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Sara LaFlamme

Honors Capstone Paper

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The Stage Through Slanted Eyes:
An Examination of the Current State of Asian Americans in Theatre

As an Asian American, I have always been interested in issues concerning race, particularly those involving how race may impact the career of an actor in today's theatre industry. Theatre has often been regarded as a business produced by white people, about white people, and almost exclusively for white audiences. Not until recent years has the subject of diversity truly been broached by groups such as the Alliance for Inclusion in the Arts (established in 1986) and, even more recently, the Asian American Performers Action Coalition (established in 2011). It is true that most audiences are typically comprised of middle to upper-class Caucasians who can afford a night at the theatre, but when a modern production is composed of an all-white cast, is that still a truthful representation of today's diverse society? Why do most shows in New York continue to be overwhelmingly cast as white? By delving into the history of race in theatre and in American society, this paper aims to look at the current state of Asian American actors and how the perception of race in everyday life can impact its reception onstage.

Race in Theatre: The Debate on Colorblind Casting

Though theatre itself dates back as early as the ancient Greeks, the notion of race being a distinct part of theatre arguably arose during the age of minstrelsy and blackface throughout 19th century America. This tradition began as white performers wearing blackface to mock both free and still enslaved African Americans through offensively stereotypical skits, songs, and dances.

Thus, racist caricatures such as “Jump Jim Crow” and “Zip Coon” were born and prevailed long after the golden age of minstrelsy had passed. Eventually as African Americans began joining minstrel troupes and making a living as performers, even they continued the tradition of blackface to accentuate their already dark and ethnic features. This was especially popular during the years following the American Civil War (Ivey). For decades, the only traces of race found in theatre were offensive, stereotypical, and undeniably racist, deeply affecting how American society views ethnicity even today. Though such prejudices are not limited to African American theatre artists, most debates concerning the topic of race in theatre surround the plight of black performers versus white performers. Should black actors be considered for roles originally written for white actors? Vice versa, can white actors be cast in black parts? These types of questions eventually sparked one of the most historically famous debates on colorblind casting.

Colorblind casting is defined as the practice of casting a role regardless of an actor’s race. Actors’ Equity Association prefers to categorize it under the umbrella of “nontraditional” casting which is “the casting of ethnic minority actors, female actors, senior actors, and actors with disabilities in roles where race, ethnicity, gender, or the presence or absence of a disability is not germane to the character’s or play’s development” (“EEO & Diversity”). The goal of colorblind casting is to provide more opportunities for actors of color to be cast in roles for which they would not traditionally be considered. It is meant to be useful for ethnic actors who would otherwise be limited to roles written specifically for their ethnicity. The increase in racial diversity onstage is meant to mirror the increasing racial diversity of our society.

On January 27th, 1997, American theatre critic, playwright, and producer Robert Brustein and African American playwright August Wilson famously debated the topic of colorblind casting at the New York City Town Hall. This debate was moderated by playwright Anna

Deavere Smith. Brustein argued in favor of colorblind casting because he believed that one of the purposes of theatre was to look at “the workings of the human soul, which has no color.”

Somewhat surprisingly, it was Wilson that was adamantly opposed to the notion and thought that black actors should only be cast in black roles while white actors should only be cast in white roles. He said, “If [African Americans] choose not to assimilate, this does not mean we oppose the values of the dominant culture, but rather we wish to champion our own causes, our own celebrations, our own values.” He argued that if black performers were cast in roles that were supposed to be white, it would imply that the white experience was to be viewed as the universal experience. Wilson wanted African Americans to stay true to their African heritage and culture by playing exclusively black roles. In response, Brustein questioned if Wilson understood that by making such a separation between what was considered “white” theatre and “black” theatre, he was harkening back to the age of separate but equal institutions. In the end, both men ultimately agreed that there needed more black theatres, but whether or not colorblind casting should continue to be practiced remained up in the air (Grimes & Lefkowitz).

