



Transtext(e)s Transcultures 跨文本跨文化

Journal of Global Cultural Studies

7 | 2012

Transcultural Identity and Circulation of Imaginaries

“In Search of the Orphan”: Intercultural Theatre, Multi-Ethnic Casting, and the Representation of Chineseness on European and North American Stages.

« *À la quête de l'Orphelin* » : Théâtre interculturel, casting multi-ethnique, et représentation de la sinité sur les scènes européennes et américaines.

Vanessa Lee



Édition électronique

URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/transtexts/455>

DOI : 10.4000/transtexts.455

ISSN : 2105-2549

Éditeur

Gregory B. Lee

Référence électronique

Vanessa Lee, « “In Search of the Orphan”: Intercultural Theatre, Multi-Ethnic Casting, and the Representation of Chineseness on European and North American Stages. », *Transtext(e)s Transcultures 跨文本跨文化* [En ligne], 7 | 2012, mis en ligne le 02 décembre 2012, consulté le 15 novembre 2019.
URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/transtexts/455> ; DOI : 10.4000/transtexts.455

Transtext(e)s

Transcultures 跨文本跨文化

Journal of Global Cultural Studies

7 | 2012 :

Transcultural Identity and Circulation of Imaginaries

Transcultural Identity and Circulation of Imaginaries

“In Search of the Orphan”: Intercultural Theatre, Multi-Ethnic Casting, and the Representation of Chineseness on European and North American Stages.

« *À la quête de l'Orphelin* » : Théâtre interculturel, casting multi-ethnique, et représentation de la sinilité sur les scènes européennes et américaines.

VANESSA LEE

Résumés

English Français

In May 2012, La Jolla Playhouse in the United States staged a musical adaptation of Hans Christian Andersen's “The Nightingale”. Four months later, the Royal Shakespeare Company announced its upcoming production of a “new adaptation” of the late thirteenth-century Chinese play “The Orphan of Zhao”. Both plays were severely criticized for the decidedly poor quota of East Asian actors in their multi-ethnic casts, and the discrepancies present in the portrayal of “Ancient” and “imaginary” Chinas. Each production draws on plays and stories that are part of a history of one-directional cross-cultural appropriation by European artists. Despite the change in mentalities over the past century, and the attempts at diversifying the British and American theatre

industries through multi-ethnic casting and intercultural performance, the legacy of the imperialist appropriation of supposedly “exotic” art-forms resurfaces in such productions. This article aims to assess the pitfalls of Western-led intercultural performance and multi-ethnic casting, the representations of Chinese stage stereotypes, and the state of racial relations in the entertainment industry.

En Mai 2012, se jouait à La Jolla Playhouse aux États-Unis une comédie musicale inspirée du conte de Hans Christian Andersen du même nom, « *The Nightingale* » [Le Rossignol]. Quatre mois plus tard, le Royal Shakespeare Company lança sa nouvelle saison « *Worlds Elsewhere* » [Mondes Ailleurs], sa programmation comprenant une nouvelle adaptation d'une pièce chinoise datant du treizième siècle, « *The Orphan of Zhao* » [L'Orphelin de la famille Zhao]. Les deux spectacles devinrent la cible de critiques concernant le faible pourcentage d'acteurs d'origine asiatique dans leurs distributions prétendument « multi-ethniques », ainsi qu'au sujet des divergences dans leurs tableaux de Chinois « mystique » ou « antique ». Les sources d'inspiration de chaque spectacle appartiennent à une tradition d'appropriation interculturelle unilatérale de la part d'artistes européens. Hormis le changement de mentalités du siècle dernier, et les tentatives de diversification des industries du théâtre britanniques et américaines à travers des politiques de casting multi-ethnique et de jeu interculturel, l'héritage impérialiste d'appropriation de prétendues formes asiatiques « exotiques » refait surface dans ces spectacles. Cet article vise à évaluer les défauts de la collaboration interculturelle théâtrale et du casting multi-ethnique menés par l'occident, les clichés de Chinois au théâtre, et l'état des relations inter-ethniques dans l'industrie du spectacle.

