

PROFILE: Lane Nishikawa

by [Arline Klatte](#), The Gate



The first time local writer, actor and performer Lane Nishikawa saw an Asian-American production, he was a student at San Francisco State University. It floored him. "It was a story about me without being me," he says today. "It was the story of the struggle of the Asian man. I had never seen anything like it. I just had to get involved. I wanted to learn everything I could about theater."

He volunteered: moving lights, setting up and, later, writing plays and eventually became artistic director of the SF-based Asian American Theater Company in 1986. But with his discovery of the theater, came deep frustration.

In his solo show, "I'm on a Mission from Buddha," Nishikawa revealed the trauma of trying to pursue an acting career as an Asian male: the world of auditioning became an endless round of butler-role tryouts with directors asking Nishikawa to speak with a higher voice. "You're a little tall," said one director -- with the implied omission -- "for an Asian dude."

"Hollywood releases 400 films a year," Nishikawa says. "Maybe two of them have a good black role -- a good Wesley Snipes or Denzel Washington role. But for Asian Americans, forget it. If we scan all the Asian roles of the last four years, they're all small and bad."

Nishikawa's latest, "Mifune and Me," plays this Saturday at Marin's Hoytt Theater. **Toshiro Mifune**, the legendary Japanese actor who could play anyone -- from a bandit (Rashomon) to a great warrior (Seven Samurai) -- in many of director Akira Kurosawa's films, was a life-long role model for Nishikawa. "Mifune and Me" will feature monologues and video clips, such as Mickey Rooney's racist portrayal of a Japanese landlord in "Breakfast at Tiffany's" and clips from some of Mifune's greatest performances.

"Mifune was the great one," Nishikawa said of the actor who died last Christmas Eve. "Every year, so many of our heroes and idols are slowly gone. Robert Mitchum, Jimmy Stewart -- oh no, you want them to live forever. But with Mifune, it was almost like your relative. You watch his films and think, 'This is what it could be like if you were given a great role.' All his roles were so full."

For Asian-American actors, Nishikawa says, the chances of getting an epic role like one of Mifune's are slim. "You think all your life you want to get one role like Mifune had. But I might not even be able to play him in my own country. I might have to go to Japan and learn to speak Japanese to get a

Lane Nishikawa in action

[A video clip from "I'm on a Mission from Buddha."](#)

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good role!"

Which is why Nishikawa has taken to writing them for himself. Born in Hawaii and raised in San Francisco (he attended Lowell High School but says he hung out with friends at Washington High), he says he became interested in writing because a counselor at SF State steered him toward some writing classes. Now, he writes all his own material and praises the rise in popularity of the solo show.

"A lot of theater companies didn't consider the one-person show to be a legitimate art form for a long time," Nishikawa said. "Now theater companies are including solo performances in their stage calendars. Back when I started doing solo shows, the only other people I knew of who were doing them were **Whoopi Goldberg** and [Spalding Gray](#)."

In the years since he wrote his most-popular show 'Buddha,' (airing on PBS in 1994), he says the climate for Asian Americans has not improved in the realm of film and theater. Nishikawa commends Berkeley Reperatory Theatre for its continuous support of the work of Philip Kan Gotanda, and he tipped his hat to American Conservatory Theater, which is set to produce David Hwang's new play. But then he adds sardonically, "It's the first Asian play ACT has ever done. The didn't even do 'M Butterfly'."

"We're still looked at as foreigners," adding that this is why he aggressively tours his shows. "I want to challenge people's perceptions. I want people to know this isn't a guy from Japan; it's a guy from America. This isn't a mom-and-pop grocery-store owner. We always do questions after the show and it's interesting to see the questions that come up. A theater audience wants to learn something -- that's what I love about theater."

His current projects include "Heal a River," a solo show about an internment camp in Arizona where Japanese-Americans and Native Americans forged relations. And he's kicking around some other stories about Japanese Americans in the U.S. during World War II.

"Right now, my stories seem to focus all around my parents' generation because I want to make sure their stories get out. And I want them to see it. I want them to enjoy them. So my focus is there. I've got plenty of time to write about Sanseis (third-generation Japanese Americans). Definitely I know in the back of my mind: There are these stories that I want to get out."

Lane Nishikawa performs his latest solo performance "Mifune and Me" on Jan. 17, 8 pm at the Osher Marin Jewish Community Center's Hoytt Theater, 200 North San Pedro Road, San Rafael. \$20. 415-479-2000.