

Harsh criticism at LJ Playhouse forum on play's cast

Creative team apologetic about lack of diversity in playhouse's 'Nightingale'

By PAT SHERMAN SPECIAL TO THE U-T

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Emotions ran high Sunday afternoon during a panel discussion held in response to complaints about a paucity of Asian actors in La Jolla Playhouse's musical "The Nightingale," a Page to Stage production based on the Hans Christian Andersen fable set in China.

Actor and playwright Christine Toy Johnson, a panelist who flew in from New York to see the production, praised set designers for creating an authentic Chinese atmosphere, but she said the lack of Asian-American faces felt like "a knife to the heart" and reminded her "how invisible we still are."

Actor and fellow panelist Cindy Cheung, a member of the Asian-American Performers Action Coalition, expressed "disgust" and "confusion" with the casting, noting that an earlier version of the work had an all-Asian cast.

"I'm still kind of getting over the shock of it," she said. "Seeing so many people being OK with this is very disturbing."

The Playhouse's artistic director, Christopher Ashley, and director Moisés Kaufman both offered an apology for what they said could be construed as a glaring omission, adding that their casting was never

intended to offend the Asian-American community or fellow artists.

Kaufman, who also wrote and directed “The Laramie Project,” said he has devoted most of his professional life to giving voice to the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community. He said the La Jolla Playhouse has consistently engaged the public in social justice issues through its works.

“Usually, we are the ones screaming for representation ... for inclusion, that minority groups are not properly represented on American stages,” he said.

Kaufman maintained that the creative team’s emphasis was less on historical and cultural accuracy than on Andersen’s mythical aspects, which include a talking bird and a Chinese palace made of porcelain.

Kaufman said they strove to assemble a cast that included as many ethnicities “as populate the American landscape.”

“We were never interested in setting it in a real China ... at a real moment in time,” he said. “Otherwise, our casting choices would have been very different.”

Though the set includes Chinese lanterns and other accurate vestiges of Chinese culture, it also includes Moroccan lanterns and an emperor’s robe based on that of an Iranian emperor, he said.

However, Kaufman conceded that his team was largely “unsuccessful in articulating what we were trying to do.”

“We owe everybody an apology,” he said.

If the Playhouse wanted to populate the stage with as many multiethnic backgrounds as possible, Cheung questioned, why was the cast still 50 percent Caucasian?

“It’s so glaring that there are no Asian-American men on the stage, except for the puppets, and even then we’re not sure,” she quipped. “They could have been Moroccan.”

Panelist Andy Lowe, former producing artistic director of the San Diego Asian-American Repertory Theatre, questioned whether the audience had the “cultural context” to discern the multicultural set details.

Johnson expressed her respect for the current cast, but she noted that the names of the characters are all still Chinese.

“That’s a big disconnect,” she said. “Multicultural casting was never meant to justify a Caucasian person playing a culturally specific role.”

Tara Rubin, the production’s New York-based casting director, noted that Page to Stage productions are workshop pieces designed to garner audience feedback, as opposed to being a finished product.

She said such discussions were a “valuable part of the process” and helped to educate the creative team.

“I do want to remind everybody ... we’re still getting there,” she said.

Cheung said she hoped the feedback would influence the production.

“Otherwise, we’d be outside with picket (signs) — and we will,” she said.

She said the explanations given for the casting thus far are “really good and well meaning and altruistic,” on

paper, but skipped over the reality of today's race politics, noting that Asian-Americans comprise only about 1.5 percent of available roles in new productions on Broadway.

"Multicultural casting was created to provide opportunities for the underrepresented," she said, "not for five white men."

Rubin said privacy issues precluded her from delving too much into "specifics" of her casting decisions, though she intimated that some Asian actors were made offers but didn't accept roles.

"There are things that happened that would have changed our casting," she said to very tepid applause. "We didn't set out to cast a Caucasian emperor. That was never part of the plan or vision."

Cheung questioned whether the company would have cast a white man in the role of an African king.

"I would contend that you would not have," she said. "Fundamentally, you would have known that that's not acceptable. You just wouldn't have done it (and) said five black actors turned (the role) down."

Seema Sueko of Mo`olelo Performing Arts Co. suggested the company not just be concerned in assembling a multicultural cast, but in the perception of a world "ruled by white men," where darker skinned women are to be feared, the Asian is viewed as the precious nightingale and there are no American Indians or Latinos.

Nevertheless, Sueko thanked Kaufman and Ashley for their apology and the forum, noting La Jolla Playhouse's positive track record of working with the Asian-American community.

"'The Nightingale' does not define you," she said.

Pat Sherman is a San Diego writer.

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