Texte intégral

¹ The Royal Shakespeare Company opened their “A World Elsewhere” season in October 2012 with a “new adaptation/translation” of the thirteenth-century Yuan dynasty Chinese play *The Orphan of Zhao*, translated by James Felton and directed by Gregory Doran.¹ Due to run until the end of March 2013, the production was the cause of much contention and criticism among members of the British East Asian actors community owing to the casting of just three British East Asian actors; there are altogether seventeen roles in the play. News of the controversy spread, as a number of Asian actors spoke out against the injustice they felt had been done to them. A round table at Royal Holloway, University of London was organized and brought together members of the academic and theatrical communities as well as representatives of the actors’ union, Equity. Accusations of discrimination, “white-facing,” and “imperialism” resounded and consequently led to the Royal Shakespeare Company’s offering a “lukewarm” apology to the offended parties.² This apology, published on a social networking site, proffered excuses such as the desire to represent the British population as accurately as possible, the claim that the universality of the piece allowed for a “multi-ethnic” casting, and the need for an ensemble that could perform roles in all three plays in the season of “Worlds Elsewhere,” which also included Bertolt Brecht’s *Galileo*, and Alexander Pushkin’s *Boris Godunov*.³

² Such debates are not confined to Europe. Only three months previously La Jolla Playhouse’s production of an adaptation of Hans Christian Andersen’s *The Nightingale*, written by Steven Sater and directed by Moisés Kaufman as part of La Jolla’s “Page To Stage” programme, was set in a supposedly “mythical China” inspired by the nineteenth-century Danish writer’s fairy tale. In this case the casting, also “multi-ethnic,” did not include any East Asian male actors, all the lead male roles being played by white actors.⁴ At a post-show discussion organised by La Jolla, the production team were confronted with the wrath of the members of New York’s Asian American

Performers Action Coalition, and some scathing comments from audience members. The contention was, yet again, to do with casting and the portrayal of China on stage. The issues brought up by these controversies form part of a half-century-long debate around "intercultural theatre," "multiculturalism," and "colour-blind casting," along with the question of an imperialist, Orientalist reproduction of Chinese archetypes, and the state of ethnic relations within the entertainment industry.

³ This article, then, aims to assess the pitfalls of Western-led intercultural performance and multi-ethnic casting, the reproduction of "Chinese" stereotypes on stage, and the situation regarding ethnic relations in the entertainment industry. Following a brief introduction to "intercultural" theatre and appropriations of Chinese theatre from the eighteenth century to the present day, with "The Orphan of Zhao" taken as a point of reference, the issue of multi-ethnic casting and intercultural theatre will be discussed, and the politics of representation at play within the productions of the RSC and La Jolla Playhouse will be analysed.

A brief historical overview of intercultural performance

⁴ The first writings on the East can be traced back to the fourteenth century, with the expeditions of navigators and merchants such as Marco Polo. Polo is recorded as visiting China at the time of the Yuan Dynasty (1206-1368), or the Mongol Dynasty. The Venetian merchant's writings are one of the first "Orientalist" texts through which Western minds could conceive of and construct China. Three centuries later diplomats wrote travel journals describing local Chinese customs, including the theatrical performances they witnessed in market places and at grand banquets held in honour of foreign guests. Jesuit missionaries wrote a considerable amount about Chinese culture. They had found in non-Muslim China opportunities for conversion, and for this they needed to understand the local culture, some even learning Chinese and participating in the local customs. In 1735, the Jesuit priest J.B. Du Halde included in his *Description Géographique, Historique, Chronologique, Politique et Physique de l'Empire de la Chine et de la Tartarie Chinoise* a translation by his colleague Father Joseph Henri Prémare of a Chinese play dating from the Yuan era, which also happened to be a particularly prosperous time for the arts and the theatre.⁵ Entitled "The Orphan of Zhao," the play tells the story of the sole remaining heir of the house of Zhao, who proceeds to avenge his family by killing the general responsible for the massacre of his entire clan. This story fascinated European thinkers and writers. The French philosopher and writer Voltaire (1694-1778) proceeded to write an adaptation of the story and became an ardent sinophile, despite his misconceptions and condescending views regarding Chinese culture. An English version of the text by playwright Arthur Murphy (1727-1805) soon followed, inspired by both Prémare's and Voltaire's versions. It was the first Chinese drama adapted into English. Goethe is also believed to have written a version of the play. He did so anonymously in the light of increasing sinophobia of the nineteenth-century German intelligentsia, and his own questioning of the morals behind the

