you get into acting?

MP: Yeah, so I got into acting in 2000. So, I started hosting this local kids TV show, *Chic-A-Go-Go*. We're not as active as we used to be, but we used to film every month. So, in about 1998, I started hosting that show and that got me comfortable being in front of a TV camera in a TV studio. Two years later I said I'm going to try "this acting thing." So, I got my friend to take my headshots and I sent out my headshots and bam! Lo and behold I was represented by agents and different agencies and that's how I got into acting, I started doing a lot of commercials and things like that and bits in movies. I got into theatre four or five years after that. So, I've been doing theatre, voiceover, print jobs which means like lifestyle and modeling and it all started with this TV show *Chic-A-Go-Go*.

JF: Awesome. I was doing research, could you speak more about the A-Squared Theatre and the Chicago Asian American Acting Industry Group?

MP: Sure. I started A-Squared Theatre Company in 2006. There had been an Asian theatre company in Chicago, but it closed. But there was a guy that had a little bit of seed money, a couple thousand bucks, his name is Alan Sermonia, he now lives in New York, Filipino-American actor guy. So, I had this idea to start up another theatre company. So, I got in touch with him and I got in touch with one of my acting classmates named Cary Shoda and we sat down and talked about it and we started a new company and the couple thousand bucks that my friend had, the seed money that Alan had, and we put on our first play. We did fundraising and made money from shows. I stepped down from A-Squared and I'm also no longer on their board, but I wish them well. So, Cary Shoda is now their artistic director and they are Chicago's only pan-Asian dramatic theatre company. So there quite a lot of theatre companies, there are actually six Asian-American performing groups in Chicago. It's a pretty big number now, which is great. Two improv sketch-comedy groups and four theatrical groups. But of those four, A-Squared again is the only one that involves the whole diaspora of Asian-American voices.

So, the Chicago Asian American Acting Industry Meetup Group, I'm actually folding that because it's costing me about \$170 a year and I tried to implement people paying \$5 to be a part of it and like two people paid. So, I'm closing that because that's my money. I did it for over a year, paying out of pocket but right now my efforts are going towards organizing two Asian-American theatre events in Chicago, so that's where my passion going to lie. I feel I need to focus on producing shows rather than getting people to come to shows. So as part of the Asian American Acting Industry Meetup Group, I also held monthly workshops because I thought we need to train our local Asian-American acting community, in order to have the level of talent that talent agencies could use and that kinda thing. That was going okay but it varied, sometimes we would have 18 people, sometimes we would have 1. Again, that was a lot of effort for me monthly to coordinate so I'm focusing my energies on producing something called, *Our Perspective*.

So, *Our Perspective* is Chicago's first Asian-American play reading series, which is really exciting. So, I hired local Midwestern Asian-American playwrights and all Asian-American play directors. The cast is local as well but it's not all Asian-American because not all plays have Asian-American characters, so the cast is per character. This reading series is four installments. Every season, winter, spring, fall, summer. I went right to the top, I was like, "You know what, I'm not going to do this in a storefront somewhere, I'm going to go to the top." They are being hosted at Goodman, Steppenwolf, and Victory Gardens. So, with that in mind, I did the first reading in the Goodman in February. It was over 100 people, standing room only. They had to bring out chairs. So that was super exciting. Then the next one is at Steppenwolf in May. In

addition to that, I was hired by the National Asian American Theatre Organization to be the local coordinator for the Asian-American national conference and festivals. It's the 6th one and it's the first time it's happening in Chicago.

JF: Awesome. So, I'm also a Filipino-American and this question has always been bugging me in terms of our representation in the media. So how do you think the media can better represent us, the Asian Pacific American community?

MP: There's a long way to go with that, right?

JF: [laughs] Right.

MP: There's a lot we can do with that. Well, I think a good way we can get represented is to... When you say media, do mean in entertainment or like news or what does media mean to you?

JF: I think to me, I always kinda see it as TV shows. I know it seems really basic but it's like the most thing I watch every day in terms of media that... I don't see people like me on TV I always questioned why but as I grew I understood why because of all the complex factors. But I would say in terms of TV.

MP: So, you are talking entertainment when you say media. I think part of that is a big conversation. Part of us getting representation has to do with a lot of factors that were not in control of. We are not yet the casting agents. We are not yet the money-making producers or the ones that own the TV stations because money talks, right?

JF: Right.

