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Playhouse Apology At Casting-Controversy Forum



Above: Actors Bobby Steggert and Corbin Reid in the La Jolla Playhouse's Page to Stage production of "The Nightingale."

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By [Angela Carone](#)

[La Jolla Playhouse](#) artistic director Christopher Ashley apologized at a panel discussion held after Sunday's matinee performance of the Page to Stage musical "The Nightingale." Ashley said he was sorry for any hurt feelings resulting from the show's casting, which has [sparked controversy](#) in recent weeks.

Ashley was one of six panel members assembled to discuss the mostly non-Asian casting of the workshop production, which is set in what creators call a "mythological version" of ancient China.

Many of the characters still have Chinese names, including the emperor, who is played by a white male. The cast of 12 includes African American and white actors, along with two actors of Asian descent.

Joining Ashley on the panel were: director Moises Kaufman (“The Laramie Project,” “33 Variations,” “I Am My Own Wife”), Andy Lowe (founder and producer, Chinese Pirate Productions), casting director Tara Rubin, actor Cindy Cheung, and actor, playwright and filmmaker, Christine Toy Johnson. The latter two are members of the [Asian American Performers Action Coalition \(AAPAC\)](#).

Ashley apologized early in the discussion and the packed house, composed mostly members of the theater community, many of them Asian, applauded. There were other moments like this, when consensus took hold.

However, feelings of hurt, anger, and frustration were also expressed. Many Asian audience members spoke out, saying the show’s casting amounted to salt in an open wound. They cited a long tradition of cultural appropriation in entertainment and a history of under-representation on stages across the country.

A recent report conducted by AAPAC was cited. The report looked at casting on Broadway over the last five years. African American performers filled 13 percent of all available roles, Latinos/Hispanic American actors were represented at 4 percent, and Asian American actors were 2 percent. Asian Americans were the only minority group to see their numbers decline over the five-year period. Caucasian actors, who secured 80 percent of the roles, were the only ethnicity to over-represent compared to their relative population size.

Actor Johnson said when she learned “The Nightingale” was set in ancient China with a non-Asian cast, it was like “a knife to the heart.”

The play is based on an 1843 fable by noted children’s author Hans Christian Anderson. It’s about a Chinese emperor who longs for the song of a nightingale that once illuminated the world for his sheltered eyes.

The musical was created by Duncan Sheik and Steven Sater, the team behind the hit [Broadway musical “Spring Awakening.”](#) (Both were in attendance at the forum, though only Sater spontaneously answered questions.)

The panel’s moderator, a diversity consultant, asked director Kaufman to explain the show’s casting.

He said the mythical aspects of Anderson’s tale (the book features a palace made out of porcelain) resonated with the creative team. They set out to build a fantastical world of their own, one that transcended any one place or time, said Kaufman. A multiethnic cast was key to this mythical take on ancient China.

The show’s design, which prominently features Chinese lanterns, is also meant to reflect a multicultural place, explained Kaufman. Moroccan lanterns hang in the backdrop. The emperor’s costume is inspired by Iranian royalty and the costumes of the fishermen and women were inspired by Brazilian fishmongers, said Kaufman.

Lowe, also on the panel, pointed out the majority of audiences might not have the cultural context to recognize those references. Kaufman admitted “we may have been unsuccessful in articulating our idea of a multiethnic world.”

Page to Stage productions are works in development. They give creators a chance to find and develop their story along with the methods of telling it, which include casting. The creators repeatedly cited “Nightingale’s” workshop status, saying that discussions like the one under way help inform the play’s development.

Cheung noted, speaking on behalf of AAPAC, that they know the play isn’t finished and that’s why they’ve come to the forum. They hope to influence creative choices made in future productions.

She added that if those future productions (post–Playhouse) continue in the same vein (with current cast composition), they’ll be in attendance armed with picket signs.

Many tried to situate the discussion in the context of modern race politics. Cheung posed a hypothetical to the creators: “If this play were set in ancient Africa, would you have cast the king as white?” The question was never answered.

Cheung went on to say the Asian American and African American theater communities have very different visibility levels. African Americans stepped up years ago “and said a white person can no longer play Othello.” The Asian American community is stepping up now, Cheung explained.

An audience member asked why an earlier incarnation of the play with an all-Asian cast was abandoned. Steven Sater, the playwright and lyricist, addressed the crowd and relayed the many versions of the play work-shopped over the years. He said the version with the all-Asian cast wasn’t right for the story he wanted to tell.

“As white creators, we would not presume to know Asia,” Sater said. “And I didn’t want to tell a story only about Asia. I wanted to tell a multicultural story.”

Some audience members and panelists pointed out that non-traditional casting (“blind casting,” “color-blind casting”) was created as a way to provide opportunity for minority actors, not as “a way to justify whites playing a culturally-specific role.”

In the end, both sides of the argument were clearly articulated, with an audience Q&A session that occasionally got heated as attendees expressed their frustrations.

The creators explained their artistic vision for the show and how they went about realizing that vision, successfully or not. Frankly, the fact that they admitted failures in creating a multicultural mythical world impressed me. At the start, Kaufman announced that he was at the forum to learn. Sater called himself “a student” of the unfolding conversation.

It also impressed me that so many actors spoke out against what they see as unjust. It’s tough for actors to find work, especially if you’re not white (and male). It took courage to criticize some of the biggest names in theater on the stage of a potential employer, especially one of La Jolla Playhouse’s caliber.

Overall, I was surprised by the honest discussion. Sometimes people are reluctant to speak openly and honestly at forums like this. That did not seem to be the case here.

Both Ashley and Kaufman characterized the discussion as one of the most important conversations to be having in contemporary theater today.
