

Upstarts Asian Americans making noise.

Tak Toyoshima | Syndicated comic strip artist



They call him the "Voice of Asian Neuroses." After all, Tak Toyoshima, the artist behind the comic strip "Secret Asian Man," has no problem bluntly addressing Asian American issues through his thick eye-browed Asian American character. The comic strip has been controversial since its beginnings with its political content and opinionated take on issues like race, gender, religion and sexual orientation. Toyoshima says the strip is about "the minority experience and a celebration of diversity." "Secret Asian Man" has been printed in publications in Boston, Chicago, San Francisco and Atlanta, and appears weekly in *Boston's Weekly Dig*, an alternative newsweekly Toyoshima helped start. Now the 7-year-old comic strip has been signed with United Feature Syndicate, a distributor for cartoons like "Peanuts," "Dilbert" and "Boondocks," making it the first daily American comic strip featuring a lead character of Asian descent. That means as of May 7, newspaper readers across the country may find "Secret Asian Man" in the comics section of their daily rag.

Toyoshima has worked for New England Comics on "The Tick" and self-published a comic book, *The Couch*. Born and raised in New York's Tribeca district and a graduate of Boston University, he now lives with his wife and son in Boston. More of his comics can be found on his website www.secretasianman.com.

Helen Zia | AALDEF honoree

She has the power to move you to action. Raised in New Jersey to immigrant parents from Shanghai, Helen Zia has become a prominent voice in the Asian American community. She's an award-winning author and activist who continuously fights for social justice and political empowerment. To honor her role in the Asian American community, the Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund awarded her the 2007 AALDEF Justice in Action Award at the Lunar New Year Gala on Feb. 22, along with two other honorees, Javade Chaudhri, the executive vice president and general counsel of Sempra Energy, and Nicholas deB. Katzenbach, former U.S. Attorney General.

Zia authored *Asian American Dreams: The Emergence of an American People*, and co-wrote *My Country Versus Me* with Dr. Wen Ho Lee, a Los Alamos scientist who was falsely accused of being a Chinese spy. In *Asian American Dreams*, Zia talks about her reaction to the racially motivated beating and death of Vincent Chin in 1982. Zia pushed for a national campaign to see justice prevail in this act of racism.

Zia has been involved in journalism for more than 20 years, and is a contributing editor to *Ms.* magazine, where she was once an executive editor. She received an honorary doctor of laws degree from the City University of New York School of Law, is an expert fellow at the University of Southern California's justice and journalism program, and was one of Princeton University's first female graduates. AALDEF's award isn't Zia's first in the area of social justice. She's also the first to receive the Asian American Journalism Association's Dr. Suzanne Ahn Award for her coverage of Asian American civil rights and social justice issues.



Rehana Mirza and Rohi Mirza Pandya | Founders Desipina & Company



Desipina is an adjective, a noun and a verb. It refers to a person of both South Asian (desi) and Filipina (pinay) descent, to "a group that embraces multiracial identities and fusion lifestyle," and "to check outside the box" — at least according to Rehana Mirza and Rohi Mirza Pandya, the Filipina-Pakistani sisters and founders of Desipina & Company, a South Asian and Asian arts company focused on film and theatre. This nonprofit group, dedicated to bridging the gap between Asian and South Asian communities through their artistic work, is celebrating its 5th anniversary this year.

Desipina & Company has produced 35 short plays to date, including the popular *Seven.11 Convenience Theatre* series, which features seven 11-minute plays set in a convenience store. Rehana, who graduated with honors from New York University's Tisch School of Arts, has written and produced *Barriers*, a play about a biracial Muslim American family post 9-11, and most recently premiered her award-winning short film *Modern Day Arranged Marriage* on MTV Network's Logo channel last month. She's currently an MFA candidate in playwriting at Columbia University. Rohi is the producing director at Desipina and is involved with multimedia producing and event organizing. She has an MBA from the University of Colorado. For more info on upcoming shows, visit www.desipina.org.

— Joanna Wu