



INVISIBILITY

Many Major Theaters Believe in Color Blind Casting (Except When It Comes to People of Color)

 Laura Beck

Chuck Mee is all about fairness. The legendary American playwright believes there's no such thing as an original play, and invites visitors to his website to "remix" his work. He also has some pretty visionary ideas about casting his shows. He writes:

Casting Note: In my plays, as in life itself, the female romantic lead can be played by a woman in a wheelchair. The male romantic lead can be played by an Indian man. And that is not the subject of the play. There is not a single role in any one of my plays that must be played by a physically intact white person. And directors should go very far out of their way to avoid creating the bizarre, artificial world of all intact white people, a world that no longer exists where I live, in casting my plays.

This quote particularly resonates with Asian actors, who are historically underrepresented on the stage. Many say a regular refrain from theaters is that they believe in colorblind casting. But, as a rash of recent controversies demonstrates, in practice that often means casting white actors in Asian roles.

Collaborators Duncan Sheik and Steven Sater recently ran a high profile workshop of the *The Nightingale* at the prestigious La Jolla Playhouse. The play's set in ancient China, and the lead role of a Chinese monarch was cast with a white actor.

As the *Huffington Post* [points out](#):

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.

FEB 1, 2013 6:00 PM

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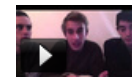
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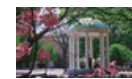
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To his credit, the show's director Christopher Ashley said that Asian actors were cast in some of the show's smaller roles, and he was open to talking about the underrepresentation as a larger issue. In fact, as a direct response to this uproar, Ashley and several artistic directors of other local theaters gathered for a **panel discussion** about the question. Since the theater world is relatively small and interconnected, word about controversies this size generally spreads quickly. So it's surprising that two other high profile theaters made the same mistake in less than a year.

London's Royal Shakespeare Company's production of *The Orphan of Zhao*. Often referred to as the "Chinese Hamlet", the 17 person cast had only three actors of east Asian heritage in it — and they all had minor roles (including one woman who just played a **dog**).

British Chinese actor Daniel York, the vice-chair of the British Equity's ethnic minority committee, **told the Guardian** the problem isn't confined to the RSC: "The whole industry is reluctant to cast east Asians in non-race specific roles. We are generally only thought of as the Chinese takeaway man or the Japanese businessman." he said.

It is a vicious cycle, York continued: "It's incredibly hard for an east Asian person to build up the track record that would enable the RSC to feel confident in casting them in a decent role. We're not on the radar because we're not working very much."

The RSC said it cast such an overwhelmingly large white cast because it needed to use the same actors in its other productions. However, Gabby Wong at *Big Green Scotland* makes the **excellent points**:

The Orphan of Zhao is being played in repertory with two other plays, Pushkin's *Boris Godunov* and Brecht's *Life of Galileo*, and the justification for this 'diverse, colourblind' casting is that all actors must be suitable for all three plays. But none of the East Asian actors in the ensemble have leading roles in any of the three plays, taking on subservient roles in all of them. The title role of *The Orphan of Zhao* is played by Jake Fairbrother, yet it seems unimaginable that the RSC would have one of the East Asian actors play Boris or Galileo.

So the RSC are saying it is OK to have a white actor play a leading Chinese character but a Chinese actor can play a white character only as long as it is minor and hidden away; that Chinese people can't tell a white story but they are now not even permitted to tell their own story either. Newsflash – it is only 'diverse' if the colourblindness is two-way traffic.

Then there's the most recent, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, the play within a play inspired by an unfinished Charles Dickens novel. White actors are cast to portray two Sri Lankan characters — and they do so wearing brown face makeup. *The New York Times* even **calls the production out** for their "silly imitation exoticism" and "...absurd burnt umber makeup". It's **debatable** whether the directors and producers should've cast white people and let them just look white; or cast Asian people and, you know, just let them look like themselves. Oh, and like the characters they're playing.











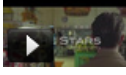



And it goes on: Recent casting breakdowns for a Bollywood play coming to the states **says in the first line**: "NOTE: We are open to seeing Actors who are Non Indian, but who can believably play Indian Characters." Another recently removed from *Callboard* (probably because it'd been cast) for *Priscilla Queen Of The Desert* read: SEEKING: CYNTHIA Female, 20s – 30s, Asian. (Actor can be any ethnicity-as long as she can convincingly portray Asian on stage).

You have to wonder if that would fly if they'd replaced Asian with "convincingly play black on stage," or even "convincingly play white on stage."

These frequent repeated incidents seem to reveal patterns so ingrained that theaters reflexively make the same poor choices, even after they've witnessed similar choices result in highly publicized controversies.

So, it's no surprise that a group of Asian American actors banded together and crunched the numbers to prove that this type of underrepresentation is an endemic issue. The **Asian American Performers Action Coalition** (AAPAC) has a handy chart of the ethnic make up of all the actors

Oscar Party

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MORE STORIES...

on Broadway and in non profit theater from 2006-2011, and it's depressing. Eighty percent caucasian, 14 percent African American, four percent Latino/Latina, two percent Asian American, and one percent other. Yes, it's true that Asian Americans are six percent of the U.S. total population, but the percentage is higher in the urban population centers that typically host major theaters. For example, in New York City, it's 11.8 percent.

