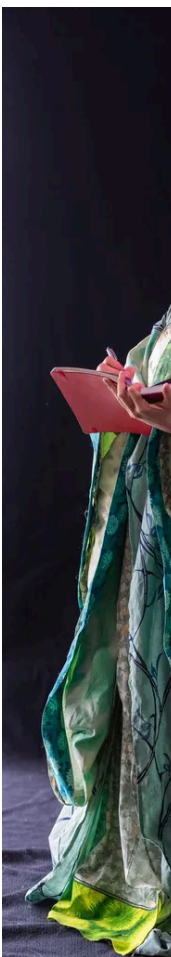


In ‘Unrivaled,’ two frenemies have much to write about

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Alanah Pascual and Pearl Lam in “Unrivaled,” co-produced by Seattle Public Theater and SIS Productions. (Rick Wong)

By [Gemma Alexander](#)

Special to The Seattle Times

People love a celebrity feud. If the celebrities in question are talented enough, they can hold the public’s interest for a very long time. In the case of two rival Japanese writers, people have been reading their competing works for 1,100 years.

And now a contemporary writer with Seattle roots has written a play about them.

A co-production of [Seattle Public Theater](#) and [SIS Productions](#), “Unrivaled,” written by Rosie Narasaki and directed by Mimi Katano, will run May 10-June 2. The first mainstage play from SIS Productions since the pandemic uses the rivalry between two of the world’s most legendary writers to examine how power systems divide the very people who have the most to gain from cooperation.

The rivals in question are Sei Shōnagon and Murasaki Shikibu.

“These two were literally the Beyoncé and Taylor Swift of their day,” said producer Kathy Hsieh. Their combination of exquisite poetry and dishy gossip continues to attract audiences centuries later — often through comic book and TV adaptations.

Sponsored by Empress Teishi, Shōnagon wrote a collection of poetry and witty miscellany in 1002 that was called “The Pillow Book” because it was as thick as a pillow in an era when paper was a luxury product.

A few years later, the tutor to the empress’s rival Shoshi, Shikibu wrote the world’s first known novel, “The Tale of Genji,” about a talented and handsome nobleman hampered by his family’s unfortunate political position.

“It swept the nation. Everybody was reading it, and everybody couldn’t wait for the next episode. She was very clever about weaving all these very current political things into this ‘Bridgerton’-like soap opera,” explained Katano. These authors’ popularity affected their sponsors’ status, with real impacts on the balance of power.

“Women were used as a pawn for men in their family to advance their career. To elevate the status of women was very important,” said Katano.

But even as women were used to acquire power, “because it was a patriarchal society, they were not the ones who ultimately had power. That’s still happening today where women don’t have their own agency, even over their own bodies,” Hsieh said, drawing a parallel to women’s autonomy over their own bodies in current-day America.

Although the play deals with historical facts, it is fiction — the two writers probably never met in person — and Katano is not fixated on historical details.

“I’m from Tokyo. I’m a foreigner in America, and part of my personal artistic mission is to be the bridge between my two cultures. When I am called to tell a Japanese story, I use my resources to make sure I understand the context and background and bring that onto the stage with authenticity,” said Katano. “Unrivaled” builds that bridge visually through sets and costumes. As the play progresses, contemporary elements begin to appear on the historical set. Layers of kimono are shed to reveal contemporary clothing. The music is J-pop.

“Right off, when they open their mouths, you know this is not going to be a history play,” said Hsieh. She says the writer’s use of contemporary language draws attention to how little has changed in a millennium.

Narasaki, the playwright, comes from a Pacific Northwest theater family. Before her actor parents moved to California, her father, also a playwright, performed with [Northwest Asian American Theatre](#). An actor herself, Narasaki found parallels between Heian-period (794-1185) power structures and today’s competitive auditions for limited roles for Asian American women.

“The irony is lots of times you feel more competitive with people who look like you, the people you should have the most solidarity with, because they are struggling in the same situation. In our country, the systems are set up to divide people so that people in power can stay in power. She’s done such a lovely job crafting this play that reveals all of that,” said Hsieh.

This production of “Unrivaled” has a cast, director, producer, stage manager and production managers who are all Asian American and Pacific Islander.

“One of the things that SIS is always trying to do is introduce Asian American writers to the region,” said Hsieh. These writers include Lauren Yee, whose [“Cambodian Rock Band”](#) was recently produced at ACT; Maggie Lee, whose [“Once More, Just for You”](#) premiered at SPT this season; and Dipika Guha, who went on to work on “The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel” on TV.

When SPT invited SIS to be part of this season, the companies considered more than 20 scripts.

“Coming out of the pandemic where the country is so divided in so many different ways, I wanted to do something that spoke to our feminist values,” said Hsieh. “Unrivaled” rose to the top for its examination of solidarity and division — and for its humor.

“It’s a very smart play, and very funny,” said Katano.

Katano hopes the play will appeal to diverse audiences, from those who’ve never heard of the Heian period to Japanese people revisiting high school history. “And of course, Asian American folks who may not often get to see a full cast of people who look like them,” she said. That includes people like Hsieh who experienced racist bullying growing up in Seattle.

“You grow up feeling like you just want to be invisible so that you don’t get hurt by other people. Part of the reason why Asian American theater exists is to remind us that we actually can be protagonists in our life story. We as human beings can have that agency and pride in people who look like us.”

“Unrivaled”

May 10-June 2; Seattle Public Theater, 7312 W. Green Lake Drive N., Seattle; accessibility info: [st.news/spt-accessibility](https://www.seattlepublictheater.org/news/spt-accessibility); \$10-\$100; 90 minutes, no intermission; 206-524-1300, seattlepublictheater.org

More AAPI performances to check out

In addition to SIS Productions, here are more Seattle-area Asian American and Pacific Islander theater companies to check out during AAPI Heritage Month in May and beyond.

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