

Obituary

Michael Paul Simons

Eugene Khan, Brynner As He Was Born To Be, Dies at 65

The red velvet curtain drew to a close on one of community theatre's brightest stars. Eugene Khan died October 10, 2009. Khan is best remembered for his commanding portrayal of Yul Brynner in hundreds of local productions of "The King and I." Khan was 65.

Shaven-headed Khan turned countless numbers of heads with his deep, resonant voice. Many of us will recall his radio commercials for The Lucky Cookie Chinese Buffet back in the late 1980s.

But to say he merely resembled Brynner would not come close to touching his impact on the community. His "pitch perfect" performances were a special boon for the local economy, attracting out-of-state tourists eager to watch him in high school productions of "The King and I."

The next run of shows had been slated for Oct. 15-17. The sets have been built, but the stage is empty.

"It's tough when you lose your MVP," said Doug Morgan,

Nikwasi High's cross country coach and current theatre director. "And the kids are real broke up about this. With Khan, the shows practically run themselves. But obviously, the show must go on."

Greg Bryant agrees. Bryant, a top-ranking All-State runner on Morgan's team and Khan's most recent understudy, says he's ready to step in.

"Coach's called me from the bench on this one, so I'm going to memorize my lines and give him 110%," Bryant said.

"At this point, we're doing it for Khan," he added.

Over the years, Khan took small roles in several local plays, including "Bye Bye Birdie," "Once Upon a Mattress," "Li'l Abner," and "A Midnight Summer's Dream." But none of those roles could ever compare to the one he played in "The King and I."

"He really lived his life in that role," said Morgan. "He really was an inspiration to the kids."

One of the town's worst kept secrets was Siam's, Khan's Chinese restaurant. At Siam's (pronounced Sam's, formerly The Lucky Cookie), at any moment, you might catch Khan in character. He ruled that restaurant like a king.

Khan also owned a chain of gas, lube, and convenience stores called Etcetera, Etcetera.

"We were so lucky to have him," Morgan added. "Anyone else, and you'd expect them to move to Hollywood or Vegas. He really was the closest thing our little town ever came to a celebrity."

Born in Queens, NY, Khan moved here with his wife, Judy, and family in 1977.

Scandal seemed to shadow Khan, seeking him out wherever he went. Many will recall the smear campaign that nearly led to the shuttering of The Lucky Cookie in '88. Rumors circulated that several dishes, including house specialty General Tso's chicken, contained dog meat. The fact that Khan kept many dogs as a foster owner only fanned the flames.

Local animal shelter representative Elaine Turlington denied the rumors, insisting that "every animal we ever entrusted with [Khan] returned unharmed."

Though he eventually cleared himself of all accusations, it took Khan longer to repair his reputation. People started questioning

why anyone so talented would settle in their small town: perhaps he molested children, or ate them, or was a homosexual, or perhaps he operated the southern hub of a heroin trafficking ring, or perhaps he smuggled immigrants into the US inside shipping containers for cannibalistic purposes.

“People here are quite forgiving. We have short memories,” said Tricia Morganson, Director of Nikwasi Chamber of Commerce.

“For a time Khan rivaled even Santa Claus in popularity,” Morganson said. “Seriously. Khan was one of the stars of the annual Christmas parade.”

Many will recall that despite freezing cold temperatures, he’d be out there bare-chested, tossing fortune cookies, menus, and coupons.

“Crowds loved him,” said Morganson. “His float typically came right before Santa’s. One year he donned a Santa’s hat. That with his red costume, people just thought we’d combined floats. That’s how I will remember him: as a bald-headed, half-naked Santa Claus tossing fortune cookies to the kids.”

Cause of death was an apparent self-inflicted shotgun blast to the head. It is known that Khan recently discovered he suffered inoperable lung cancer.

In one interview, Khan described his relationship to Brynner as one of complete and constant frustration: “Never be too good at anything. You’ll end in shackles.” He complained that nobody ever paid attention to his Orson Welles impersonations.

Yet in most interviews, Khan characterized his long-lasting fame as a dead-ringer for Yul Brynner as a “blessing” and “the best thing in my life.”

Many will recall his radio commercial sign-offs: “I am Brynner as I was born to be.”

Yul Brynner, the stage and screen legend, died October 10, 1985. Khan’s death is a tragic loss for Brynner fans. It feels like we lost him all over again.

Khan is survived by his seven sons and forty-nine grandsons. Khan’s wife Judy preceded him in death. A memorial is set to take place at Siam’s. Parties of six or more will be subject to an 18% gratuity.