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Heated exchanges at La Jolla Playhouse over multicultural casting [Updated]

By David Ng

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LA JOLLA — The controversy over the casting of a new musical set in China with mostly non-Asians provoked a series of heated exchanges at a public forum arranged by the La Jolla Playhouse.

The casting of “The Nightingale,” written by Tony-winning “Spring Awakening” collaborators Duncan Sheik and Steven Sater, has drawn sharp criticism. The musical, adapted from the Hans Christian Andersen story and set in ancient China, features a multicultural cast of 12, with two actors of Asian descent in supporting roles. The show's lead role of a young Chinese emperor is played by a white actor.

Members of the Asian American community and others have faulted the company for what they view as a serious casting imbalance.

Sunday's discussion drew a crowd of approximately 150 people. The onstage panel included Moisés Kaufman, the musical's director; Christopher Ashley, the artistic director of the La Jolla Playhouse; and Tara Rubin, the show's New York casting director.

Cindy Cheung, a panelist who is a member of New York's Asian American Performers Action Coalition, said that she reacted to the casting with “dismay and disgust and confusion.” She described the casting of the musical as “unacceptable.”

Another panelist, Christine Toy Johnson, also of AAPAC, said that the incident reminded her of “how invisible we still are” and that Asian Americans were “not invited to sit at the table” for this production.

Both panelists noted that the musical features five male roles, none of which is played by Asian or Asian American actors.

Both Sheik and Sater were present in the audience but were not panelists. Still, Sater, who wrote the book and the lyrics for the musical, spoke out to say that the multicultural casting was deliberate and was meant to “reflect the world I live in.” He said a multiethnic vision is one that “I continue to embrace for the piece.”

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Ashley and Kaufman both offered apologies in separate addresses to the audience. Kaufman said that the creative team intended to create a mythological China, not a literal one. But, he added: "I'm the first to agree that we have been unsuccessful at what we were trying to do."

Sheik didn't speak during the panel, but in a brief interview afterward the composer said the discussion had "affected my thinking of the show. My head is spinning."

At times, the discussion became heated. Some audience members shouted passionately and expressed their anger toward the musical's creative team at length. The show has "created the perception that the world is ruled by white men," said one attendee.

A tense moment came when the panelists asked Kaufman if he would cast a white actor in the role of an African monarch. The director avoided answering the question directly, which prompted the panelists to repeat their question. Kaufman still did not answer the question.

Cheung promised that actors would picket future productions of the musical if the casting choices remained unchanged.

Seema Sueko, executive artistic director and co-founder of the Mo'olelo Performing Arts Company in San Diego, said in an interview after the panel that she has "no doubt that [the creative team's] intentions were good, but good intentions sometimes have bad outcomes."

Bobby Steggert, the white actor who plays the lead role in the musical, said after the panel that "I fully agree" with the views expressed by the Asian American community. Steggert's character is a rebellious young monarch who becomes obsessed with a singing nightingale and eventually falls in love with a peasant girl. He did not want to comment further.

Other cast members said that they felt a combination of discomfort and embarrassment as a result of the controversy but did not want to talk on the record because they were not authorized to speak for the show.

"The Nightingale" is being presented as part of the La Jolla Playhouse's Page to Stage program, a workshop series in which new works are tried out in front of audiences. The musical has had previous readings, including one with Vassar's Powerhouse Theatre in upstate New York that had a multiethnic cast and was directed by Kaufman.

Sater said on Sunday that another past workshop reading of the musical featured an all-Asian cast and was organized by the American Conservatory Theater in San Francisco.

The La Jolla production is the fullest staging of "The Nightingale" so far, but it is still considered a workshop engagement.

It remains unclear if "The Nightingale" will be produced elsewhere following its La Jolla run. Officials at the company, as well as members of the creative team, said they could not comment on the musical's future.

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