A comment on [AAPAC's Facebook wall](#) identifies the reality of the situation. In it, Kenneth Lee writes:

Going beyond [casting] breakdowns, if you made a visit to any casting director's office, you'll see 'binders' or file drawers categorized as types. Starting with male, female, ingenue, character actors, leading men/lady types, comedians...etc.. . Guess which 'binder' we get filed in? Asian. What does that mean? It means that unless a specifically asian role is being cast (or with some anecdotal exception), that binder sits there, unopened, gathering dust. Now if you can see this situation in the context of what is happening in *Cloud Atlas*, in the new Kublai Kahn movie starring Mickey Rourke, in *Iron Man 3*, in *Airbender* and in the upcoming *Akira*, you begin to find that even with Asian roles, that binder still sits there, unopened.

So, you could argue that the casting directors, producers, and directors for these major productions picked the best actors for the roles, but I don't think that tells the whole story.

If you're any kind of "other" in our society, you become accustomed to imagining yourself in the perspective of someone really different than yourself in order to enjoy a story. Since it could be argued we live in a culture that values the stories of white men most of the time, it makes sense that we all become used to seeing things from their perspective. (I mentioned this in a piece just yesterday but it's complicated, powerful dynamic so it bears repeating here.) There's a passage in Margaret Cho's hilarious 2002 autobiography *I'm the One That I Want* where Cho talks about how, as a young girl, she couldn't wait to grow up and become white like everyone on TV.

The white men casting these three shows have never had to place themselves in other people's shoes. Because most stories are catered to them, it's possible they never had to develop the same imaginative flexibility the rest of us are continually practicing. You might assume that when an Asian man or woman walks in to audition for the lead, the casting people think "other". They could wonder, "How will the audience access this story since they're not a Chinese woman?" But in reality, many of us have been doing that our entire lives. It's possible that this might come into play in casting, with the end result almost always being: You want it to be universal, you gotta cast white. This might also help to explain the best-friend-slash-sidekick-of-color phenomenon — it's a way for well-intentioned-if-somewhat-clueless producers to try for diversity without having to actually sacrifice their identification with the audience's point of entry.

Another component might be that theater producers, directors, and casting agents just have disproportionately white Rolodexes, and haven't made enough of an effort to build a list beyond that. It's an availability bias, and a self perpetuating cycle — people have seen white actors take on all these amazing roles, because that's who gets cast. They know what those actors are capable of, so it's easy to imagine them in new roles. They don't have the same level of experience with Asian actors, so even with a great audition, they might not capture the creators' imaginations in the same way. A proven track record with a beloved actor will usually win the part, and it makes sense that most actors afforded those opportunities are white.

There's no such thing as neutral casting. If the same people arguing that roles should go to the best person, regardless of race, then that should be true *all* of the time. Scriptnotes, a screenwriting podcast I listen to, tackled the issue of character ethnicity in scripts. Basically, the takeaway was, if no ethnicity is mentioned in the character description, you assume they're white. Sometimes cheeky casting directors might ignore instructions and bring in whoever they think is best for the role, but many just get the job done with the tools they have. And often the tools? They're white.

This particular blindspot sucks because there are so many reductive, stereotypical, and demeaning representations of Asian people out there, and so few truly human and complex Asian characters to counterbalance them. Somehow it feels a bit harder to stomach incidents like

these in a world where shows like *Two Broke Girls* get renewed, despite the fact that that particular show's depiction of Korean-American restaurateur Han Lee—aptly **described** by Andrew Ti as "A tiny, greedy, sexless man-child"—led *The New Yorker* to **say** the show is "so racist it's baffling." We need more stories about compelling, complicated, idiosyncratic Asian characters spanning the whole range of human experience, not just the few notes that seem to be repeated way too often.

This isn't about straight-up evil, actively racist producers, directors, and casting directors, but it does reveal some of the smaller unconscious choices and assumptions people make that breed systemic exclusion. It's possible we often make the unconscious assumption that white=neutral, and that informs all of our choices. But the thing is, it's past time for everyone to recognize that we never lived in a white neutral country, and we certainly don't live in one now. Our stories should represent our culture, in all its variety, and how we cast our stories is an important part of creating the culture we want.

Playwright David Henry Hwang (pictured above) **puts it best**:

In choosing works to enjoy, the country in general needs to see past the the notion that a piece's "universality" has anything to do with the race and culture of its characters. Over the past 20 or 30 years, we seem to have crossed that Rubicon in the world of pop music. It's hard nowadays to remember that it was once considered daring to put Michael Jackson or Prince videos on MTV, for fear white audiences wouldn't watch them. We need to make that same transition in narrative-based art forms.

