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Asian American theater leaders react to 'Nightingale' controversy

By David Ng

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"The Nightingale," a new musical being presented at the La Jolla Playhouse, has drawn sharp criticism in recent days for the relative lack of Asian American actors in a work set in ancient China.

The creative team behind the musical, based on the Hans Christian Andersen story, has assembled a multicultural cast of 12 that includes two performers of Asian descent. Christopher Ashley, the artistic director of the La Jolla Playhouse, said the casting was a deliberate decision to create a mix of East and West, past and present.

"The Nightingale," which is being presented as a workshop production, has received a barrage of negative comments on the company's Facebook page and on various blogs. Commenters have faulted the company for failing to include more Asian or Asian American actors in a production in which the characters are Chinese.

The show features big-name writing talent in the form of Duncan Sheik and Steven Sater, who collaborated on the hit Broadway musical "Spring Awakening."

For some, the incident is reminiscent of the controversy more than 20 years ago surrounding the Broadway production of "Miss Saigon." The casting of actor Jonathan Pryce as the French-Vietnamese Engineer in the musical upset many people in the Asian American community and led Actors' Equity Assn. to request that the role go to an actor of Asian descent.

"The Nightingale" is set to run at La Jolla through Aug. 5. Here are excerpts from our recent interviews with Asian American theater leaders and professionals from around the country.

Tim Dang, producing artistic director of East West Players, in Los Angeles: "What has been nice to see in the last two decades is that roles for Asian Americans have increased. But if you look at all of the media, like TV and film, they have done so much better than the stage... This brings up the question of artistic independence. I wouldn't want someone telling me whom I should cast in a play. But if you're setting this in ancient China, why aren't you considering Asian Americans in some of the lead roles?"

Pun Bandhu, member of the Asian American Performers Action Coalition, in New York: "It's fair to criticize a production that doesn't allow Asian actors to participate in how Asians are being represented. This is a story that is clearly set in China, and it's a specific time and place. It would be different if the

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creative team wanted to set it in a land far, far away.... If you were setting a story in Africa, you would never cast the majority of the cast with white actors. You would never cast "Porgy and Bess" with only two African Americans.... I would question any work of art that claims to be non-specific. To achieve authenticity, and universality, you need specificity."

Pearl Wong, managing director of the Asian American Theater Company, in San Francisco: "I'm surprised something like this is happening in Southern California. There's such a large number of actors of Asian descent there who are clamoring for work.... [Casting directors] should make every effort to include actors who have knowledge of the parts they're playing.... I'm a big fan of the La Jolla Playhouse -- they have worked with some prominent Asian Americans in the past, so they have inroads in the community. They know whom to call."

Francis Jue, Obie-winning stage actor (sent via email): "The creatives of 'The Nightingale' explain that 'mixing it up' takes this piece to a non-literal, fantastical level of meaning. But why is that goal only achievable by including actors who are not Asian? Why is that goal not achievable with Asian actors?... In the context of a story set in China, such casting not only denies Asian actors the opportunity to play roles uniquely appropriate to them, it may be at cross purposes to its very goal of inclusion."

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