revenge plot.⁶ Elsewhere in Europe during this time, the popularity of writings from China was rising, and the fashion for *chinoiserie* was in full swing in France, where many well-known artists collected Chinese artefacts, attempted to write Chinese-style poetry, and, in the case of Théophile Gautier's daughter Judith, even Chinese-style drama. Diplomats returned from China and wrote novels, poems, and drama inspired by Chinese culture, and their heightened awareness and knowledge of the culture gave these texts an aura of "authenticity" that the previous literature on China had lacked. Asian theatre troupes were brought to Europe to perform in the Great European Exhibitions of the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries, and quickened the interest of European practitioners who believed Western theatre had reached a dead end with naturalistic theatre. They saw in these foreign theatre styles a primitive, purer aesthetic expression, reminiscent of Ancient European theatres and closer to the ritual performances of the beginnings of humanity. Most of these artists, as was the case of Voltaire and his contemporaries three centuries previously, never visited China. In the United States, theatres in Chinatowns opened to cater for the tastes of the growing Chinese immigrant communities during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Occasionally an American scholar would venture into these spaces to witness Chinese theatre and Cantonese opera, but these were poor renditions of what Peking Opera, now a major national theatre, had to offer. When Mei Lanfang toured the United States, Russia, and Europe in the 1930s, these same scholars noticed what they were missing. In the case of Western practitioners, very few expressed an interest in the wider culture surrounding Chinese theatre. Content with borrowing conceptual and stylistic elements to enhance their own exploration of the meaning and making of theatre in the West, writers such as Bertolt Brecht, Paul Claudel, and Jean Genet, took ideas and techniques into account, but translated them into their own terms.

⁵ The history of the adaptation of Asian theatrical forms has not always been exclusively that of the triumph of content over form. One of the best-known names in "theatre anthropology," Eugenio Barba, attempted a study of worldwide performance techniques in order to reach a heightened and perfected form of performance. Barba promoted what he termed "Eurasian theatre," a theatre in which "the meeting of East and West, seduction, imitation and exchange [were] reciprocal" and which would lead to a single, unified "profile" where "the borders between the 'European theatre' and the 'Asian theatre' do not exist."⁷ His extensive work on the acting styles from different cultures and epochs argues in favour of a "Eurasian" theatre and the similarities shared by theatre forms from around the world. He believed in a "pre-expressivity" present in all theatre forms. This term, which is fully described by Barba in his work, can be said to represent the frame of mind of each and every actor on the verge of performing a role. In his history of East-West theatrical interchange, Barba explains how once forms such as *Commedia dell'arte* boasted similar techniques, but that these were now only to be found in Asian theatrical forms. He thus justified the need to turn to the latter so as to facilitate a reassessment of the European theatrical past. Barba claimed that now, Eurasian theatre was finally becoming a reality in terms of intercultural exchange, having passed the stage of "misunderstandings," spawned by the interaction between Eastern and Western theatre from the eighteenth century to the mid twentieth century, which he deemed fruitful in

some cases. Eurasian theatre could enrich the experiences and works of both types of artists on either side of the European/Asian divide. This sentiment influenced the work of pioneering artists such as Peter Brook and Arian Mnouchkine, who fully embraced other theatrical cultures and created pieces that allowed European audiences to re-discover their own classics in a different format. Such was the case with Mnouchkine's *Les Attrides*, and Brook's *Mahabarata*, bothground-breaking performances in their respective contexts.

