
Asian American Art Oral History Project

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Dwight Sora Interview

Jay Lee
DePaul University

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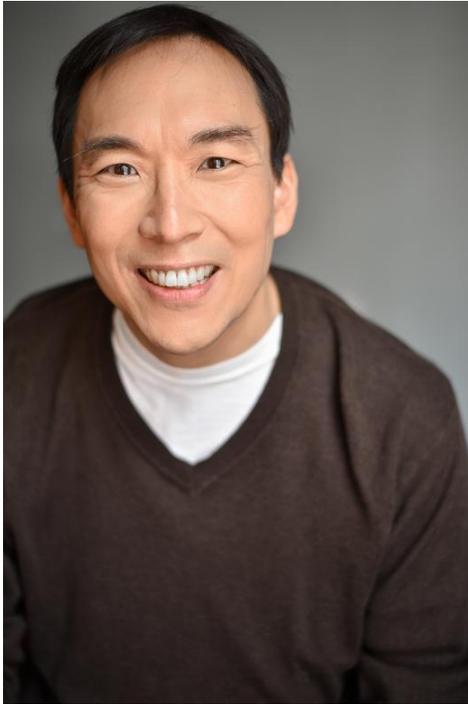
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Interviewer: Jay Lee
Interviewee: Dwight Sora
Location: City Café Chicago
Date: May 15, 2019



Artist Bio: Dwight Sora is half-Japanese (father) and half-Korean (mother) actor who grew up in the Chicago suburb of River Forest. He has studied the Japanese martial art of aikido since 1993, when he was an exchange student attending Waseda University in Tokyo. He holds a rank of sandan (third degree black belt).

Biography and Photo from IMDB

Note: The following interview was conducted by a DePaul University undergraduate student enrolled in ART 200/ AAS 203: Asian American Arts & Culture during Spring Quarter 2019 as part of the Asian American Art Oral History research project conducted by Laura Kina, Professor Art, Media, & Design.

Interview Transcript:

Jay Lee: Can you tell me a little about yourself?

Dwight Sora: I'm half Japanese and half Korean, technically fourth generation Japanese American, and second generation Korean American. I grew up in River Forest Illinois, in the West Suburbs. Pretty much a lifelong Chicagoan, I really haven't lived anywhere else except for one year of college I spent in Japan. I work as a freelance Japanese/English translator, that's how I get by. I am also an actor, mostly stage, and I had also trained in, continuously study and occasionally teach Aikido which is Japanese martial arts.

JL: That's great, I'm also second-generation Korean...it's difficult for us Asians to break into this industry.

DS: (Laughs) Yup, it's getting better

JL: I wanted to interview you because I am a film major at DePaul, and I thought we might have some similar experiences in casting and stuff.

DS: Yeah, sure.

JL: I wanted to ask you, what are the influences in your life that lead you into being an actor?

DS: Um influences... Well when I was a child, starting from very young, I was always liked performance story telling. Maybe that sounds silly, but I would start by saying "I like TV and Movies" which all kids liked. But even when I was really young, I was interested how they were put together, like why characters did stuff. And I mean like at a young age that manifested. When I was six years old I would like watch "The Making Of...", and we didn't have YouTube or DVD extras, every now and again we would get "The Making Of Specials" on prime TV. So I would watch all the makings of like *Star wars*, or *Superman*. And I remember my mother saying to me "Doesn't this ruin it for you? Seeing what happens behind the scenes?," and I said "No." What's kind of unusual for my Mom's generation of first-generation Korean, was she was interested in a lot of the stuff too. (Referring to the arts) So even when I was a kid, I remember her taking to me children's theater shows at the Goodman. And there was a pretty good theater program at what was then called Rosary College, now called Dominican University. They had a kids theater stage, and my Mom would go and take us to shows there. And it was great, and till this day, my Mom is still interested in the culture, like she goes to the Lyric musicals, and while my other Asian American friends wouldn't do that.

JL: Yeah, for me as a second generation, my parents really weren't interested in that kind of stuff and when I told them I wanted to go into film making, it was pretty difficult to convince

them that I could have a career in it. So my question was how was your experience telling your parents you wanted to pursue a career in the arts?

