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'Nightingale' Casting Controversy: Asian American Actors Criticize Lack Of Asian Actors

The Huffington Post | By Lucas Kavner
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La Jolla Playhouse
The poster for "The Nightingale," which is causing a stir in the Asian-American community for its colorblind casting.

A new workshop production of "The Nightingale" by Duncan Sheik and Steven Sater at the historic La Jolla Playhouse in California is striking nerves in the Asian American community.

The show, which was adapted from a short story by Hans Christian Anderson and is set in ancient China, has amassed critics vocal about the lack of actual Asian actors present on stage. The lead role of a Chinese monarch is being played by a white actor, and the rest of the cast is multiethnic.

Most of the grievances have been aired on the theater company's [Facebook page](#). "Would you cast non African American people in the roles of 'The Color Purple' or an August Wilson play or 'Topdog/Underdog'???" wrote one commenter. "I am eagerly anticipating your multiracial, non-traditionally cast production of Glengarry Glen Ross! Should be outstanding!" wrote another.

After receiving enough complaints to warrant a discussion, the theater's artistic director, Christopher Ashley, has scheduled a panel discussion -- set for July 22 -- to discuss the issues at stake, which will feature members of the Asian American Performers Action Coalition (AAPAC) and a New York-based casting director, among others.

Though Ashley expressed an understanding of the criticisms, he also defended the show's use of a multi-ethnic cast, [telling the Los Angeles Times](#) that the show is meant to combine "elements of Eastern and Western cultures," and this version of the cast is by no means final. He said he is open to a version of the show with all Asian actors.

In a statement posted on the company's Facebook page, Ashley said he welcomed the feedback, since the show is a part of the playhouse's developmental workshop series, [Page to Stage](#).

"We are still in the process of discovering this piece in the Page To Stage environment and fully acknowledge that some of our choices may change as the project develops," he said. "We truly value this feedback and look forward to continued discussions."

This is certainly not the first instance where Asian American actors felt underrepresented by the theater community at large. In the past year [AAPAC has made themselves much more visible](#), with a high-profile panel discussion at Fordham University in February and other scheduled appearances.

In the most recent AAPAC report, "Ethnic Representation on New York City Stages," AAPAC stated that Asian-Americans received only 3 percent of all available roles in the non-profit sector overall, and only 1.5 percent of all available roles on Broadway in the past five years.

Christine Toy Johnson, an actor and member of AAPAC who will appear at the July 22 La Jolla panel, told the Huffington Post in February that she struggled to be perceived as simply an "American" actor.

"It's a bit shocking, but every [Asian-American person] I know has had to deal with some sort of perception based on image," she said.

And now, it seems, they even struggle to play characters with their own ethnic background.

Click through our slideshow of other instances of "race-lifting" in Hollywood films:

