

Asian Americans in Theater Speak Out with #MyYellowFaceStory

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By Frances Kai-Hwa Wang

After the highly publicized casting of Tilda Swinton and Scarlett Johansson in movie roles that were originally written as Asian characters, Asian-American actors and artists in theater took to Twitter last weekend to share stories about the challenges they face as Asian Americans in theater. Using the hashtag #MyYellowFaceStory, many revealed issues of representation and employment equity.

Scarlett Johansson Casting Raises Concerns Over 'Whitewashing' 0:58

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"I think the general public is unaware how few opportunities are open to minority actors," Tony Award-winning playwright David Henry Hwang told NBC News. "Sharing these stories may help folks understand why it's so damaging when the few Asian roles that do exist end up going to white actors, two of the most publicized recent examples being Tilda Swinton and Scarlett Johansson. Moreover, since actors of color are routinely excluded from even auditioning for many roles, how can anyone believe that the white actors hired were truly the best men or women for those jobs?"

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Some Asian-American actors shared stories about not being considered for roles because of their Asian ancestry.

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At the same time, the practice of casting white actors to play Asian roles, often with additional makeup, known as yellowface, is prevalent. The practice of white actors playing African-American roles in blackface is no longer considered acceptable.

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Other Asian-American actors shared stories about not looking Asian enough to play Asian characters.

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The use of vague Asian accents, especially when one is not necessary or accurate, were a point of contention.

Asian Americans in theater often face stereotyped assumptions of what is Asian and that all Asian people, cultures, and languages are alike.

Asian-American playwrights spoke about the frustration of creating more roles for Asian and Asian-American actors, but then not being able to get those characters cast with Asian and Asian-American actors.

Latino and Latina actors in theatre also joined the conversation with #MyBrownFaceStory.

In one word, Actor BD Wong summed up the issues of both representation of Asian characters and employment equity for Asian-American actors with a photograph of British actor Johnathan Pryce, who played "The Engineer" in the original cast of "Miss Saigon," recalling the nationwide protests by Asian-American actors, artists, and activists in 1990 when Pryce was brought to America to reprise the role on Broadway without any consideration of Asian-

American actors. "Uncoooooomfortable," he wrote in the caption of the photo.

| [A photo posted by NBC News \(@nbcnews\)](#)

A group of four arts organizations — the Asian American Arts Alliance, the Asian American Performers Coalition (AAPAC), the Theatre Communications Group (TCG), and the Alliance for Inclusion in the Arts in association with the Fordham University Theatre Program — will sponsor "Beyond Orientalism: The Forum" tonight at Fordham University in New York City. This forum will launch a national initiative to address the negative effects of yellowface and brownface and to advocate for diverse representation of Asian Americans and other characters of color in theatre.

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