

SEATTLE  
REP

THE  
HEART  
SELLERS

BY  
LLOYD SUH

Youth Guide

## Welcome to *The Heart Sellers!*

We're so glad you're here.

Theater is a space where stories help us understand ourselves and one another, and playwright Lloyd Suh's *The Heart Sellers* invites us into a meaningful moment of connection between two young immigrant women navigating life in a new country. Set in 1973, the play follows Luna and Jane as they share memories, fears, humor, and hope.

As you watch the play, notice how much of the story lives in small moments, shared food, quiet pauses, laughter, and imagination. These moments remind us that history isn't only shaped by major events, but also by personal relationships and everyday acts of care. Although the play takes place decades ago, its themes of identity, friendship, and belonging continue to resonate today.

At Seattle Rep, we believe theater doesn't end when the curtain comes down. If this play sparks your curiosity or inspires you creatively, we invite you to explore **Young Rep**, our program offerings for teens who want to dive deeper into theater. Young Rep offers students opportunities to connect through classes, social events, and performance opportunities. It's a place to build skills, make community, and share your voice.

Thank you for being part of our audience and for engaging thoughtfully with this story. We hope *The Heart Sellers* encourages reflection, conversation, and connection, both inside the theater and beyond it.



**Deanna Martinez**  
Education & Community  
Programs Director

## CHANGING LAWS AND MINDS:

# The Legislation Behind *The Heart Sellers*

By Nicole Bearden, Seattle Rep Communications Manager

In the award-winning play *The Heart Sellers*, playwright Lloyd Suh uses a landmark of U.S. legislation, **The Hart-Celler Act** (also known as **The 1965 Immigration Act**), to set the scene for this heartfelt story of two young immigrant women, newly arrived from Korea (Jane) and the Philippines (Luna).

**So, what was this historic Act?** The United States' relationship with immigrants has always been tumultuous. In the years when railroads were first being built to connect people and goods across the vast country, Chinese immigrants stepped in to fill the void with hard, often dangerous work, and labored for much less pay than white laborers.

After the transcontinental railroad was complete in 1869, tens of thousands of Chinese immigrants remained in the U.S., and anti-Chinese sentiments grew amongst the white population. A law called the Chinese Exclusion Act passed in 1882, which barred any immigration from China for ten years.



A group of Northern Pacific Railroad construction workers in front of a locomotive (1885). Museum of History & Industry, Seattle; All Rights Reserved.

During this decade of Chinese Exclusion, Japanese and Korean immigration to the U.S. rose, along with anti-Asian rhetoric. Groups like The Asiatic Exclusion League stirred up sentiments like "The Yellow Peril," and stoked fear about morality and economic security. World Wars I and II reinforced American racism toward Asians, which resulted in even more

restrictive legislation, especially toward East Asian immigrants.

Beginning in 1921, U.S. immigration policy was based on a national quota system that restricted the entire immigrant population of the U.S.—meaning each country had a maximum allowance of people who could immigrate to the U.S. in a given period. In 1924, these immigrant quotas were updated by the Johnson-Reed Act, and the Asian Exclusion Act.

**NEW IMMIGRATION ACT  
APPROVED BY COMMITTEE**

*Would Exclude Japanese and Reduce Percentage  
of Aliens Admissible From Europe*

Washington, Feb. 5.—(A. P.)—Exclusion of Japanese immigrants and a reduction in the percentage of aliens admissible from European countries would be provided for by sections of a proposed administration immigration act approved by the house immigration committee. Completion of the entire measure within a day or two and a prompt report to the house is the committee's plan.

Japanese exclusion would be made possible, it was explained, under a general provision of the bill which sets forth "that an immigrant not eligible to citizenship shall not be admitted to the United States" to meet treaty stipulations, exceptions would be made in the case of ministers of the gospel, professors of colleges, members of any "learned profession" and bona fide students, who seek to enter the United States solely for the purpose of study at an education institution particularly designed for them. Such students, who are married after entering the country, would be deported, however.

