

Facing Criticism for Lack of Asian Artists in Musical, La Jolla Playhouse Hosts Panel Discussion

By Kenneth Jones
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La Jolla Playhouse is offering a July 22 community panel discussion to explore the idea of multicultural casting following criticism of its casting choices for the current production of *The Nightingale*, a musical set in China but not employing a fully Asian cast.

Cindy Cheung and Christine Toy Johnson of AAPAC – Asian American Performers Action Coalition, which has formally expressed its concerns about the production's casting, will be among those on the panel, according to a posting by LJP artistic director Christopher Ashley, on the Tony Award-winning theatre's Facebook page.

In addition to Ashley, Cheung and Johnson, the panel participants will include Tara Rubin of Tara Rubin Casting, NY, who cast the LJP Page To Stage workshop production, and Andy Lowe, founder and producer of Chinese Pirate Productions. The panel will be moderated by Jeanine Hillis, Diversity and Inclusion Consultant, who previously served as the City of San Diego's Chief Diversity Officer for ten years.

The musical is based on Danish writer Hans Christian Andersen's fable set in what he imagined as feudal China, where an emperor (played in this version by Tony nominee Bobby Steggert, who is not Asian) falls in love with a mechanical bird. The show is penned by Tony Award winners Steven Sater (book and lyrics) and Duncan Sheik (music), who wrote the Tony-winning musical *Spring Awakening*. Tony nominee Moisés Kaufman (Broadway's *I Am My Own Wife*, 33 *Variations*, Off-Broadway's *The Laramie Project*) directs.

AAPAC's Johnson told Playbill.com that in recent weeks AAPAC made a public statement about the dearth of Asian performers in the show. That criticism prompted LJP to call various members of AAPAC to discuss the issue and invite them to the panel, she said.

AAPAC's most recent statement about *The Nightingale* follows: "The idea that a play set in feudal China can be cast with only two Asian American actors out of a company of 12 — with the lead role of the Chinese Emperor played by a white actor — is in step with a long history of appropriation and misrepresentation of Asian peoples that has consistently denied Asian artists a voice in shaping how they are represented. To make casting decisions that are unaware of this history and indeed, reinforce it, is racially insensitive in this day and age, whether intentional or not. It is bad enough that Americans of Asian descent are grossly under-represented on U.S. stages and rarely called in for roles which transcend the color of their skin, but to deny them the opportunity to play roles uniquely appropriate to them seems to be at cross purposes to the ideas of inclusion and parity originally intended in 'multi-cultural' casting. We are pleased to be able to engage in a dialogue with La Jolla Playhouse and the creative team of *The Nightingale* about these issues."

"I do hope you will attend and share your thoughts with us on the 22nd following the matinee performance," Ashley wrote. "The discussion will begin at approximately 3:45 PM and you do not need to purchase a ticket to attend. It is very important to me and the Playhouse to address the many valid casting conversations that are taking place around our production of *The Nightingale*. I think the best way to do this is to have a frank discussion in a forum open to all in the community who wish to participate."

Ashley said in a further statement, "It was our intention from the onset to create a multicultural cast in a reinterpretation of this Hans Christian Andersen classic fable, blending East and West, past and present.

"We are still in the process of discovering this piece in the Page To Stage environment and fully acknowledge that some of our choices may change as the project develops. We truly value this feedback and look forward to continued discussions.

"In fact, it is just this kind of discourse for which the Playhouse's Page to Stage program was designed. These developmental workshop productions allow the space to explore questions about what a piece is and wants to become. Audience reactions and feedback help drive the changes that are made on a nightly basis, which are incorporated into the show throughout the run."

The panel discussion will be held at LJP's Potiker Theatre following the 2 PM matinee.

Here's a look at the production:

[View the Entire Photo Gallery](#)



The cast of *The Nightingale*
Photo by Craig Schwartz

For more information about AAPAC, visit aapacnyc.org. For more about La Jolla Playhouse in La Jolla, CA, visit lajollaplayhouse.org.

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Tony Award nominees Bobby Steggert and Charlayne Woodard, plus Broadway's Corbin Reid, Aaron Serotsky, Eisa Davis, Jonathan Hammond and more populate the California developmental production of *The Nightingale*, playing July 10-Aug. 5.

Choreography is by Tony nominee Dan Knechtges (*Lysistrata Jones*, *Xanadu*).

LJP bills it this way: "A compelling contemporary musical based on Hans Christian Andersen's classic tale, *The Nightingale* tells the story of a young emperor in ancient China, whose luxurious but constricted life inside the walls of the Forbidden City is upended by the song of an extraordinary bird that lives beyond his reach."

The cast includes Nikki Castillo (*How the Grinch Stole Christmas!*) as Nightingale; Obie Award winner Eisa Davis (*Passing Strange*, *Angela's Mixtape*) as Fisherwoman; Matthew Patrick Davis (LJP's *Limelight*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*) as Lieutenant Eunuch; Kimiko Glenn (*Spring Awakening* national tour) as Princess Ssu-Ming; Steve Gunderson (LJP's *Memphis*) as Chief Eunuch; Jonathan Hammond (Broadway's *Ragtime*) as the Emperor; Corbin

Reid (Broadway's *Sister Act*, *American Idiot*) as Feiyan; Aaron Serotsky (Off-Broadway's *The Blue Flower*, Broadway's *August: Osage County*) as Minister of State; Bobby Steggert (Broadway revival of *110 in the Shade*, *Ragtime*) as Young Emperor; Tony Award nominee and Playhouse Gala honoree Charlayne Woodard (*The Night Watcher*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*) as Empress Dowager; as well as ensemble members Chelsea Diggs-Smith (Lamb's Players Theatre's *Guys and Dolls*) and UCSD M.F.A. student Zach Martens (LJP's *The Car Plays: San Diego*).

The production team includes Lon Hoyt (music director); Derek McLane (scenic designer); Susan Hilferty (costume designer); David Lander (lighting designer); Cricket S. Myers (sound designer); Chris Green (puppet designer); Gabriel Greene (dramaturg).

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