DS: Well aside from small school productions, where everyone participated, like the first time was in high school. I was a pretty shy kid, and I had a really bad habit of giving up interest if I didn't pick it up quickly. So I did really badly in sports. I didn't like that aspect of myself, and in my freshman year of high school I told myself I'm going to try something and not give it up. I didn't do any plays my freshman year but when sophomore year came around, I tried out for the first play in the fall, and there were call back, and I didn't get casted. So I said, "Alright I'm going to try for the next thing." And I remember it was the first studio play. My high school was huge, and there were multiple theaters. So I tried out for the first studio play, and I did call backs and didn't get cast. And I was like "I won't give up!" And spring play I got casted in. It was the first time trying it, I remember feeling really good and it wasn't a big part. It was a comic relief part, and I remember getting really pumped when people would laugh at the stuff I was doing. And then I know I was capable of it. Then I did a little more in high school, but when I got to college, I was originally going to be a English major, then I switched a Asian studies major. I performed in a musical, but I really didn't pursue it then.

JL: Oh, so you didn't go study performance arts in college?

DS: No, I went to University of Chicago, which didn't really have a theater major. And even though I had a taste of it in high school, and even then, I had an interest of how Asians were portrayed in media. I remember feeling, "There's not a big chance of being successful" and the guy who directed me in the play in high school talked to my mom. He actually said to her, "It's really hard, especially for Asians to be successful in this industry." But my parents didn't mind me doing theater, mainly because I was still doing everything else. It wasn't like I dropped the science club to do theater. And so it was acceptable, and when I got to college I remember thinking it wasn't a career. However, I remember one year, as an elective I took a improve class. And my younger brother who was still living at home told me that when I told my mom I was going to take a improve class for one quarter, she freaked out. She said, "WHAT ARE YOU DOING? DO YOU WANT TO BE AN ACTOR?"

JL: (Laughing) That is similar on how I told my parents, in high school I would just sneak those classes into my schedule and slowly over time they caught on. And I originally came into college as a business major, and my Mom was like, "you can do all the film stuff you want as long you get your business degree." And I was like "haha....OK."

DS: (Smiling) yeah they like when their kids have a safety net. In my case, my mother was a retired chemist and my father is a retired electrical engineer. So when I talked to my other Asian friends there like, "I feel sorry for you." (Laughing). But in college I really didn't pursue it in college, after college I graduated and started to work. I was involved a lot with the Asian American community in Chicago. And I also started to do Aikido, I was basically the equivalent of a gym rat. And I got pretty good at it, not to boast of anything. But around 2001, I was like "I gotta do something else." Then I got involved with a lot of community performance group in Uptown. It was really a community outreach project; it was a mix of oral history where they would go interview people from uptown. The other half, they would take those stories and turn it

into a 2-hour piece. It was anchored with some professional actors from Columbia College, like there was this guy named Brian Shaw. But mostly volunteers, and one of the performances someone came up to me and asked if I was a professional actor. And I said, “Well not really, I’m just doing this thing.” And he said, “Well, I’m producing a storefront play but we are having a really tough time casting Asian American actors, will you audition?” I was like, “Sure.” And he asked if I had a headshot and resume. I said, “No I’m not a professional actor.” But they just told me to come anyways. They asked if I had a monologue, I said, “No.” And so I just did the piece from the community group because that’s all I had. And I did it, and they liked me and they cast me. The play was terrible. (gigging)

JL: (Laughing) so what was so bad about it, like bad writing?

DS: Yeah, just like bad writing, it was a smaller startup company that doesn’t exist anymore, but the play wasn’t good, it didn’t get good reviews.

JL: Did it give you a good experience?

DS: Yeah, it was a good experience, and I met all these Asian American actors. And you know, during that play it was really my first “professional school.” I basically talked to everyone and tried to pick their minds. Like, “How do I keep doing this? Where do I get headshots, resumes and like where do I take classes?” And a couple of them told me about Stir Friday Night!

JL: Oh, I’ve heard of them.

DS: Yeah so that’s what really started it all, from that point on I would take classes here and there. I got my headshots, went to auditions, that’s basically where it took off from.

JL: That’s really interesting, I want to ask you on how you felt that your background with martial arts helped you in acting?

DS: One is like it helps me with my mental strength. In stressful situations be calm and focus. Focus on the work, and try to be somewhat spontaneous, although there is one conflict. In traditional martial arts, you want to become calm and not project anything. But in acting you project a lot. Other than that, it really helped me to do fight choreography. So, I got to assistant direct this Midwest play last year and there is a Kungfu fight scene in the middle, and the director knew me so I got to help out on the choreography.

JL: I did Tae Kwon Do and I feel like that martial arts taught me a lot of lessons for life in general. Such as being disciplined for one.