⁶ From the point of view of the offended parties in the RSC's *Orphan of Zhao* controversy, Broderick Chow and Daniel York, speakers at the round table concerning the performance admitted that at the time of Brook's and Mnouchkine's productions, their hopes of finally gaining greater visibility on European and other Western stages seemed to be edging ever closer to becoming a reality. York exclaimed "I thought that wow that's amazing, I might stand a chance of being in that. It's interesting that that got criticised."⁸ So what went wrong? In the words of J.S. Peters:

Theatre anthropology and the ostensibly intercultural performances that are its inheritors - from Artaud's hallucinatory ethnography, through 'ritual' theatre like Genet's, through the studies of anthropologists like Victor Turner and theatre theorists and practitioners like Richard Schechner and Eugenio Barba, through the performance experimentation from the 1960s on, like that of Grotowski, Lee Breuer, or Brook - are part of the pattern of Western imperialist appropriation.⁹

⁷ Two criticisms have been made of Barba's work. The first is that in his theories, in his attempt at universalism, may be detected what Rustom Bharucha sees as a means for European practitioners to overcome their sense of "ennui," a sort of "search for new sources...through the importation of 'rejuvenative raw materials,'" and what Daryl Chin sees as "an absolute breakdown of distinction" privileging a unidirectional Western world view.¹⁰ Another issue with the concept of the "Eurasian" is the question of dichotomies. Despite arguing in favour of an equal exchange of traditions between East and West, Barba still polarizes the different traditions in his concepts of "poles," posited as replacements for the categories of "Oriental" and "Western" theatre. The "South Pole" performers adhere to the techniques found in a Western performer's repertoire, and the North Pole performer to those in the "Oriental."¹¹ Barba's aim is laudable, since he encourages an equal exchange between poles, and grants each pole an equal degree of influence. But it seems that "Eurasian" theatre, and any Western attempt at incorporating into or adapting non-Western theatrical methods and techniques to the stage, remain mainly unidirectional. In the universal realm of Eurasian and so-called intercultural theatre, "Western description of non-Western performance as 'universal' is merely a disguised form of orientalism [into which] ostensible 'others' are simply assimilated. Difference is denied them."¹² The question of denying difference is found in the practice of "colour-blind casting" in the United States, in "integrated casting" in the UK, as is illustrated pointedly in the casting of the two shows discussed here.

Pitfalls of colour-blind casting

⁸ In a 1988 article Alan Eisenberg, the then Executive Secretary of Actors'

Equity Association, declared that "equal opportunity as a reality actually has lost ground. Multi-ethnic casts in big musicals were the norm at one time.... But there are no black performers in the Broadway productions of 'Phantom of the Opera,' 'Les Misérables,' or 'Me and My Girl.'...There is no good reason for this exclusion, it's just 'tradition."¹³ Large-scale Broadway productions rarely featured black or Asian actors in their casts. However, according to the *Nightingale*'s writer Steven Sater, referencing his Broadway hit show *Spring Awakening*, casting processes in mainstream theatre have changed in the twenty-first century. The casting process for the *Nightingale* production had been a scrupulous one which included a series of workshops with different actors from various ethnic origins each time. One such workshop had an all-Asian cast, but Sater and director Kaufman claimed that that particular workshop "did not work for him" as the other workshops which had no Asian-American actors had. Shunning accusations that discrimination had taken place, Sater added that one of his ensemble actors who had performed in his *Spring Awakening*, was of Asian (Philippino) descent, and played one of the main female characters in *The Nightingale*. Nevertheless, both of these arguments in defence of the "colour-blind" casting process undermine the production's claims of fair multi-ethnic casting. On the one hand the end-result of the multiple-cast workshop of a cast comprising of only white male belies the tradition of discrimination brought about by colour-blind casting. On the other, it shows a, possibly unconscious, inscription of *The Nightingale* into a history of mainstream productions which condescend to having a female Asian lead, only to pit her against a white male lead as his exotic "Other" romantic interest.

⁹ In the RSC and the La Jolla productions one may distinguish a synthesis of attitudes of mainstream and marginal theatres in the West in regard to representations of China on-stage. Despite having worked with a plethora of actors and casts, as in the workshop-based casting process of *The Nightingale*, the lead roles are played by white actors. This is revelatory of the discrimination within colour-blind casting, which remains normative twenty-four years after Eisenberg tackled the issue in his ground-breaking article. *The Nightingale*'s production team's attitude towards colour-blind casting maybe seen as a metonymy of American, and more generally Western societies', ideological position. Even if both companies claim to create a fairer theatre practice based on erasing "racial stereotypes" by opening up the roles to all actors of different ethnic origins, this ignores the history of "yellow-facing" which involved white actors portraying Chinese protagonists, mainly evil and duplicitous ones. As Misha Berson points out:

The 'Oriental' villains helped stir up anti-Asian sentiments during the wars against Japan, Korea and Vietnam...just as white minstrels found fame impersonating blacks, some vaudeville performers prospered as 'Chinese impersonators.'¹⁴

¹⁰ In the case of *The Orphan of Zhao* and *The Nightingale*, this "yellow-facing" revives the issue of visibility or rather lack of visibility of minorities. Both plays are set in Chinese contexts and *yet* the main roles are played by white actors. The few roles allocated to performers of Asian descent in both *The Nightingale* and *The Orphan of Zhao* are minor ones. In the case of the RSC production, in bearing with the racial stereotype of the "silent" and inscrutable Eastern or Oriental other, two of the three East Asian descent actors are puppeteers.¹⁵ According to Daniel York, similar blunders abound in RSC production history,

particularly in the case of more experimental and non-Shakespearian performances. He described his own experience as a performer in the physical theatre production of *Moby Dick*, which, he hastened to add, sunk like a "whale." York explains how in British mainstream theatre, silent or physical roles such as those of the sailors in *Moby Dick* tend to outnumber spoken roles. During rehearsals, he, along with four black actors, but also Scottish actors, were put in one dressing room, whereas the rest of the cast, English actors, were put in another, which for him underlined the clear class structure of British theatre.

¹¹ In both cases it is evident that the roles are still dictated by racial stereotypes. Minorities are silenced in the allocation of more physical, rather than speaking, roles to minority actors, while the allotting of roles only to female actors of Asian descent perpetuates the stereotype of the subordinate and submissive Oriental woman.¹⁶ In *The Nightingale*, the main female role is played by an Asian American actress, and in *The Orphan of Zhao*, one of the three roles played by an East Asian actor is that of the Maid. Another illustrative example of "silencing" is found in *The Orphan of Zhao*'s publicity campaign. The early version of the promotional poster for the production was a photograph of a Chinese, supposedly orphaned, boy staring sadly at the camera. The picture is not that of the actor playing the Orphan in the play, and presents a vision of the Orphan, to the audience even before entering the theatre, as that of a long-suffering child, consequently silenced by the absence of the child from the production itself. Whether an attempt at toying with the spectator's expectations by creating this gap in characterisations between poster and stage, or at portraying a multiplicity of signifiers for what an "Orphan of Zhao" could possibly be, the round-table panellists all agreed the poster was distasteful, and the RSC did, surprisingly, proceed to change the poster. In conclusion, despite the efforts made by mainstream theatre industries to encourage increasingly integrated casts, it appears that they have merely perpetuated the tradition of stage racial stereotypes and the reification and appropriation of foreign cultures as exotic objects.

Exoticism and mythical China

¹² Exoticisation of China in these performances reveals what Patrice Pavis explains as contemporary intercultural theatre's loss of "militant" value. Along with national policies in favour of multiculturalism and multi-ethnicity as part of a growing globalised and intercultural rather than international world, positive discrimination and integrated casting have offered opportunities to a number of, so far, silenced minorities, or ethnicities. Pavis and other theatre theorists interested in intercultural performance see in this opening up to a broader united world view the effects of post-modern tendencies in society and the arts. Along with Post-modernism came the relativisation of the historicity and politics of culture, which emphasised the arbitrariness of categories and institutions. However, as Daryl Chin puts it, the "Eurocentric ego [declared] that, if recognition of the validity of 'otherness' must be accorded, then there is total equivalence, an absolute breakdown of distinction." The recognition of difference led to "complete indifference." This idea embraced what Pavis calls the "question of colonialist or anti-colonialist utilization of forms borrowed

from the contexts of Third World countries" and Reinelt and Roach's critique of multi-ethnic nationalism, wherein national and ethnic identities overlap, "not only exposing the often confused and arbitrary nature of categories of human difference, but also potentially mobilizing their prolific and dangerous power. This includes the power of the nation-state to assign racial identities to its subjects by law and the power of culture to impose them extralegally by custom."¹⁷ The devising of both shows, from set and costume to casting, are manifestations of accepting difference through "indifference."