Despite Wilson’s and others’ fervent arguments against colorblind casting, it is still prevalent in most theatre companies today. How much of a difference it actually makes is the real question. More often than not, it seems as though some companies boast about their colorblind policies and then take pride in their one black actor of the season despite the fact that the other twenty-four actors are white. Is that really an accomplishment? Though a good idea in theory, colorblind casting has proved to have several practical issues and inherent flaws. For instance, many of its critics claim that no one can ever truly be blind to race (Hillman). Race is a huge part of how individuals are perceived both onstage and in everyday life; it is not necessarily a negative thing, but it is an indisputable truth. According to Melissa Hillman, artistic director of

the Impact Theatre in Berkeley, CA, “race has meaning. It has an undeniable cultural context that must be considered when we cast.” In other words, colorblind casting cannot simply mean casting an actor of color in a traditionally white role. Doing so will affect the overall production to some degree. In an interview with Hillman, writer and director Ellen Sebastian Chang really hits the nail on the head regarding the flaws of colorblind casting while echoing some of August Wilson’s sentiments during his 1997 debate. She says:

“Color-blind casting too often means that European-based work is reinvented so that people of color are supposed to identify their humanity with that work. Color-blind casting affirms that universality is in the white perspective. Why can’t we just keep developing playwrights of color? Color-blind casting too often denies cultural difference.”

Though Chang argues that this is usually the case when an actor of color is cast in a white role, colorblind casting can also be offensive and “deny cultural difference” when a white actor is cast in an ethnic role. The issue at hand is unquestionably a two-way street. For instance, Bess in *Porgy and Bess* should never be cast as a white woman because the musical is so rich with African American culture that playing it white would be an enormous insult (Heilpern).

On the flip side, colorblind casting does not always fail or have to come across as being racially offensive. When used correctly, it does create more opportunities for minority actors without trying to belittle their culture. This is where arguments in favor of practicing colorblind casting are born. In 2009, African American actress Phylicia Rashad was cast in the leading matriarchal role in Tracy Letts’ play, *August: Osage County*. The role is written to be white and the character has white siblings and children. While some argued against the casting choice because they could not suspend their belief enough to think that Rashad could have a Caucasian

family, *New York Observer* reporter John Heilpern disagrees by making an excellent point. He asks:

“Are plays about what makes sense? Or are they acts of the imagination between the actor and audience in a serious game of pretend? All actors—black or white, Asian, biracial, bisexual—pretend to be someone else onstage six nights a week, plus matinees. The actor is always...acting. We willingly suspend our disbelief to collude in a grand illusion.”

Heilpern reasons that since we, as audience members, are required to suspend our disbelief in order to follow along in the world of a play, why would we then be unable to look past a black mother having white children? In his article on colorblind casting, he cites other black actors who have been successfully cast in traditionally white roles without causing any uproar. On the contrary, these nontraditional casting decisions opened doors for other actors of color. In 1992, Nicholas Hytner directed a production of *Carousel* at London’s Royal National Theatre where he cast Clive Rowe, a black actor, as the traditionally white role Enoch Snow. When the production moved to Broadway’s Vivian Beaumont Theater in 1994, it won five Tony Awards, including “Best Musical Revival.” This was also where Audra McDonald made her breakthrough performance as the first-ever black Carrie Pepperidge, winning a Tony Award and Drama Desk Award for her outstanding performance. By this point, Rowe had been replaced by white actor Eddie Korbich as Enoch Snow, keeping Enoch and Carrie an interracial couple (Heilpern).

The positive reception of both Rowe and McDonald’s performances provides evidence in favor of colorblind casting. Though both Enoch Snow and Carrie Pepperidge were intended to be white and are traditionally cast as white, the roles are universal enough to reasonably be cast as other ethnicities without being offensive by doing so. In general, *Carousel* is a universal show

which is why colorblind casting works for it. I personally believe that the overarching theme of love does not need to have a color. Though the musical was originally cast with all white actors, I do not believe that it was about specifically “white” love. This is also the reason why many Shakespeare companies practice colorblind casting; Shakespearean plots and themes have the ability to transcend race as well (Heilpern). Instead of just questioning why a certain role is played by an actor of color, audience members should wonder what the actor can bring to the role that makes it special. If colorblind casting is done correctly, the actor was cast because he or she was the strongest choice for the role regardless of race.