DS: Yeah, and like whenever I feel like I have a barrier in acting or really anything, I go back to the time when I first start Aikido. Like there was a time where I was terrible at this, and I got better at it.

JL: I was scrolling through your IMDB page, and I was wondering like how does being Asian American determine the types of rolls offered to you?

DS: Even still I get called in, or entirely called in if there is stuff that calls for an Asian person. And I think it's getting better right now. I remember once I got this call from my agent and they want me to audition for this Ron Howard movie. My initial reaction was "OHH, this is awesome and exciting!" They fax me the sides and it said Vietnamese massage parlor boy. I remember my heart just sank. And I haven't really reached a point where I am just bouncing from project o project, so when people are in those positions, they really don't want to turn down anything.

JL: Yeah, a lot of people say things like "You have to play the game to get the roles you want." But a lot of those rolls are demeaning.

DS: Yeah, and I've heard arguments on both sides. I met Asian Americans who refuse to take those kinds of rolls but also if you take that attitude, you will never break out. Also, it's work.

JL: Someone has to pay rent.

DS: Yeah, I think a good example of that is the whole controversy over *Miss Saigon* the musical. Hopefully I don't do musical theater really, but there is some Asian American theater artist who hate it. But then there is other people who see it as work. And it is high profile sometimes.

JL: Yeah there have been incidences where I have to go into auditions and it went well, but at the end of it, they go "Can you do that in a Asian accent?"

DS: So, if you look at my IMDB page I'm in the 2011 remake of *Red Dawn*. And that's case in point, where I followed the development of the movie. It said that the remake was going to have the Chinese as the bad guys. And I'm like, "This is terrible." I remember reading a blog from this high profile Asian American actor saying that "it was offensive, and I would have no part of it." And I was like "Right on! That's great!" Then I literally get a call from my agent the next day saying, "Hey, we got an audition for you for a feature film in Michigan called *Red Dawn*." And I went "Nooo!" but then I went like, "Okay, how many things do I audition for and never get?" So I just go to the audition and probably won't get cast. Therefore my agent will be happy and I'll be happy and there will be no harm. So I went in for the audition, and I was sitting down for lunch the next day, talking to some friends like "You won't believe what I got called in for." Then my phone rings and it's my agent. They said, "They like you, we need you in Michigan in a week." So, you know, it's one of those situations where I don't know what to do, and I remember like a year later I met a good guy in the Asian American film scene, and he asked me "What have I've doing?" And I told him I did the remake of *Red Dawn*. And his disgust was really visible. And I was so torn, because there was a part of me that wanted to scream, 'Don't judge me!" but I totally know what he was thinking.

JL: That transitions to my next question where, Asian Americans or Asians in general are not represented in film as what they should be, what do you think has to change within the industry for Asians to start getting represented in the right way and get equal opportunities.

DS: I think it's really we need more producers and directors. I think producers more than anything else. Because I think there are a lot of directorial talent out there. But we defiantly need

the money people. We need the people who have money as the producers or the producers who just collect the money. We need them to support the project, and defend the project, defend the decisions on the project. Even till this day you read stories like in the movie *Crazy Rich Asians* the studio wanted to change one of the main characters to being White. The people had to back that decision and it's like really? This is still going on. And luckily those people won those battles.

JL: It really just makes you think about how many battles have been lost.

DS: And every now and again you see things like *Avengers End Game*. Where like it was a fun marvel movie. But I was actually upset, there was a brief recapping of Hawkeye. And he is in Tokyo mowing down Yakuza. And the main guy he kills, that actor is Hiroyuki Sanada. And Hiroyuki Sanada is like one of Japans most acclaimed actors. He has been in a lot of American stuff as well. He also has a very interesting background; at youth he was a martial arts superstar then transitioned into a very serious actor. He has even done Shakespeare in London. So one of things that bothered me was, there was no reason for this scene to be in Tokyo. And there are really no other Asians in this movie besides the Asian Hawkeye kills. And heroes like one of Japans best actors basically playing Asian thug number 1. It didn't bring the whole movie down for me, it was just strange.

JL: Yeah, also he is in the movie for like 2 seconds.

DS: Yeah, like I was watching *Star Wars Rogue One*. And, there was a scene where Donnie Yen beats up a bunch of storm troopers. For some reason something in my heart rose. And I'm not saying it was the world's greatest film, but it's like I'm and Asian American who watched *Star Wars* my whole life. And I had to always imagine myself as Luke Skywalker or Han Solo. But then here is this Asian guy who is beating up storm troopers, and it made me feel like "YEAHH!". I don't care if the film isn't perfect, it really did something to me. And that's why we need representation.

