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Advocates Ask: Why Do Asian-Americans Go Uncast in New York Theater?

By *PATRICK HEALY*

Sara Krulwich/The New York Times A scene from the Broadway production of “Chinglish” with, from left, Stephen Pucci, Gary Wilmes, Angela Lin and Larry Lei Zhang.

Over the past five theater seasons Asian-American actors were cast in 2 percent of the roles in Broadway and major Off Broadway productions, while 80 percent of the roles went to white performers, 13 percent to black actors, and 4 percent to Hispanic artists, according to data compiled by an advocacy group for Asian-American performers. Over those seasons, 2006-07 to 2010-11, Asian-Americans were found to be the only minority group whose share of New York acting roles declined slightly, and they were also the least likely to be chosen for characters that would traditionally be played by white actors.

The data, culled from Broadway credits and 16 major Off Broadway theater companies, were the focus of a roundtable discussion on Monday night at Fordham College at Lincoln Center that included 19 actors, directors, playwrights, producers, and talent agents, including the Tony Award winners David Henry Hwang (“Chinglish,” “M. Butterfly”) and Bartlett Sher (the director of the 2008 revival of “South Pacific”).

Both the conversation and the data were pointed. Theater artists usually prefer to whisper or gossip critically about their peers, but the advocacy group – the Asian American Performers Action Coalition – named the theater companies that employed the fewest numbers of Asian-American actors over the five-year period. They were Atlantic Theater Company, Manhattan Theater Club, Playwrights Horizons and Roundabout Theater Company, all of which mounted productions in which Asian-Americans accounted for 1 percent of the roles. (The New Group, with 8 percent, fared best.)

Nancy Piccione, director of casting at Manhattan Theater Club and one of the panelists, echoed others, saying that she brought actors of all ethnicities into the audition room. “Sometimes I’ll get a response from a director or playwright in the room about why that just happened, and that’s where the conversation begins,” she said of inviting, for instance, Asian-Americans to try out for roles that might not seem obviously suited for their ethnic background. She and others noted that black actors have pushed and protested for decades for more stage work and more nontraditional casting, and those jobs eventually came in greater numbers.

Oskar Eustis, artistic director of the Public Theater, urged Asian-American actors to “make noise” and even consider protesting or picketing theaters to urge more diversity and counterintuitive thinking in casting roles – an idea that drew some applause from the Fordham audience of 400 people.

“There are still many directors who stop cold at the idea of members of a biologically related family

onstage being members of different races,” he said of the all-white family dramas that are a staple of American theater and that are rarely cast with nonwhite actors. Stephen C. Byrd, a producer who is mounting a mixed-race “[Streetcar Named Desire](#)” on Broadway this spring, called for an “Occupy Broadway” movement to demand greater racial diversity in productions.

Nelle Nugent, a Broadway producer currently represented by the African-American family drama “[Stick Fly](#),” questioned how many blacks, Hispanics and Asians sat on the boards of New York theater companies, and suggested that they withhold donations until they saw more diversity in their theaters’ productions. Mr. Sher, the director, also encouraged more Asian-Americans to produce work to expand the variety of shows and roles in New York.

“Get control of as much money as you can and buy out the Shuberts,” Mr. Sher said, referring to the Shubert Organization, which owns 17 of the 40 theaters on Broadway.

If there was an elephant in the room, it was whether producers and theaters are mostly casting white actors because they want to appeal as much as possible to white audience members, who make up the majority of theater-goers. Some panelists took on this subject provocatively.

Ms. Nugent noted that 70 to 90 percent of audience members at “Stick Fly” were black. She added, “I swear to you, the white audience does not want to come see that show because they don’t want to be in a place where they are the minority overwhelmingly.” Few black people, meanwhile, were in the audiences at predominantly white-cast plays like “Other Desert Cities” and “Seminar” when she recently attended.

“The audience situation is extremely critical to opening this up,” she said. “Stick Fly” is scheduled to close on Broadway after a three-month run on Feb. 26, at a partial financial loss to producers.

Pun Bandhu, an actor and one of the leaders of the advocacy group, questioned whether theater companies and producers are programming to satisfy what they assume are the relatively conservative expectations of white audience members. He quoted a theater blogger who had written, “Maybe we should just come to conclusion that theater is for white people – those are the people showing up.”

But Douglas Aibel, artistic director of the Vineyard Theater, an Off Broadway nonprofit, said it was wrong to “demonize” the predominantly white subscribers to theater companies like his. “They believe passionately, and even go to theater in the winter,” he said, referring to the time of the year when dedicated theater-goers trudge out into the cold. “I think audiences become more diverse when there’s more diversity onstage,” he added, referring to productions that include both white and minority actors.

Mr. Hwang, whose play “Chinglish” closed last month after a three-and-a-half month run, noted that he had hoped the play would prove even more popular than it was with Asian-American audiences. “It’s just really important for all people to vote with your feet,” he said. “If you want a particular sort of theater, and that comes along, then actually get into the seats.”

Throughout the three-hour roundtable, Mr. Hwang and others frequently mentioned [Jeremy Lin](#), the Asian-American who has become a breakout sensation on the Knicks this season. They held him up as

a performer who both defied stereotypes and overcame a lack of interest from colleges and the National Basketball Association, and in doing so created excitement and a potentially larger audience of Asian-Americans for basketball.

“When you have a glass ceiling, it hurts not only the people being discriminated against,” Mr. Hwang said. “It hurts the institutions doing the discriminating.”