

# BD Wong to white actors playing Asian: ‘You’re in the wrong part’

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## Isha Aran

Isha Aran is a staff reporter for Fusion's Sex & Life section and is worth her weight in salt. Really, she is. She's salty as all hell.



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Last night, leaders of the New York theater scene came together with various Asian actors and allies to take part in [Beyond Orientalism: The Forum](#), discussing how to put an end to the use of “yellowface” and “brownface” by white actors and the overall [whitewashing](#) of Asian roles in stage productions.

If you thought the movie industry was messed up for casting [ScarJo as a Japanese woman](#) in *Ghost in the Shell*, or for [Tilda Swinton's role](#) as the Tibetan Ancient One in *Dr. Strange*—but it's okay, because she's ~actually~ a Celtic monk, in Tibet, wearing Asian-style robes?—theater isn't much better. Just last year, the New York Gilbert & Sullivan Players canceled their production of *The Mikado* due to [the backlash](#) over their use of white actors in [yellowface](#). In an industry where tons of talented Asian actors are eager for [more work](#), common sense is apparently a little hard to come by.

The forum was organized by the combined efforts of the Asian American Arts Alliance, Asian American Performers Action Coalition, Theatre Communications Group, and the Alliance for Inclusion in the Arts. The nine-person panel included theater industry heavy hitters like award-winning director Nelson T. Eusebio, actress and National Asian American Theatre Company cofounder Mia Katigbak, and playwright Lloyd Suh. David Wannan, executive director of the New York Gilbert & Sullivan Players, was also in attendance—in light of last year's debacle, he emphasized the company's commitment to reimagining their iconic shows to be more open, creating a “safe space” for Asian actors to explore characters.

But no one voiced the frustration, anger, and hope felt in the room more beautifully than the keynote speaker: BD Wong, the incredibly accomplished actor and part-time [raptor egg hatcher](#). And boy, he did not hold back.

Wong described how his pride “to be part of the odd and wonderful and interesting and noble thing it is to be an Asian-American actor” nevertheless comes with difficulties. He explained that the root of many of the issues he faces as an Asian-American actor is dealing with the disparity of how you experience your Asian identity and how that identity is represented (or misrepresented) in American media.

“It isn't just about telling our stories and doing the best we can,” Wong explained. “There's a whole other thing that comes with it, that we never asked for, that we never wanted. We would just love to erase it from our entire existence, and we can't. It comes with it—we're bound to it.”

Throughout his speech, Wong maintained that the source of the racism that pervades casting decisions—whether it's the denial of roles to Asian actors or the use of yellowface or brownface on white actors—is that “they do not understand.” White production companies don't get why yellowface and brownface are insulting. White actors don't get the truth and pain of the Asian characters they're invited to portray.

“The tradition of white actors transforming themselves, playing whoever they want, crossing across race, painting themselves up, and doing all sorts of things like that is as deeply entrenched in them as our pain is in us,” Wong said.

Wong also shared his personal experiences with yellowface (he was cast as a slave in the 2007 television movie *Marco Polo*, while white actor Brian Dennehy portrayed Mongolian leader Kublai Khan), maintaining that, as ridiculous as yellowface and brownface are, the more white actors eschew prosthetics and colored foundation, the clearer the absurdity of their casting becomes.

“You [white actors] can’t win when you have the yellowface on. You can’t win when you take the yellowface off,” he said. “You’re in the wrong part.”

Hopefully, Broadway and Hollywood alike will soon wake up to the reality that’s obvious to BD Wong, a growing number of theater companies, and countless Asian actors.