

James Hong

2 August, 2020

The news feeds today are alive with Covid and politics and racism and anti-racism and, and, and... You don't need me to go into any or all of that here. But there is one item that showed up on my feed yesterday that woke me up a little.

The headline that caught my eye claimed that this one actor had the most credits of anyone in Hollywood and that he'd appeared in more than (depending on the source you read) 500 or 600 productions. Now, I know there are actors we see again and again without ever learning their names. Colin Ferguson had graced my screen on many occasions before he became ubiquitous as the Maytag guy and in the old days of studio productions, character actors and bit players become comfortable members of our households, establishing their own niches as perennial bad guys or winsome women or comedic sidekicks.

But, really...500? That didn't seem right, did it? So I decided to look him up.

My first clue that perhaps I should doubt my doubtfulness came as soon as I Googled James Hong and saw his head shot. "Oh, my goodness! It's THAT guy!" I fairly shouted to myself.

I've been watching and enjoying this actor's character work for as long as I can recall without ever bothering to find out who he was. So I checked his IMDb listing and started scrolling through his credits. Many of them meant nothing to me (can't say I recall seeing "World's Greatest Lover" and certainly couldn't place 'Yes Man #3') but a surprising number were for shows and movies I know I watched. Even more interesting was how many of his specific roles I remembered. Could picture, bringing forth a stab of nostalgia. Some of my recollections were snatches, while others were more fully clothed in the character of the moment.

Many of his parts, especially in his younger days, were throw away, brief bits in which he was used for establishment (Okay, we're in Chinatown now) but others were more substantial. When he played a larger part, he fully invested it in three dimensions. And in his tiniest appearances, well, he fully invested them in three dimensions, as well.

If all James Hong had accomplished was a career as a respected journeyman of his craft, his would have been a life well lived. But Mr. Hong went far beyond that, co-founding the Association of Asian / Pacific American Artists and helping to establish the East West Players in Los Angeles. As such, he has worked to help mold and promote the careers of countless minority actors, producers, directors.

This guy whom I'd recognized and welcomed into my home so many times has spent a lifetime working to promote racial acceptance and diversity on so many levels. He is a force majeure in Hollywood these days but even back when he was forced to live on table scraps (e.g.: Hop Sing's Cousin #3 in a Bonanza episode – Oy Vey!) he made a meal of them and when he was invited to the main table, he joined the conversation with competence and panache. He helped make a generation of clueless white boys in flood tide pants comfortable with seeing non-white faces in the crowd and eventually, at center screen. And he's worked through Asian theatre to help those who come after him reach father.

I'm glad to have James Hong in my world. We're going through a lot of turmoil these days as we struggle to come to terms with systemic racism, past and present. It's entirely appropriate to honor the work of a

John Lewis, one of the true heroes of civil rights in this country. But let's not forget to notice the work of the many people who have spent their lives buttressing the foundations of liberty and equality one brick at a time. Lewis and Hong worked the same field, just in different sections.

This is one of the people I'm glad is alive and I hope to see his work continue for a long time to come. If I could speak to James Hong I think I'd really just have two words for the man.

Thank you.