Explaining the section of the bill which would provide for the exclusion (Continued On Page Six)

Article about the 1924 Immigration Act. *The Morning Call*. Allentown, Pennsylvania. Tue., Feb. 6, 1923. Page 1.

With these quota changes, immigration to the U.S. was essentially limited to Western Europe, North America, and South America. People from East and South Asia (the Philippines, as residents of the U.S. colony, were allowed to immigrate to the U.S., but the cultural climate perpetuated difficulties for those who did), Africa, and Eastern and Southern Europe had the most restrictions around U.S. immigration—until the Hart-Celler Act in 1965.

Suddenly, quotas were gone, and immigration to the U.S. from these previously-heavily-restricted areas was much easier. But what about culture? A piece of legislation does not always change hearts and minds, and the previous attempts to limit non-white populations from coming to the U.S. had solid support from xenophobic groups.

**CONTINUED →**



The Tamura family posing at a U.S. naturalization ceremony in Seattle, November 1, 1965—weeks following the October 43, 1965 signing of the Hart-Celler Act. Photo by Tom Brownell, for *The Seattle Post-Intelligencer*.

Suh's *The Heart Sellers* is set in 1973, just eight years after the passing of the Hart-Celler Act and explores bonding through cultural differences and finding new traditions and family in an unfamiliar place. The character of Luna remarks on the Act at one point, saying that, "...after Hart-Celler all of a sudden we can come here. Our husbands anyway, they can come here to study. Work and study."

The richness of Suh's characters—over the backdrop of exclusionary legislation and the loneliness of the immigrant experience—helps us to imagine coming to a new country, knowing only your spouse, and leaving behind the rest of your family, your language, and your culture. While the Hart-Celler Act changed U.S. immigration law, *The Heart Sellers* reminds us that the real work of bridging cultural divides happens in moments like the ones we experience with Jane and Luna as they get to know one another, sing together, make up stories, and find new family in a new world.



Scan to read the full interview with Sunam, explore more *The Heart Sellers* content, and find a reading list from Seattle Public Library on Inside Seattle Rep.

## EXCERPT FROM

# Leaning into Hope and Humanity

## AN INTERVIEW WITH DIRECTOR SUNAM ELLIS

**Nicole Bearden (Seattle Rep Communications Manager):** What first drew you to this play? What made this an exciting choice for you in particular to direct?

**Sunam Ellis:** My father was stationed in Korea when he met my mother. When they moved to the United States in the 1970s (made possible by the Hart-Celler Act), my mother had to hide or shut down parts of her identity just to make life more comfortable for those around her. My mom is a free spirit. She was pretty young when she came to the U.S., and in many ways grew into an adult in a place that was unfamiliar to her. I wish she had a Luna or a Jane: someone in her life who understood what it was like to leave her country while still figuring out who she was. And even though I've been here since I was a toddler, as a Korean-American I still feel like I'm finding my own way, pulled between two cultures. I think that tug-of-war is beautifully explored in this play.

**NB:** How do you see the themes in this show resonating with audiences today?

**SE:** Immigration is a highly contentious topic right now, so I can see how that might make an audience approach the play with caution. However, this show is all about shedding light on the humanity of two young women who are both grateful for the opportunities afforded them by moving to the U.S. and aware of their status as outsiders. That is a lonely crossroads to be at, and my hope is that the audience can lean into the humanity of what these young women are facing.

# Lesson

In *The Heart Sellers*, Luna and Jane remember traditions celebrated with families back home while they engage in new traditions in the United States.

## WHAT'S FAMILIAR?

Write about a tradition that you have with your family or friends. Is there a special way you celebrate a holiday? Is there something you like to do when you get together with your community?

## WHAT'S NEW?

Write about a time when you were introduced to a new tradition. Did you learn how to celebrate a new holiday? Did you join a friend or family member to participate in something important to them?

## REFLECTION

- How does it feel different to participate in something familiar to you versus participating in something new?
- How does it feel to introduce someone new to one of your traditions?
- What makes you feel comfortable when you're in a new space?