Yellowface: Caucasian Actors in Asian Roles

Even before the advent of the term “colorblind casting,” there are several examples of white actors in ethnic roles throughout theatre history. While blackface rose in popularity during the mid-19th century in eastern and southern parts of America, the tradition of yellowface, white actors making themselves up to look Asian, began to develop in New York and on the west coast. Similar to the use of blackface to mock African Americans, yellowface was America’s way of expressing the anti-Asian sentiments that correlated with an ever-increasing number of Asian—mostly Chinese—immigrants (Kim Lee 7-22). American society loved it; not only did yellowface and “oriental” themes become prevalent in plays, but also in Hollywood, musical theatre, operettas, and mainstage operas. Some of the most famous operas and operettas include Gilbert and Sullivan’s *The Mikado* (1885), Puccini’s *Madama Butterfly* (1904), and Puccini and Alfano’s *Turandot* (1926). Though all three are still popularly produced by opera companies today, they continue to be overwhelmingly cast with white actors (Hillman).

The plot Puccini’s famous *Madama Butterfly* follows a Japanese girl who falls in love with an American Naval officer, eventually killing herself upon realizing that they can never be

together. One would think that the role of Butterfly should always be played by an Asian actress, but more often than not, she is cast as a Caucasian wearing makeup that gives the appearance of slanted Asian eyes. When *Madama Butterfly* was adapted into a musical by Claude-Michel Schönberg, Alain Boublil, and Richard Maltby, Jr. in 1989, it sparked fiery debates over casting choices. Though Kim (whose role corresponds to the original Butterfly) was cast Asian, the part of the Eurasian Engineer was cast white.

Miss Saigon premiered on September 20, 1989 in London's West End at the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane. When producer Cameron Mackintosh tried to bring the production to America, he was faced with overwhelming controversy and backlash over the casting of Caucasian actor Jonathan Pryce as the Engineer. Mackintosh argued that because Pryce was an "internationally renowned star" that his race should not matter. This, however, caused uproar in the American acting community. Actors' Equity publicly condemned the production's use of yellowface. Alan Eisenberg, executive secretary of Actors' Equity said:

"The casting of a Caucasian actor made up to appear Asian is an affront to the Asian community. The casting choice is especially disturbing when the casting of an Asian actor, in the role, would be an important and significant opportunity to break the usual pattern of casting Asians in minor roles" (Pao 56).

Not only did this take away a wonderful opportunity for a male Asian actor to finally have a lead role, it was, to some, reminiscent of minstrelsy. In order to play the French-Vietnamese character, Pryce was required to use eye prosthetics and bronzer to make his skin appear darker. Despite the controversy, *Miss Saigon* opened on Broadway at the Broadway Theatre on April 11, 1991 after Actors' Equity finally gave in due to enormous pressure from the general public, some of its own members, and Mackintosh himself (Kim Lee 177-199).

To an extent, the casting of Pryce in an ethnic role was so surprising was because one does not expect yellowface to be seen onstage anymore. It is easier to think that we live in a more progressive society than that. Certainly twenty years after the *Miss Saigon* controversy, one would hope that Asian roles would only go to Asian actors, right? Unfortunately, that is still not the case. Something very interesting that tends to happen when productions are cast in the name of colorblind casting is that minorities are robbed of opportunities to play roles that are written for their ethnicity. In July of 2012, Duncan Sheik and Steven Sater's collaborated on a musical adaptation of the Hans Christian Anderson fairy tale "The Nightingale" which premiered at La Jolla Playhouse in California. Despite the story taking place in ancient China with the main character being the Chinese emperor, only two of the twelve-person cast were Asian and neither were Chinese. The lead role of the Chinese emperor was portrayed by a Caucasian actor. During this astonishing controversy, the show's director Moisés Kaufman and La Jolla Playhouse's artistic director Christopher Ashley defended their casting choices as being "colorblind." Kaufman argued that he was not trying to literally depict China and was therefore taking an "artistic freedom." Originally, the production started with an all-Asian cast, but the creative team deliberately decided to go for a multi-cultural cast to reflect the multi-cultural nature of our current society. After harsh criticism from the Asian American theatrical community, both Kaufman and Ashley apologized and agreed that they failed in achieving what they were going for (Hillman & Ng).

