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'Caught' part of Asian-American theater movement in Philly

Rick Shiomi arrived in Philadelphia last February prepared to embark on a year-long residency to help cultivate the city's Asian-American theater community. What he was unprepared for was the controversy that erupted less than a month later, when Lantern Theater Company opened its production of Shakespeare's "The Tragedy of Julius Caesar" set in feudal Japan without a single Asian-American actor in the cast, prompting a scathing open letter from local dance-theater artist Makoto Hirano. It may not have been a welcome diversion, but in a way it might have helped him to rally the local community behind his cause.

"The whole Lantern controversy just fell into my lap," recalls Shiomi. "On one side it really galvanized the younger Asian-American theater artists to be aware that they have issues that are not being met or understood here in the theater community. And the great news is that Charles McMahan, who runs the Lantern, recognized that he made that mistake and is now proactively involved in trying to make the situation better."

Shiomi has been a leader in the Asian-American theater movement for three decades, most prominently as the founder and artistic director of Minneapolis' Mu Performing Arts theater company. Beginning his tenure in Philly, which was funded by the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation and has involved a series of workshops and play readings, Shiomi had identified a scant three Asian-American actors in the city – Hirano, Justin Jain and Bi Jean Ngo. (The latter two are in Shiomi's latest, "Caught,"; see sidebar.)

"The Asian-American theater community was almost a non-existent presence," he says.

"But in a lovely bit of serendipitous timing, we discovered that there's now a whole group of young Asian-American actors and theater artists emerging here.

"So the residency has been overwhelmingly successful in a completely unexpected way. ... That's really exciting for me because I'm just an outsider who came in to try to help but had no idea if it would happen."

Shiomi's residency will culminate this month with the world premiere of "Caught," a new play by Christopher Chen which opens at InterActTheatre Company this week. The satirical play involves a Chinese dissident artist whose story of imprisonment in his home country may not be entirely factual. The subject can't help but bring to mind the story of Ai Weiwei, the Chinese contemporary artist who was arrested in Beijing in 2011, but with a biting humorous twist.

"It's a play that constantly challenges your understanding of what is truthful and who has the power to understand and know the truth," Shiomi says. "It's a tortuously funny, fresh and engaging play."