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The Perpetual Foreigner of American Theatre

by [Diep Tran](#)

in [Activism](#), [Diversity](#)



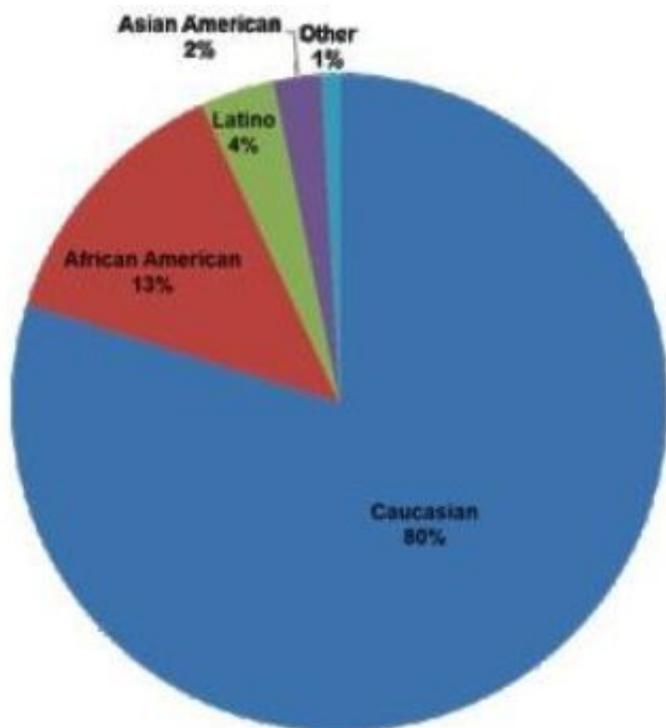
(Christine Toy Johnson, Pun Bandhu and Angel Desai at the roundtable. Photo: Bruce Alan Johnson)

Where are all the Asians? That seemed to be the question at hand last Monday, Feb. 13, during the [Asian American Performers Action Coalition \(AAPAC\)](#) roundtable, with a pun-filled title: “RepresenAsian: The Changing Face of Theatre,” at Fordham University.

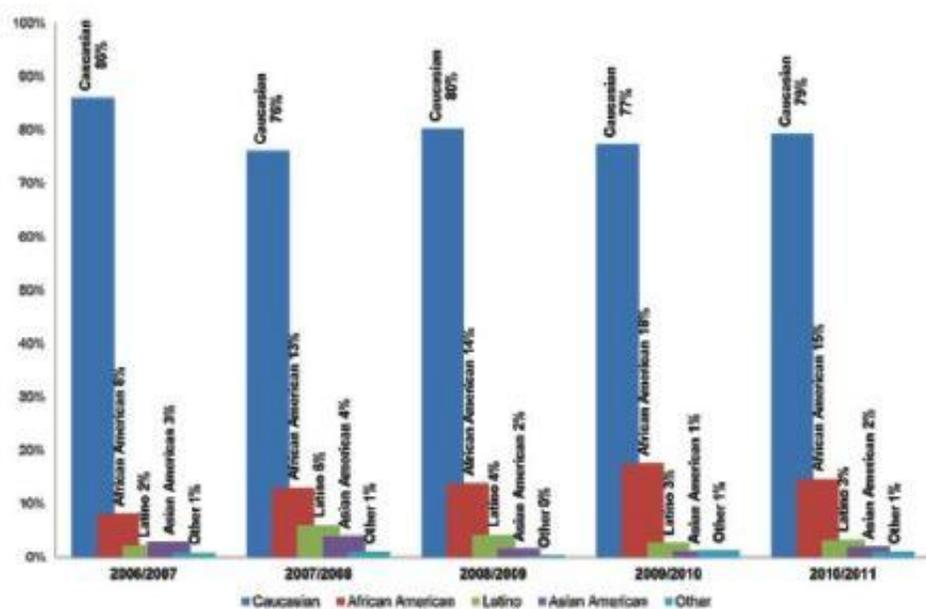
The roundtable included a presentation of a newly released study, titled “Ethnic Representation on New York City Stages, 2006/7–2010/11”. The numbers, and ensuing conversation, has been aptly summarized by former-American Theatre staffer Randy Gener for NPR [here](#) and Patrick Healy for the New York Times [here](#).