Though the "Nightingale" actors were not required to be in yellowface, it is still amazing that something like this could happen in this day and age. It is especially amazing considering the big names attached to the project (Sheik and Sater are most well-known for their Tony Award winning musical, *Spring Awakening*). To be fair, the production was cast colorblind, but

not in the way that colorblind casting should be utilized. It definitely forces one to wonder: why are producers and casting directors so reluctant to give Asian actors leading roles? How is it acceptable for a Caucasian actor to play a Chinese emperor, a role which intrinsically carries cultural meaning, but Asian actors are almost never cast in roles that are not explicitly written to be Asian? Such questions lead one to consider where Asian Americans stand in the fabric of American society and how the perception of their race impacts their perception onstage.

Asian Americans in American History and Society

When considering race and ethnicity in American history, Asian Americans are often overlooked whereas there is a rich, well-documented, and well-known history about the struggle of African Americans to become an accepted part of American society. In schools across the country, children learn all about the abolition of slavery, the fight for black equality in the Civil Rights movement, and iconic figures such as Martin Luther King, Jr. and Rosa Parks. We even celebrate an annual Black History Month. Undoubtedly, black citizens continue to face racism in today's society, but I personally feel as though they are still considered to be a significant part of American society and American history. Not many people on the street would walk past a black person and assume he came straight from Africa. What about Asians? Even today, Asian Americans are perceived as exotic, oriental, and alien. It leads one to wonder, what happened? Why are we not considered Americans?

Through my research as well as my own personal experiences, I would agree with the argument that Asian Americans are an invisible minority. America seems to pride itself on being a melting pot of different nationalities, races, and cultures, but Asians are mostly forgotten. When asked about specific racial suffering throughout U.S. history, the first thing that will come to the minds of most people is black slavery. Not many people remember or extensively learn

about the mistreatment of Asian Americans found in the Asian and Chinese Exclusion Acts as well as the Japanese internment camps of World War II. In 1882, President Chester A. Arthur signed the Chinese Exclusion Acts which barred further Chinese immigration to the States for ten years because they were supposedly taking jobs away from working Americans. There was also the Asian Exclusion Act which was a component of the Immigration Act of 1924 (“Chinese Exclusion Act”). With the aid of anti-Asian propaganda, both acts helped fuel a deep-set notion that Asian immigrants posed a threat to American society and way of life. This was further confirmed in 1942 during World War II, when over 127,000 United States citizens were forced into internment camps solely because of their Japanese heritage. Despite having no evidence against them, these citizens were imprisoned simply because of their race; just being Japanese at the time implied that you were not to be trusted, even if you were born and raised in America. It was not until 1988 that the U.S. Congress attempted to apologize for this atrocity by giving surviving internees \$20,000 (“Japanese-American Internment”). Though Asian Americans have not been discriminated against as explicitly as African Americans, there is still clear historical proof that Asians have never been fully accepted into society.

So what makes Asian Americans so un-American and how did our status change so drastically over time? Between World War II and today, Asian Americans have gone from “foreigners/outside/deviants/criminals” to “domesticated/invisible/exemplary/honorary whites” (Shimakawa 15). Before the Asian American Movement in the 1960s, Asian Americans were thought to be “problematically and willfully unassimilable, an exception to the ‘natural’ process by which the United States absorbs its other aliens” (J.D. Lee 138). Even the term “Asian American” did not exist until roughly 1965; it was coined by historian Yuji Ichioka as part of the movement to combat racist terms like “oriental” (Kim Lee 7). Today, there is an idea of “Asian

American exceptionalism” from which “positive” stereotypes are derived. These stereotypes include being incredibly smart, being hard workers, and being naturally disciplined.

University of California sociology professor Jennifer Lee proposes that this idea of “exceptionalism” grew from hyper-selectivity in Asian immigration. She argues that “Asian immigrants are not only more highly educated than U.S. citizens, they’re more highly educated than their own countrymen. This reflects high selectivity among those who choose to immigrate” (J. Lee). From their statistically higher education, positive stereotypes have arisen and continue to strengthen when individuals fit the stereotype. Eventually, the stereotypes become the expectation and the expectation becomes the norm. It goes on in a vicious cycle: society expects Asian Americans to be intelligent, Asian Americans strive to meet the expectations, and the stereotypes of high intelligence are reinforced when expectations are met. Though the stereotypes could be much worse, they force Asian Americans to fit into a certain mold. However, the “positive” stereotypes definitely put Asian Americans at a disadvantage when it comes to college admissions (J. Lee). It is now considered the norm for us to obtain perfect scores on standardized tests such as the SATs. When an individual does not meet the expectation, he finds himself at quite an unfair disadvantage when compared to individuals of other ethnicities with similar scores.