JL: Yeah I agree, going off of my previous question, what do you think is the "right way" of representing Asian in films.

DS: Oh, that's tough because I don't think that is isn't just one way. Because it is complicated. I always liked the show *Kim's Convenience*. But I have Korean friends who say that the accents are wrong. And I'm like, "Yeah I know they are putting on the accent." But for some reason my threshold for that show is very high. That's an example of how some people disagree with it and some people don't. For me the most important thing about it is that the Asian American characters don't fall into lazy stereotypes. Even Lazy positive stereotypes, I don't like that anymore. I think that there was an episode of *Star Trek Next Generation* where they had a very minor Japanese character. I think she was a nurse, and I remember that had her serve sushi one time. The part that bothered me is that this show is in the 24th century, and yeah, I know her character is Japanese or Japanese American. I also realize that *Star Trek* has a liberal leaning but like that's a lazy way of way of representation. "She's Japanese so she has to serve sushi." Like I eat it but I'm probably going to get a hamburger today! So bad stereotypes are bad like bad accents or whatever but also like, tokenism is definitely good. Lazy coding is what I don't like,

again like if you have non-Asian director and they are working with a Korean actor they might insert a line like “Oh this isn’t as good as my Mom’s kimchi.” You don’t have to put that line to let them know that their Korean American. Mainly because we don’t talk that way, and we don’t show off our asianness. And I’m always heartened when I see stuff and they get it right. I think I’m seeing that slightly more often.

JL: So, my next question is, what do you look for in an acting job?

DS: At my current age is getting paid (laughs) I’m a little too old to do work for free, unless its close friends. But definitely a sense of fulfillment, and definitely something Asian or Asian American and to do it as what I believe is something full and 3 dimensional. But something that is artistically satisfying. I definitely like stuff that isn’t just merely entertainment.

JL: What genre do you feel the most comfortable playing?

DS: I’m told I’m funny, but I prefer to do drama.

JL: A lot of comedy actor say that, and you do see now a lot of comedy actors’ transition to drama.

DS: Yeah like, I don’t feel naturally funny but maybe that’s good.

JL: Where there any role models or particular person you look up too?

DS: There is a guy named Randall Duk Kim, if you do your research. He is a much older guy, Korean American. He was an acclaimed Shakespearian actor. He put himself out there way before. To think that he was kind of a loner at it, and definitely inspiration for later guys like BD Wong. So when I think about him, where at the time there was less representation and less opportunities, and he was out there. And that guy struggled probably 10x more than we have.

JL: Yeah, well being a pioneer in something is never easy

DS: Yeah, I also think about Sandra Oh’s career it is really impressive. I remember when she was in this Canadian Indie film called *Double Happiness*. She played a Chinese American roll; I remember noticing her than. Since then she had a bunch of supporting rolls. So watching her career develop and persevere is impressive. It doesn’t make you feel alone.

JL: My next question is how do you include your Asian culture into your work, either in plays or film.

DS: Well, I do my homework for a roll and I try to bring as much of my own heritage, as much as I know, to the table. A big thing for me, something I’ve been fighting for, is authenticity. Sometimes you watch something and you’re like “That’s not how a 45 Korean dad acts” or something you know. Those subtle stuff. I realize theater needs to be big and I realized the director might instruct you to do something but you’re like “Well no” for authenticity we are more subdued, within the theatrical environment, conveying that is difficult.

JL: So, In a recent podcast by Ryan Higa, he talks about how for Asian rolls studios just get all the Asians to audition. So like if it was a Japanese roll, they would cast like Korean or Chinese. It apparently caused some distress among the Asian acting community, what is your take on that?

DS: Personally, I think that is an area where we all should have some leeway. I think we should be able to play each other within reason.

JL: You do both theater and film, do you notice a difference between the rolls you get?

DS: Yeah, definitely for film it was more Asian this and Asian that or ethnic. But theater the casting is wider than that. I've gotten Shakespeare and rolls that are generally White. But it is definitely changing now.

JL: And final question, what are you working on right now?

DS: Right now, I will be in a stage reading for *Garage Door Opener*, and next month I will be in a stage reading on June 5, for a Korean Play for the International Voices Project. Which is a project that tries to do stage readings and plays from other countries. Then some auditions and if you go up to Writers Theatre, I am on their talk back rotation. So right now just auditions, readings, and trying to get out there.

JL: Well that concludes the interview, thank you for your time.

End.