But to quickly point out some key facts in the study (with charts!), which included Broadway and the 16 largest non-profit theatres:

- Over the past five seasons, Asian Americans were the only minority group to see a decline in representation, from 3% to 2%, even though overall casting of colored actors has risen from 14% to 22%.
- When a role was not racially specific, (e.g.: non-traditional casting), Asian-American actors were the least likely to be cast in those roles.
- In an overall study, Caucasian actors made up 80% of cast lists.
- Out of the 16 non-profit theatres that were counted, Signature Theatre had the highest representation of actors of color in their roles (60%). On the other end, Atlantic Theatre Company had the lowest percentage of colored actors at 7%, and the New Group had the highest proportion of Asian-American actors at 8%.



Broadway and Non-Profits Casting Trend, Combined



Broadway and Non-Profits Combined Casting Trend, Year to Year

Over the course of the evening, among the 16-member panel (moderated by David Henry Hwang), the term “equality of access” was thrown around frequently.

In the words of Pun Bandhu, an actor and a member of AAPAC’s steering committee, that meant expanding “the types of roles that Asian-Americans are allowed to play. Even if a theatre company is not telling an Asian-American story, at least consider Asian-Americans in the audition room for that Midwestern neighbor or what have you...It’s not about just casting Asians for Asians’ sake. It’s about casting the best actor for the role.”

But in order to do that, as discussed in the panel, a change of mindset is needed. Playwrights and directors need to insist that Asian-Americans be considered for roles not based on race. Casting directors need to scope out

more Asian-American talent and bring those actors into the auditions.

And the Asian-American performance community needs to (in the words of panelist, and New York's Public Theater artistic director, Oskar Eustis) start "making noise." Such as the backlash that occurred in *Miss Saigon* when Jonathan Pryce was cast in a half Vietnamese, half French role. Though Eustis also added later, "I'm not urging you to come picket my theatre. It doesn't have to be protest, this is a form of noise," he says, indicating the forum.



David Henry Hwang leads the roundtable discussion. Photo: Bruce Alan Johnson

The days following the event, while prepping to write a shorter (and newsier) version of this post for the April news section of *American Theatre*, I thought about how I wanted to address this sensitive issue as a commentator. The following was my meandering train of thought.

Obviously, there is not a lack of Asian-American actors or work dealing with the ethnic condition, if the number of theatre companies focusing on Asian-American works is any indication (Ma-Yi Theater Company, Pan Asian Repertory Company and East West Players comes to mind). And Asians do go to the theatre. Sitting in a performance of *Chinglish* on Broadway last fall, the house was almost half-filled with Asian audience members, the most I had ever seen in a Broadway house.

If anything, the lack of Asian-American actors on the New York stage is just another indication of the latent prejudices that are still present in the American landscape, which then bleeds into theatre. After all, just read any [editorial](#) about Jeremy Lin, a name oft-repeated at the forum.

It's the thought that most issues written about (dysfunctional family, heroic angst, cancer) are wholly Caucasian issues. It's, up until very recently, the thought that basketball was not a sport for Asians, or that *A Streetcar Named Desire* cannot contain an all-African-American cast. And it's the thought that non- racially specific roles such as Dr. Jason Posner in *Wit*, sister James in *Doubt*, or Fiyero in *Wicked*, cannot be adeptly played by an Asian-American actor.

Christine Toy Johnson said something that struck me:

"In society at large, Asian-Americans are not Americans. We're saddled with the perception of being the perpetual foreigner," says Johnson, who is a member of AAPAC's steering committee. "Because of that, we are not routinely thought of when people are populating their American landscape. I don't know any Asian person aged 15 to 85 who have not been complimented on how well they speak English."

But as any therapist will say, the first step in solving the problem is admitting there is a problem. So what's to do next?

Talk about it. And talk about it some more. And don't stop talking about it. And always be aware of that latent prejudice (which is partially engrained because of the popular culture) and fight against it, so that the best actors, no matter their race, are the ones who gets the role.

Or, to put it in the words of Eustis, in the best quotation of the evening: "In this world we created [on stage], we cannot view race as an essentialist category. We cannot view race as so primary that it overrides all the other ways that we suspend our disbelief when we go to the theatre."



Diep Tran is an editorial assistant at *American Theatremagazine*. She comes from the sunny land of California. When she is not writing about theatre and seeing theatre, she watches television shows about glee clubs and zombies. Her Twitter handle is [@DiepThought](#).

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