Not only are Asian Americans pressured to fit into stereotypes, but they are also expected to westernize themselves physically or else be ostracized for seeming too foreign. Julie Chen, an Asian American TV personality known for being a co-host on the CBS daytime show “The Talk,” admitted this September that she underwent double eyelid surgery in 1995 in order to advance her career. Chen, whose lifelong dream was to become a news anchor, was told by an agent that she would never make it because she looked “too Chinese” (Fung). Double eyelid

surgery makes your eyes look bigger and not as slanted; by having this procedure done, many Asian women achieve a more westernized look. Though Chen openly announced that she did not regret her decision to get the surgery, it reveals just how much pressure Asian Americans face in this society to look more like everyone else. Included in the article is a before and after picture of Chen. I was honestly shocked when I read through the comments section and found that the majority of the commenters agreed that she looked much better after the surgery because she had conformed to the “preferred look.” Some commenters even seemed irritated at the article’s insinuation that white people pressured her to look white. They argue that everyone gets plastic surgery regardless of race and Chen was no exception. In my opinion, these are the kind of people who have never been asked if they can see normally because their eyes are so squinty. I do not blame American society, but I acknowledge the pressure to conform because of it.

As an Asian American myself, I feel caught between two worlds and not truly a part of either. Though I am ethnically Chinese and was born in China, I am culturally American because I was raised in America. I have experienced both sides of the story: I have been told that my English is great because some people do not assume off-the-bat that it is my first language and I have been asked countless times where I am from. On the other hand, I have also been the one sitting in the dining halls and laughing at the fresh-off-the-boat Asians with their strange fashion trends and huge plates of rice. It is odd to be Asian American in American society because every now and then I have to stop and remind myself not to laugh because I am one of them too. I am proud to be Chinese, but I do feel as though Asians and Asian Americans still are not seen as anything other than foreign. Sure, we have been surrounded by the idea of “exceptionalism,” but even that continues to make us an invisible “model minority” (J. Lee) and nothing more.

Unfortunately, I think that theatre has had a helping hand in preventing Asian Americans from being anything other than “oriental.”

Asians and Asian Americans in Theatre

The concept of “Asian American theatre” did not exist until 1965 with the founding of the East West Players, the first Asian American theatre company. However, Asian Americans and Asian themes have appeared in theatre since the 18th century. Unfortunately, such themes were presented with and founded on fanciful exoticism that continues to persist today. The first play to introduce Asian-ness to American theatre was Voltaire’s *Orphan of China* (1755) which was adapted into English by Arthur Murphy and premiered at the Southwark Theatre in Philadelphia in January 1767. As noted by James S. Moy, this production introduced “the notion of Chineseness under the sign of the exotic [which] became familiar to the American spectator long before sightings of the actual Chinese” (Kim Lee 8). The exotic, oriental stereotype continued to strengthen and grow through the mid-1800s as authentic Chinese theatre companies began cropping up on the west coast as a source of entertainment for the thousands of Chinese immigrants that came to America in search of gold. By the late 1800s, the acting manager of San Francisco’s Tong Hook Tong Dramatic Company signed a contract in New York City, not realizing that Caucasian audiences would not understand genuine Chinese theatre after being exposed to popular plays such as *The Yankees in China* (1839), *The Cockney in China* (1848), and *China, or Tricks Upon Travelers* (1841) which portrayed comedic Chinese characters who were played by white actors in yellowface. The failure of the Tong Hook Tong Dramatic Company made other Asian groups/performers realize that American audiences could not appreciate authentic Asian culture onstage, so they began portraying the “faux Chinese” that was much more profitable. This tradition continued through the 19th and 20th centuries until

“caricatures of Asians...were seen as more ‘real’ than real Asians. ‘Oriental’ exoticism always had more box-office appeal than the actual Asians and Asian immigrants in the United States” (Kim Lee 10).