MP: So, once we get into those positions of leadership it will be easier to be represented. I'm all about "Pull yourself up by your bootstraps", "Create your own content", "Put on your own shows", "Get out there and if no one is doing it for you, do it yourself". So that's where I'm coming from. With that in mind, when it comes to TV, there are a lot of great Chicago, Asian-American content makers. People who are writing the content, writing webisodes, writing pilot TV shows, writing plays. There are a growing number of Asian-American directors, the ones that have the vision, the ones who know how to take a story on paper and put it onto a screen. Where the other part comes in is that we need more Asian-American producers, in my opinion, because you can have story and you can have someone who can make that story make sense on a screen, but you need that money to do that and that's where the producers come in with fundraising and all that. There are a growing number of producers that are Asian-American. So that's the formula on why there is not that much representation. Also, the talent, from the front end if you will, we need actors who are quality enough that people go, "You know I'm thinking of casting an Asian

person, but you know that guy is good” or “She’s great I’m going to put her in that role.” So that has a lot to do with that too. Think of Shonda Rhimes. She’s a machine. She’s brilliant. She’s writing her own shows. She’s her own showrunner, putting the shows together. She writes these brilliant characters and she’s done so much advocacy work for African American women. What we need is an Asian-American in that position who is talented and skilled enough and also has kinda enough production strength to also produce, to write the shows, to write characters that represent them. So that’s how I think we can have more Asian-American representation.

JF: It’s clear that you are a multidisciplinary artist. So, I was kinda interested if you could speak on how yoga has weaved into your career.

MP: Yoga is great. Like every other person on the planet, I’m complex and I’ve done a lot in my life. I’ve probably done more than the average person, I would think humbly. Yoga came in. I grew up doing martial arts and gymnastics. I’ve had a very strong connection occupying this body and yoga came in when I was teaching kickboxing in the 2000’s era. In 2002, I began practicing yoga and I started teaching in 2006. It’s the other part of my livelihood and I love it. I love having a practice that helps you go inwards, that helps you discover yourself more, that is actually a deep spiritual practice. So that’s what I’m interested in, this deep, spiritual side of yoga. Also, I think we need to keep the body healthy. We need to keep the vessel our souls are in strong, so that’s where the yoga comes in as well.

JF: Going back to Asian-American identity, was there ever a time in your work that you ever addressed Asian-American identity? Do you have any specific examples?

MP: In my work? Yeah, for sure. I started volunteering in the Asian-American community in 1995. That kinda solidified my personal identification in Chicago as an Asian-American citizen. Creatively, it started with a band. My whole presence in the public eye started as a rock drummer. I started an Asian-American female rock trio. We were great. The name of the band is “*Kim*”. One woman moved to Boston, so who knows when we will play again. “*Kim*” started out as four piece and it became three of us and it was great. We had a lot of fun. We did a reunion show just two or three years ago, actually. So were still kinda playing. That was my first public and creative attempt to merely solidify and redefine what an Asian-American identity is. From there, I got into acting in 2000. It became quite clear to me that there was the misrepresentation and being underrepresented. I was told to wear a Korean dress for a United Airlines industrial film and it was totally ridiculous because I was like, “Why would I wear a traditional Korean dress riding an airplane?” So, I did and the woman was like, “You’re dragging your kimono on the ground.” I was like, “This is not a kimono.” She was like, “It’s such pretty kimono.” Oh my god, it was so dumb. That really solidified my desire to have a more Asian-American identity in acting.

Right around that time is when I started A-Squared and within A-Squared I created and curated a show called *My Asian Mom*, which were 10-minute plays and under of different artists talking about their Asian mom. So that was a really large group. There was one woman who wrote a piece who was a white woman, but she really wanted to be an Asian mom because she thought Asian moms had the best model and that was kinda a farce on cultural appropriation from white female views. So, I accepted that because it was very clever in that way. But everybody else were Asian people doing pieces that had big reflections about their mom. It was a hit, we extended the show and it made money for the theatre and right around that time I left the theatre and I empowered them to continue *My Asian Mom*. They ran it for another 3 or 4 seasons and it continued to make them money. It was another thing I created about Asian-American identity and as playwright, I'm working on my third, full-length play and it is directly about my North Korean great-grandmother, who kept walking backing and forth between the North and South Korean border after they escaped from North Korea, trying to bring money back from their apple orchard to the South. Anyways, that's a family cathartic thing I'm doing. That somehow helps form an Asian-American identity voice in that historical narrative. I'm figuring out how that's going to happen.

JF: What opportunities will continue to pursue in the future, in terms of artwork, acting, producing, focusing on yoga?

MP: Things that I'm looking forward to working on are definitely with yoga. I teach yoga with private clients, it's a passion of mine and its part of a way I make a living. I also picture producing *Our Perspective* ongoing. I would love that to keep going forward, so I would like to do that next year, in other words. I'd also like to produce full-on theatrical shows. So, in the city of Chicago, next year is the "Year of Theater". One year they had the "Year of Dance" and one year they had the "Year of Public Sculpture". So, in that way, the city puts extra money in that spotlight. I'm thinking about producing another play that involves either a brand-new script or I might revise *My Asian Mom* again because that gave a lot of people a lot of voices and it was a hit. So, I'm thinking about producing a play. Also, producing an Asian-American play reading series again next year. Sometimes people ask me to come on board with their project and I just don't have the bandwidth for that so who knows what's going to fall into my lap.

JF: That'd be awesome, I'd love to see *My Asian Mom* because that would be a great story to see with my own mom and that artwork being displayed.

MP: Oh yeah! We definitely had some Filipino moms in there who brought in some *lumpia*. Mothers and food are a huge bond in every culture but Asian moms and like delicious Asian food are always winning, triple win.

End.