¹³ In the RSC's response to the round-table discussion, we read:

We intend to present *The Orphan of Zhao* in our own way, **just as a theatre company in China might explore Shakespeare**. Having absorbed **something** of Chinese conventions and dramatic idioms, we want to approach the play with a diverse cast and develop our own ways of telling this ancient story and thus **explore its universality** [author's emphases].¹⁸

¹⁴ Consequently, critic Andrew Dickson, explains, the production "felt, somehow, it was just sort of stranded in the middle - not quite one thing, not quite the other."¹⁹ The minimalistic staging is said to have been inspired by that deployed in Peking Opera, a symbolic form using few props and scenery. However, in the many instances where Shakespeare, as other Western plays, were performed by Chinese players, these were hardly cases of "not quite one thing, not quite the other." There are examples of Peking Opera versions of *Hamlet*, which adapt the play's original plot line to the traditional Chinese theatrical form, not attempting to compromise the aesthetics of the performance. When Ibsen was performed in China at the beginning of the twentieth century, the actors followed Western stage conventions, with Western dress and modern sets. Though it is undeniable that Doran put some effort into researching the culture, the performance techniques, and ethics behind the play, this search for authenticity is filled with contradictions betraying a latent Orientalist belief in "Asia" as an exotic entity. Sardar describes the imaginary, dating from the journeys of travellers such as Polo, of "the East [as] bigger, richer and better in some senses...also simultaneously remote, subservient and inferior." It did not matter whether or not the myth was real, since it existed in the imagination. The Orient was a "treasury of ideas for rethinking and remodelling European attitudes and understanding."²⁰

¹⁵ The RSC features a blog "In Search for the Orphan," which documents the *Orphan of Zhao*'s director Doran and designer Turner's journey to China for research. There they explored the main tourist attractions, took multiple photographs for reference, and spent one afternoon in the rehearsal room of a Peking Opera troupe in Shanghai, marvelling at the similarities between Peking Opera and RSC rehearsal processes. Amanda Rogers of the East Asian Theatre Network compared this one-week "search," as reported in Doran's informal and ingenuous blog posts, to nineteenth-century travelogues she studied with her students, underlining the Orientalist undertones of the blog posts. These included statements such as: "We wander down narrow alleyways jammed with stalls selling mechanical birds singing in cages; the tiny silk embroidered shoes which presumably used to cover the bound feet of Qing dynasty ladies; bronze Buddhas and bamboo chopsticks," and "It's time to get back to the hotel. As it is not very far away we decide to take one of the little tuk-tuk taxis, known here as hop-hops', for the way they lurch and jerk along like a rabbit trying to escape

a fox."²¹ What is more, Turner and Doran's attempt "to learn as much as they can about Ming China in their brief visit" to modern-day China, fails to confront the reality that today's China is not the China of the Yuan dynasty (1271–1368), and that Yuan drama itself is no longer performed. Even though it is believed the myriad Chinese theatrical forms derive in some way or another from the thirteenth century dramatic tradition, attempting to trace the "essence" and "feel" for the play, that is a work of fiction and not necessarily historically accurate, shows the disjunction between these different types of authenticity, and the futility of trying to grasp a millennial theatrical tradition through a present-day tourist attraction catering to a Western audience.

¹⁶ Other examples of accepting difference through indifference include the claim to authenticity made by translator and poet James Fenton who attempted to convey the "essence" of Chinese poetry by not directly translating the verse of the play, but writing his own, as he explains in a self-laudatory series of articles in the *Guardian* newspaper.²² What is more, the pronunciation of Chinese names by the actors of this difference-embracing cast, is distorted, as both the trailer for the show and an video extract, portraying two white actors, show.²³

¹⁷ The promotional pages dedicated to the production on the RSC website are not all grossly representative of stereotypical attitudes towards Chinese culture, as was the case of the poster and "Looking for the Orphan" blog described above. A Chinese version of *The Orphan of Zhao*'s webpage, and a programme of outreach activities aimed at primary and secondary school students show that the RSC are willing to use the production as a means of broadreaching to an audience unfamiliar to the RSC. Though the multi-cultural performance attempts a neutralizing of political and cross-cultural concerns and inconsistencies, the image of China projected through the RSC's *The Orphan of Zhao*'s publicity campaign is a powerful one, especially when the performance is contextualised in the media in the light of international politics. Here is Kirsty Lang's introductory note to the interview with critic Andrew Dickson:

We come to the end of a week when the two most powerful countries in the world [the People's Republic of China and the United States] have had a change of leadership: one in the full glare of the public eye, the other behind closed doors. So, it seems entirely appropriate that the Royal Shakespeare Company should be staging a Chinese play which deals with power and succession.²⁴

¹⁸ Historically, what "seemed appropriate" was an altogether different representation of China and Chineseness. In the United States of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the American stage and cinema portrayed Chinese immigrants as opium dealers, warlords, and rapists, as Misha Berson recalls:

[H]ostile images of [the] Asian tended to dovetail neatly with U.S. Foreign-policy aims...the 'Oriental' villains helped stir up anti-Asian sentiments during the wars against Japan, Korea and Vietnam, helped rationalize the periodic government orders against Asian immigration, and helped justify the incarceration of one hundred thousand innocent Japanese Americans during World War II.²⁵

¹⁹ Today, the RSC's casting policies do not reproduce the same discrimination and stereotyping as the nineteenth- and twentieth-century American

entertainment industry, and their outreach to non-traditional audiences, “minority” groups and age groups is indicative of the Company's opening up to new cultures. However the ambiguities and the disproportion in casting are definite hindrances.

²⁰ The production team of La Jolla Playhouse's *The Nightingale* had no qualms in assuming the exotic unreality of the “Ancient China” setting of Hans Christian Andersen fairy tale. Even though the original tale itself is filled with unrealistic fantastical imagery, when one considers Andersen's “Oriental” travel experiences and the time in which the tale was written, the nineteenth century, the fashion for *chinoiserie* and Oriental studies, one realises the story may not be so innocently constructed and free of Orientalist stereotypes.

²¹ The story, according to Spink, “contains reminiscences of the Aladdin story that Andersen had been told by his father many years before in Odense, and of the *chinoiserie* of the Tivoli gardens, founded in Copenhagen in the year of the tale's publication.”²⁶ Here we see the materialisation and manifestation of Reinelt and Roach's “power of culture to impose [racial entities] by custom,” and to impose a vision and identity to a whole “Other” culture.

²² The director Moises Kaufman dismissed the claims of irreality and racial prejudice in this new production, as was his right given the politics of the original tale. However Kaufman also defended his production as based entirely on Andersen's, and by extension on a nineteenth-century Orientalist, vision of “Ancient China.” His designers appear to have gone through a similar process of exoticisation and Orientalisation. To reproduce on stage Andersen's imaginary world, the cultures of the “exotic,” non-American world were the designers' oyster. Kaufman defended the company's right to creative licence, proudly enumerating the costumes and props taken from other cultures, such as Moroccan lanterns to accompany the Chinese ones, the King's costume in every detail the exact replica of an Iranian emperor's garb, the Brazilian fabrics and flats. The recuperation of cultures to “inspire” set and costume design reminds us of Sardar's comment that in the Orientalist's perspective, “the East [is] bigger, richer and better in some senses, [but] also simultaneously remote, subservient and inferior.” Steven Sater's comment on the set and costume designs of his Broadway hit *Spring Awakening*, reinforced this point. He explained how despite his cast being multi-ethnic, the set was minimalist and the costumes were replicas of 1930s German clothing. This argument did not take into account how *Spring Awakening* set itself in a tradition and a description of “white” theatre, of a culture well-known by American artists, where accuracy was perhaps more important than that of the “unreal” world of *The Nightingale*, made up of non-Western cultures.

Conclusion: Beyond “Imaginary Worlds”?