Around the time of the Chinese Exclusion Acts, American theatre began to reflect anti-Asian attitudes to rally citizens in support of immigrant exclusion. Two infamous Asian male stereotypes appeared in Henry Grimm’s play *The Chinese Must Go* in 1879: there was the Chinaman who could barely speak English, was usually drunk or high on opium, and chased white women and there was the Chinaman who could speak perfect English and was the “evil mastermind” that planned on corrupting innocent white Americans. These male stereotypes were coupled with female stereotypes of either being the “innocent self-sacrificing lotus blossom or the much feared dragon lady” (Kim Lee 12). The former of these female caricatures has been hotly debated with the production of *Miss Saigon*. As if the controversy regarding Jonathan Pryce was not enough, it has been argued that “for the Asian American theatre community as a whole, the musical presented a major setback not only in terms of casting and stereotypes but also in terms of how the economic power of mainstream theatre has utterly dictated minority theatres” (Kim Lee 178).

Though Asian roles in American theatre tend to be overly exotic, they are not all necessarily portrayed in a negative light. One must consider the works of Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II. Their Tony-award-winning musical *South Pacific* in 1949 is well-remembered for its confrontation of racism, specifically in the song “You’ve Got to Be Carefully Taught.” According to Philip Beidler, professor of American literature at the University of Alabama, Rodgers and Hammerstein were known to “use the Broadway theater to make a courageous statement against racial bigotry in general and institutional racism in the postwar

United States in particular” (Beidler 49). However, the Asian roles Bloody Mary and Liat were portrayed by an African American and Caucasian actress, respectively.

The most ground-breaking Rodgers and Hammerstein show for Asian Americans was *Flower Drum Song* in 1958. The musical was based on the 1957 novel of the same name written by Chinese-American author C.Y. Lee. Not only did the story focus on Chinese American immigrants in America, but the creative team did their best to find a mostly Asian American cast for the original production. Modern critics complain that the musical lacks authenticity and is filled with stereotypes, but in my opinion, it is admirable that Rodgers and Hammerstein created an ethnic show without blatant or purposeful racism in the first place. Renowned Asian American playwright David Henry Hwang worked to revise the libretto for the 2002 revival of *Flower Drum Song* which featured an all-Asian cast. Though the production received mixed reviews and closed early, it was significant because, despite its short run, it finally exposed modern Broadway audiences to a Chinese American story (Kim Lee 225-228).

Though Asian Americans have made some theatrical break-throughs here and there, the majority still feels as though they are struggling to be seen and cast in New York and a large part of the issue is trying to overcome stereotypes from the past. NYU professor Karen Shimakawa reasons that “Asian American performers never walk onto an empty stage...that space is always already densely populated with phantasms of orientalism through and against which an Asian American performer must struggle to be seen” (Shimakawa 17). In response to a growing frustration with the industry, hundreds of Asian American theatre artists rallied and formed the Asian American Performers Action Coalition (AAPAC) to find out how many Asian actors were really being cast in New York (Kavner). Their reports were shocking. In the past five seasons as of February 2012, Asian Americans were cast in only 2% of the roles in Broadway and major

Off-Broadway productions while 80% went to white actors, 13% to black actors, 4% to Hispanic actors, and about 1% to others. In recent years, Asian Americans are the only minority group to see their casting percentage actually decrease. This is particularly interesting because Asian Americans make up 12.9% of the population of New York City and are considered the city's fastest growing minority group. The AAPAC reports also revealed that only about 9% of all available roles in New York at the time had been cast "nontraditionally" in the first place (Gener).

