

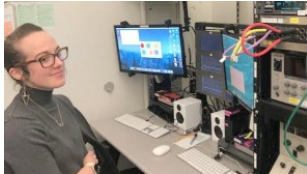
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NW Asian American Theatre comes back to life in digital project

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By Jason Cruz
NORTHWEST ASIAN WEEKLY



Libby Savage Hopfau, program manager/audiovisual archivist at MIPoPS. Photo by Jason Cruz/NWAW

Enveloped in a windowless office in City Hall, the history of Asian American Theatre in the 1990s in Seattle is being preserved. In conjunction with the Wing Luke Museum, the Moving Image Preservation of Puget Sound (MIPoPS) are digitizing recordings from the Northwest Asian American Theatre (NWAAT).

The Wing Luke Museum received a grant from 4Culture, the cultural funding agency for King County to catalogue the NWAAT materials, and the Seattle City Archives invited the museum to be part of its MIPoPS' project. MIPoPS received a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities to digitize the tapes.

It was identified that the Wing Luke Museum had a unique, rare collection of tapes from the NWAAT. MIPoPS is digitizing the whole collection, in addition to 100 oral histories from the Wing Luke Museum. The collection includes a wide variety of videos. In addition to plays, there are dances, conferences about the status of Asian American theatre and musical performances. They range from the traditional, such as a revival of West Side Story, to modern interpretive dance.

According to Ari Lavigne of MIPoPS, there are 198 tapes and around 400 hours of tape time. The Wing Luke Museum had curated the tapes and inventoried the tapes for MIPoPS to convert.

The VHS tape machines and other recording equipment in the small room were a reminder of technology from another time, another century to be precise. Rachel Price, the executive director of MIPoPS, noted that the equipment is outdated and the service of the machines may require an eBay search to discover a product.

Yet the machines, which many born in this century would not recognize, will transfer tapes of plays, oral histories, improv shows, and other theatre projects to this century's technologies. The home for these videos is found on the open-source (non-commercial) archive.org. The videos are populating the Wing Luke site and it is anticipated that they will be done with the footage sometime in February.

The process for digitizing one VHS tape to a digital format can be long and tedious, as there is no way to speed up the recording of the VHS to digital. One would have to play the VHS tape in real-time with MIPoPS aiding with the appearance of the video. Over time, the tapes deteriorate, so there is some wear on the tape for which MIPoPS attempts to cure with its video equipment.

"It was really interesting to see this theatre group doing all of these different stories from this Pan-Asian experience," explained Lavigne. "NWAAT seemed like it gave Asian American actors an opportunity and community." She added, "You see the same actors, the same credits." She indicated that the project will help amplify the Asian American theatre experience.

According to its mission statement, MIPoPS is a nonprofit formed "to help preserve our cultural heritage by assisting archives, libraries, and other organizations with the conversion of analog video recordings to digital formats according to archival best practices." Since its inception in 2015, MIPoPS has digitized over 1,078 videotapes amassing over 2,156 hours. MIPoPS is funded through various grants, such as the National Endowment for the Humanities, the National Historic Publications and Records Commission, and 4Culture.

The Wing Luke Museum does not have plans at the moment to exhibit the materials once the videos are transferred over to digital, according to Collections Manager Bob Fisher. However, a portion of the videos will be featured by the Northwest Film Forum on a quarterly basis starting on Feb. 10.

Roger Tang, a NWAAT board member in the 1980s and 1990s, advised of the importance of this project.

"A portion of the culture and history is 'time bound,' a lot of the stuff lives in memories right now," explained Tang. "In talking with younger artists across the country, I constantly am told that it's too bad that a lot of our early work is not available. If there's a fighting chance



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that this can get done, there'll be a lot of excitement not just in Seattle, but across the country, as NWAAT was, for the longest time, one of just five Asian American theaters keeping the flame alive." Tang remains active in the Asian American theatre community as a part of Pork Filled Productions Asian American Theatre.

"When we were actually doing the shows, we were documenting all the shows for archival purposes," said Kathy Hsieh, the managing director of the NWAAT at the time. "Because it is such a live art form, unless it is captured through film or video, no one would ever know it ever happened." Hsieh also is an actress, writer, and director, and was very active with the theatre. A part of recording the shows during that time was to market the product to benefactors, explained Tang. It was also put on tape for the performers to critique their work and never intended to be seen by the public. The videos include the early works of David Henry Hwang, the playwright most famous for his play M. Butterfly, which premiered on Broadway in 1988.

"We can't go into the future until you what you've done in the past," stated Tang, about the necessity to view these performances in a historical perspective for the current batch of the Asian American theatre community. "It would be invaluable for development and sense of histories [for Asian American playwrights]."

Hsieh, who has taught a class about Asian American theatre at the University of Washington's Drama Department, was relieved that the Wing Luke Museum had stored these tapes.

"It made me so happy, because it made me realize that at least a new generation of Asian Americans and the broader community will get to see who Asian Americans are and they are going to get the stories and receive access." Online access will help individuals all over the country see that they are not alone in their pursuit of the arts.

"I meet young Asian Americans that have dreamed about being in television or film and state how hard it is to find role models," explained Hsieh. "The archive will show that there are whole decades of people who came before them."

To find the Wing Luke Museum archive, visit archive.org/details/winglukemuseum.

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