A note on casting [Chuck Mees]

Doing It a Bit Too Brown, Old Chap [Fairy Princess Diaries]

55 discussions in response to [Laura Beck](#)

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You are following AndAnotherThing...s comments

[mommy_dearest and 23 more](#) Reply 24 days ago

It's always funny how people will say to calm down about a white actor in an Asian Last Airbedder, but put a black guy in the world of Thor or a black woman as Guinevere and they start complaining about accuracy.

[AndAnotherThing... and 13 more](#) Reply 24 days ago

These people clearly need to sit down and watch WWoD Cinderella. I like to live in a world where Whoopi Goldberg and Victor Garber have a hot Asian guy for a son*. Who falls in love with Brandy. Who has Bernadette Peters for a stepmom. And Bernadette Peters has one white kid and one black kid.



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[Alekei_Firebird and 9 more](#) Reply 24 days ago

It's a musical. If I can believe people are bursting into song randomly, I can believe in true colorblind

into song randomly, I can believe in the colorblind casting.

White people don't realize how good they have it, to have their stories viewed as the most important and the most interesting.

*Whatever happened to that guy?

That is, until they get their privilege pointed out, upon which they will become ultra-defensive and belligerent as the cognitive dissonance occurs in their head:

You are following MyPrettyFloralBonnets comments

Thought #1: "These minorities should stop complaining! Movies are just movies! Who cares which race gets represented favorably or not?"

[MyPrettyFloralBoonn... and 7 more](#) [Reply](#) [24 days ago](#)

Thought #2: 'Oh god, it's been a sweet gravy train, being able to see Whites like me, and ONLY Whites like me, everywhere in the media. I don't wanna lose that! That sh*t's the bomb!'

The Shakespeare Festival I grew up near actually did do color-blind casting, and it was really neat. (Particularly since the rest of the area was ridiculously white and vaguely racist--there's a reason I moved.) Last time they did Hamlet, Hamlet was white with super blond hair and his mother and uncle were both played by black actors; either Rosencrantz or Guildenstern (or both? it was a few years back) were Asian. No one cared, and the show was awesome.



You are following MaggieFs comments

The only time I remember hearing people get upset about the race of an actor was when they did Othello and cast a black man in the part. Still haven't totally figured that one out.

[MaggieF and 7 more](#) [Reply](#) [24 days ago](#)

My favorite (and possibly apocryphal) casting story: CCH Pounder, sick of playing crack-addicted single moms, told an audition panel that she wanted to read for the judge (Law and Order or something). The thought had never occurred to them, and they had a surprised discussion that consisted of phrases like, "Do they have black judges now?" "Yeah, I think there are black judges."

You are following HelenaLandless comments

I like to think that story ends with her getting the role, but I don't remember.

[HelenaLandless and 5 more](#) [Reply](#) [24 days ago](#)

You're being very one-sided with this. I encourage you to read a response written by someone who knows the show and consider the other issues at play here, including Ms. Quill's own racism.

[\[alisonpeople.tumblr.com\]](#)



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[Shmeliza and 2 more](#) [Reply](#) [24 days ago](#)

This is a huge issue in theater right now, and I think it comes down to a combination of underrepresentation of Asian actors and overt and subtle racism from producers and directors.

I know this is focusing on theater but it's just as much of a problem in movies and maybe only marginally less so in TV. I am still REALLY pissed about Avatar (or the Last Airbender as they called it) but at least no good Asian actors had to suffer their resumes with that garbage. Well, for the dominant race.

First, underrepresentation: Asian Americans (and other minorities, for the sake of argument) see a world of theater and film the dominant race them, so why would they join up? There are very few roles models in the field, whereas any white person has a hundred actors, playwrights or directors that he or she wants to emulate in either theater or film. This is the ugly, disgusting truth: companies don't trust Asian actors in leads because a) they're racist (more on that in a moment) and b) Asian actors are a smaller pool. [More »](#)

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[Sharsrawesome and 4 more](#) [Reply](#) [24 days ago](#)

Over Christmas I saw Les Mis in D.C. and they cast an asian actor as Marius. He did great and his rendition of Empty Chairs/Empty tables made me cry. He was also far superior to whoever played Marius in the movie. But I was shocked and impressed that they cast him in a lead role in such a well-loved musical. So obviously, the world doesn't fall apart when asians portray white characters, so there is no reason for it not to happen (and/or to like, I don't know, stop having white-male be the only story that is told, because that shit gets old after a while).



You are following cew-smokes comments

[cew-smoke and 2 more](#) [Reply](#) [24 days ago](#)

Honestly, being a mildly conservative person I don't know much about the theater. However, I had always assumed that it was probably one of the more progressive environments to work in. I'm disappointed that it appears to have the same problems that Hollywood does. If the Liberal dominated fields are not breaking down the racial barriers, where are these barriers going to get broken? Certainly not in white, corporate America and certainly not in American politics (from the looks of Congress). So, then where? Where will the change come from if not from the world of the arts? How heartbreaking.

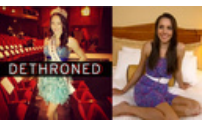
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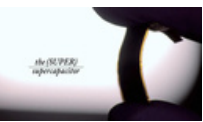
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Kotaku



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Happy 69th Birthday, SCCA!

GIZMODO



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