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La Jolla Playhouse Says 'We Are Sorry' to Casting Decisions That Caused Racial Tension

Members of La Jolla Playhouse's team and the Asian theater community joined a panel discussion after Sunday's performance of "The Nightingale" to speak on the lack of Asian actors cast in the workshop musical.

By [Michelle Mowad](#) | [Email the author](#) | July 22, 2012



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Following criticism of its casting choices for the workshop production of *The Nightingale*, the [La Jolla Playhouse](#) hosted a panel discussion on Sunday to address the racial tension.

The playhouse has been under fire over its selection of a white male lead and lack of Asian performers cast in the musical, which is set in China.

"We didn't intend to offend fellow artists or the Asian-American community. We inadvertently did so. And we are sorry," said Christopher Ashley, La Jolla Playhouse's artistic director, to an audience of a few hundred.

Ashley said the workshop production is a blend of East and West, past and present. The cast of the musical, based on Hans Christian Andersen's tale by the same name, is multicultural, but has few Asian Americans cast in roles.

Numerous members of the Asian American theater community from both San Diego and across the U.S. joined in on Sunday's dialogue.

Panelist Christine Toy Johnson, actor, playwright, filmmaker and member of the [Asian American Performers Action Coalition](#), was emotional when she spoke on Sunday.

"To see this production ... with so few Asian American faces, reminds me how invisible we still are and how we are so often not invited to sit at the table. And to not be invited to sit at a table in a play that takes place in an Asian country is like a knife to the heart," she said.

The AAPAC said production with only two Asian American actors out of a company of 12 "is in step with a long history of appropriation and misrepresentation of Asian people that has consistently denied Asian artists a voice in shaping how they are represented."

Moisés Kaufman, director of *The Nightingale*, said he created the play with a focus on the location as a mythical land and not just as China.

“We were in search of a mythical space. We were never interested in setting it in a real China, in a real moment in time ...” Kaufman said. “I think all of us in the creative team have done work that is set in a very specific place, in a very specific time. And I think had we thought we were setting it in feudal China or in China in 1917 our casting choices would have been very, very different.”

Cindy Cheung, actor and member of the Asian American Performers Action Coalition, said while she respected the creative process, the end product still had many Chinese character names, set designs, and other place factors.

“You explaining the concept of not thinking of it as being in China is one thing, which I respect, but it doesn’t line up to what we are seeing. That’s not what it feels like. So it is an intellectual argument and an artistic argument, but it is not what comes across to us,” said Cheung.

Over the past two weeks, La Jolla Playhouse’s Facebook page has been a sounding board for commentary on race, multicultural casting, inclusion and the creative process.

One Facebook user posted, “I am very disappointed in the casting choices made by La Jolla Playhouse. Your casting choices have ramifications far beyond this production of *The Nightingale*, please take a hard look and examine whatever unconscious biases you may have that led you to these casting choices.”

The Playhouse has also used Facebook to comment back on the musical with lyrics by Steven Sater and music by pop star Duncan Sheik. Ashley invited theater patrons and community members to attend Sunday’s forum.

“I think this conversation we are having today is perhaps one of the most important conversations we can be having in American theater,” said Kaufman. “Both for issues of the presentation, issues of inclusion, but also for the health of the American theater.”

The Nightingale is a workshop production. Throughout the run of the show, the playwright and director take notes, feedback and make constant changes based on audience input. La Jolla Playhouse workshop productions have included *John Leguizamo Diary of a Madman* and *The Farnsworth Invention* written by Aaron Sorkin and directed by Des McAnuff.

“We know it is not a finished product. That is why we are here – to influence. We don’t want to see this happen anymore. If this was a finished product, we would be outside with pickets,” said Cheung.

Panelists also included Andy Lowe, founder and producer of Chinese Pirate Productions, and casting director Tara Rubin.

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