

Theater

'Gold Mountain' reading leaves audience hungry for more

July 19, 2016 12:00 pm by [Guest contributor](#)



Monica Ho and Jonny Hsu Lee, as "Yook Mei" and "Lit" in a stage reading on July 11 of *Gold Mountain* at the Aurora Theatre Berkeley. Photo: Justin Anthony Long

By Bonnie Britt

The musical drama *Gold Mountain* taps into the rich emotional lives of the too-often-forgotten Chinese immigrant labor force who gave their all to connect the eastern United States with western states in the construction of the first transcontinental railroad.

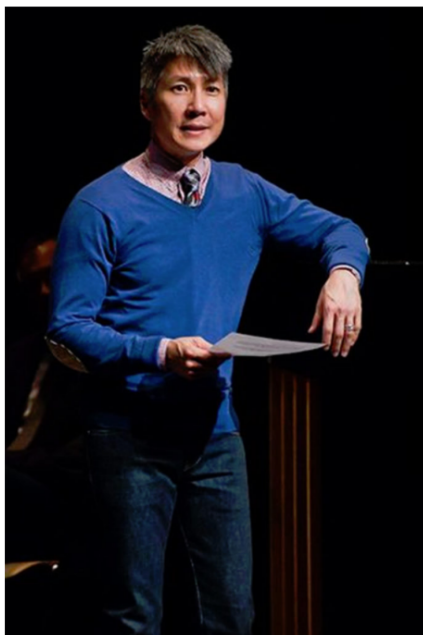
A staged reading of *Gold Mountain* at the Aurora Theatre in Berkeley on July 11 was presented by LaborFest and the SAG-AFTRA SF-NorCal local.

Actors flew in from New York and Los Angeles to join Bay Area professionals for the one-act performance that left the audience wanting more from Jason Ma, a natural-born storyteller, whose credits include writing the script and music for the musical *Barcelona*.

The gifted Ma wrote the *Gold Mountain* script and music for the cast which rhythmically told of the harsh conditions and speed that cost the lives of too many Chinese workers in the hurried building of tracks for the trains that replaced covered wagons in the late 19th century.

A love story is set against the backdrop of discrimination and subjugation. Immigrant workers yearn to see their loved ones back home in China but are separated by U.S. law. The love story is special because the Chinese immigrant men were precluded from bringing women to join them in America's harsh labor camps. Against a backdrop of clackers and drums, the chorus of railway workers tells how deeply they miss the women in their lives, including wives and lovers, mothers and sisters.

The producer, Marie Shell, made it happen in this, her third LaborFest production. She previously produced Lisa Ramirez' *To the Bone* and Michael Gene Sullivan's adaption of *A Christmas Carol* for the annual month-long celebration of working-class history in the Bay Area. Shell has worked in many Bay Area theatres, including the Magic, Theatreworks, San Francisco Shakespeare Festival, Symmetry, and San Jose Stage Co.



Jason Ma: writer of *Gold Mountain*

Gold Mountain is a translation of the historical Chinese phrase to describe North America. Twelve actors made up the talented cast that played railroad workers and family members who loved them at the July 11 reading. The delightful Monica Ho played Yook Mei, the young woman who charmed Jonny Hsu Lee, whose character's life was in constant jeopardy. Guan Lit Ning, or "Lit," held the most dangerous job of fuse runner, which entailed running like hell for his life after lighting the fuse to set off explosives that blew holes tunneling through the Sierra Nevada mountains to make way for the railroad and its tracks. All of the fuse runner's predecessors lasted no longer than four weeks before being blown to bits. With his father, played by Michael Ching, also an immigrant laborer, arguing that his only son must quit this job, tension focused on how long the young man might live doing this perilous work. His romance with Yook Mei heightened the poignancy.

There's not a bad seat in the intimate Aurora Theatre, which is celebrating its 25th anniversary season. The 2016 ASCAP/DreamWorks Musical Theatre Workshop selected *Gold Mountain* for performance at the Wallis Annenberg Center in Beverly Hills in February. It too was directed by Alan Muraoka. The play has been selected as a finalist by East West Players and

New Musicals Inc. for their joint initiative to develop a new musical.

The evening also featured images from the traveling exhibit, "The Chinese and the Iron Road: Building the Transcontinental," on loan from the Chinese Historical Society of America. It was produced in conjunction with the Chinese Railroad Workers in North America Project at Stanford University.

LaborFest: Honoring working people through events

LaborFest events honoring working people have occurred in the Bay Area on most days in July for the last 23 years. The next LaborFest event in Berkeley begins at 10 a.m. July 25 when Berkeley historian Harvey Smith is to lead a walk around downtown Berkeley and the UC campus featuring art and architecture from the New Deal era Works Project Administration. The WPA walk will explore the "New Deal nexus" in Berkeley that includes Berkeley High School, the Community Theater, Civic Center Park, Post Office art, the old UC Press Building (now repurposed as the Berkeley Art Museum Pacific Film Archive), and the old Farm Credit Building. The tour will include the beautiful mosaic mural on the UC Berkeley campus and photographs of the California Folk Music Project, Western Museum Laboratory, WPA prints at the Berkeley Public Library, and WPA projects on the UC Berkeley campus. Details at [New Deal Legacy](#). Check out other [LaborFest events](#).