Though it has statistically been proven that Asian American actors are faring quite poorly in mainstage New York theatre, times have improved drastically since the Asian American Movement in 1960s. With recent controversies like "The Nightingale" and the formation of the AAPAC, the tribulations of Asian American actors are finally beginning to come to the forefront of race discussion (Kim Lee 225-228). In addition, there are now several more active Asian American theatre groups across the country including the East West Players based in Los Angeles, the Asian American Theatre Company in San Francisco, the Asian American Repertory Theatre in San Diego, the Ma-Yi Theatre Company in New York City, and the Pan Asian Repertory Theatre in New York City to name a few. Though no substantial advancements have been made, theatre artists such as playwright David Henry Hwang have been striving to change the course of Asian American theatre for years by activism and by writing specifically for Asian Americans. Hwang is enormously influential in American mainstage theatre as he is the only Asian American playwright whose work has made it to Broadway (Toy Johnson). Some of his plays include *M. Butterfly* (1988), *Yellow Face* (2007), and *Chinglish* (2011).

As it stands now, there are two parts to consider when examining the current state of Asian American theatre: casting and programming (Toy Johnson). Statistics show that the

amount of Asian Americans cast is startlingly low: of the 6,639 total roles cast in the past five theatre seasons as of February 2012, only 54 Broadway parts went to Asian American actors (Gener). Those numbers are staggering. On the bright side, however, the AAPAC's report has sparked serious discussion about the state of Asian Americans in theatre today. Race debates in organizations like the Equal Employment Opportunity Committee, the Broadway League, and the Alliance for Inclusion in the Arts, had previously been limited to African American actors, but with the AAPAC in full-blast, the tides are starting to turn. As for programming, there is only one Asian American playwright produced on Broadway: David Henry Hwang. That needs to change. Similar to the need for more black theatre (which was discussed in the Wilson-Brustein debate), there is a need for more Asian American theatre as well. Christine Toy Johnson theorizes that because Asian Americans are not perceived as entirely American, theatre producers are only comfortable with shows that portray Asians from Asia. Unfortunately, most Asian American actors who are cast in New York are almost always cast traditionally; they play Asian characters from Asia, never Asian characters from America (Toy Johnson). This provides evidence that American theatre needs more playwrights writing and producing material that showcases Asian Americans as Americans, not foreigners. If American theatre could adjust its casting policies and expand the types of shows being produced, Asian American actors could finally be cast and be accepted as American.

Conclusion

Based on my research on Asian American history in theatre and in American society, I would argue that it is currently very difficult to be an Asian American trying to make it as an actor in New York. I find this surprising because theatre is always thought of as being more progressive than the rest of society, yet deep-set prejudices and stereotypes about Asian

Americans are still prevalent in theatre today due to the long tradition of yellowface and racist caricatures. I strongly believe that the root of the problem is American society's fear of change. Audiences are accustomed to seeing Asians portrayed as foreign, oriental, and often side-kick characters. Though Asian Americans are rarely cast as leads, part of the problem is that there are currently very few opportunities for such roles. There either needs to be an increase in the amount of Asian American shows produced or casting directors must be willing to cast nontraditionally more often.

Though many companies say they endorse the practice of colorblind casting, it is still difficult for producers, casting directors, and audience members to look past the Asian-ness of an actor. Personally, I believe colorblind casting can be effective when used with the right shows. If a show focuses on a modern American experience and lifestyle, there is absolutely no reason why the cast could not be Asian even if it was initially written to be Caucasian. In this day and age, what was once considered nontraditional casting is actually more realistic casting. In the diverse population of New York City, for instance, not everyone you meet on the street is going to be white anymore. Asian Americans make up a large part of the community and their numbers in the city continue to grow. As stated in an interview with actor Christine Toy Johnson, "the power of the theatre has always been in its ability to hold a mirror up to society – and as a result, to educate, enlighten and entertain by what we see. And society looks *much* different from how it's being portrayed onstage, both as reflected by the actors up there, and by the stories being told."

The tendency to cast primarily white is part of a vicious cycle: white shows are performed by white actors to attract white audiences. In order for the state of Asian American actors to advance, American society must fully accept that we are American too. I adamantly

believe that mainstage American theatre has the ability to move society towards this goal by producing shows that are about Asian Americans from America and by making bolder, “nontraditional” casting choices. If Broadway productions had more racially diverse casts, they would attract a more racially diverse audience; thus, the vicious cycle would begin again with more realistic racial standards. If contemporary theatre can become more progressive in this way, it will help change how American society perceives race both onstage and in everyday life. I feel that a paradigm shift for Asian American actors is coming, but it needs the extra push that mainstage American theatre can provide.

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