

## FROM MARGINS TO CENTER STAGE

An Ethnographic Study of Theater Mu in the Twin Cities



Photo by Rich Ryan

### What is the issue?

Theater Mu has demonstrated resilience and growth in the face of Covid-19, funding shortages, and other obstacles to provide a home for Asian American artists. These artists have continually experienced discrimination and underrepresentation in the larger theater landscape. This study explores how Mu continues to create a space where Asian American artists can create, be vulnerable, and feel like they belong.

### What is the research context?

Theater Mu was established in 1992 and is dedicated to bringing Asian American voices to the American theater community. Mu helps develop and support the work of local and national playwrights, actors, directors, and musicians by premiering new works. Mu is located in Minnesota's Twin Cities, one of the most multiracial and multiethnic metropolitan areas in the United States.

### What are the research findings?

The study suggests that Theater Mu, a space founded by and for Asian Americans, provides artists with a sense of belonging and space to be vulnerable, allowing them to express themselves authentically and creatively. In doing so, the theater has played an integral role in developing and nurturing artists and local and national arts leaders.

### Research Approach

This study draws on multiple methodologies: archival research, structured interviews with artists and staff, and ethnographic research that included observing rehearsals, training workshops, committee meetings, and staff meetings. The researcher, kt shorb, engaged in practice-as-research-teaching, directing, and developing pieces for Theater Mu to further understand the ideas of "home" for both artists and audiences of the theater.

Mu has grown significantly, expanding its budget and receiving national recognition, not only for its productions, which seek to challenge the conventions and aesthetics of the field, but also for paying its staff, including production staff, living wages—a struggle for many nonprofit theaters.

Mu creates a safe creative space where Asian American artists can share the micro- and macroaggressions they have experienced in the theater world, such as being asked to play "more Asian" for a stereotypical role. These experiences, they say, can lead to psychological

Study by kt shorb, Ph.D., University of Texas at Austin

fatigue. In contrast, working with Mu they “didn’t need to explain” various racialized specificities and could therefore concentrate on their work. The artists interviewed also shared that Mu provided a space where up-and-coming artists could take risks and that the theater invested time and opportunity in them, even when they had not yet been “proven” elsewhere. Both Asian American and non-Asian American artists shared that Mu became their creative family, where they could be ambitious and take risks because they felt supported by a large safety net of other artists. Many also credited specific Mu staff, who provided attentive mentoring and a space for professional development and growth.

The organization also serves as a haven for Asian American and BIPOC organizations locally, investing in community engagement and inclusion. During the uprisings in response to George Floyd’s murder, Mu supported staff who wanted to participate in local mutual aid efforts by counting it toward their work hours. The staff undergo ongoing training on equity and inclusion, and the company has worked to expand who is at the center of the Asian American experience by staging works from Southeast Asian (Burmese, Laotian, Thai, and Vietnamese), South Asian (Bangladeshi, Indian, Pakistani, and Sri Lankan) American, and queer writers who have historically been underrepresented onstage. In addition, Mu

has grown to support artists in markets outside of the Twin Cities. In 2024, for example, it held a competitive national call for scripts for its New Eyes Festival. The theater works in solidarity with other Asian American performing arts organizations throughout the country while also collaborating with other BIPOC organizations to advocate for more support from local and national funders.

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## Why does this matter?

Theater Mu plays a critical role in local and national theater arts communities and ecosystems. It is committed to funding up-and-coming writers and new works. It offers artists space for experimentation and risk taking. This is essential for artists and for arts communities. As support for BIPOC arts organizations remains crucial, funders might:

- Provide multiyear operational support to allow organizations like Mu to continue long-term planning, invest in new creative talent, and operate beyond annual fundraising cycles.
- Launch or expand grant programs dedicated to new play development, residencies, or commissions for underrepresented playwrights and directors.
- Support ecosystem building by funding collaborative initiatives, such as co-productions or regional convenings that bring together BIPOC-led theaters, artists, and audiences

The study this brief is based on was funded by The Wallace Foundation as part of its Advancing Well-Being in the Arts initiative. The initiative seeks to support and document the essential role that arts organizations rooted in communities of color play in the U.S. arts ecosystem. The views summarized in this brief are those of the researcher and do not necessarily reflect the views of the foundation.