²³ The performances at La Jolla and the RSC show the lingering legacies of stage and societal racial stereotypes in both the productions' colour-blind casting and their overall Orientalist and exoticising undertones. These two performances show the potential errors and pitfalls of intercultural theatre, and links may be made with other instances of racial discrimination and under-

representation in British and American media of East Asian actors. Peters explains how emphases on the “Other” or on “sameness” are forms of cultural imperialism in intercultural theatre, symptoms of a unilateral and Western dominated cross-cultural exchange. In the RSC's *The Orphan of Zhao*, the writer and director's citing the universalism of the Chinese “morality tale” as applicable to any culture to justify the fact that the play may be performed by a cast of actors from multiple ethnic backgrounds, is evidence of this. In La Jolla's *The Nightingale* the universal potential of the fairy tale and the freedom to express it through a patch-work of cultures on set and in costume, adds to the generalisation inherent in Western-derived Orientalism, wherein all “non-Western” cultures belong to the West's imaginary exotic Other. By claiming a patch-work universalism these performances, perhaps unintentionally, send mixed messages to the audience and the media. So as to arrive at the antithesis of Peters's ideas on difference as indifference, many associations based in the UK and the States have attempted to devise performances going beyond “sameness” and accepting “difference.” Such groupings include the recently established British East Asian Artists Network in the UK, and the East West Players and the Asian American Theatre Company in the USA. The strategies of these groups have been and continue to either focus on “telling their own stories in their own authentic voices,” as has been the case with the work of Asian-American and British Asian playwrights which started in the 1960s, or doing away with “colour-blind” casting altogether and accepting, in Eisenberg's words that “non-traditional casting is actually realistic casting; minorities participate in all aspects of life.”²⁷ The intervention of these pressure groups, and the controversies and debates around such productions that they encourage, may eventually lead to a heightened consciousness of the part of mainstream theatre companies, and to a more enlightened politics of representation which shuns from discriminatory stereotypes.

Notes

1 *The Orphan of Zhao* [趙氏孤兒], by Ji Junxiang [紀君祥], adapted by James Felton, directed by Gregory Doran. Swan Theatre, Stratford-Upon-Avon, 7 December 2012 - 28 March 2013.

2 Royal Shakespeare Company, “There's some Twitter debate about the casting for The Orphan of Zhao,” Royal Shakespeare Company Facebook page, Facebook, 18 October 2012, 16:21, <https://www.facebook.com/thersc/posts/10151107942763235>, accessed 13 December, 2012.

3 See “RSC Announces Winter 2012/2013 Season,” RSC Website, 9 January 2012 <http://www.rsc.org.uk/about-us/press/releases/winter-2012-13-season-stratford.aspx>, accessed 13 December 2012.

4 *The Nightingale*, by Steve Sater, directed by Moisès Kaufman, La Jolla Playhouse, La Jolla, 10 July – 5 August 2012.

5 Jean-Baptiste Du Halde, *Description géographique, historique, chronologique, politique et physique de l'empire de la Chine et de la Tartarie chinoise*, Paris, P.G. Lemercier, 1735.

6 Yun-Tong Luk, *Studies in Chinese-Western Comparative Drama*, Hong Kong, The Chinese University Press, 1990.

7 Eugenio Barba and Nicola Savarese, *A Dictionary of Theatre Anthropology: The Secret Art of the Performer*, translated by Richard Fowler(London: Routledge, 2006), p. 102 ; Eugenio Barba, *The Paper Canoe: A Guide to Theatre Anthropology* (London:

Routledge, 1994), p. 44.

8 MadamMiaow, “RSC Orphan of Zhao debate: British East Asian Artists Part 2,” *Youtube* video, 21:23, 27 November 2012, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Um_4KNcoB6U, accessed 13th December 2012.

9 J.S. Peters “Intercultural Performance,” in *Imperialism and Theatre: Essays on World Theatre, Drama and Performance*, ed. J. Ellen Gainor (London: Routledge, 1995), p 198.

10 “Rustom Bharucha, “Somebody's other: Disorientations in the cultural politics of our times,” in *Intercultural Performance Reader*, ed. Patrice Pavis(London: Routledge, 1996), p 207; Daryl Chin, “Interculturalism, Postmodernism, Pluralism,” *Performing Arts Journal* 11/12, 11 no. 3, 12 no. 1 (1989), p. 165.

11 Eugenio Barba, *The Paper Canoe: A Guide to Theatre Anthropology*, London: Routledge, 1994, pp. 13-16.

12 Peters, p. 200.

13 Alan Eisenberg, “Nontraditional Casting; When Race and Sex Don't Matter,” *The New York Times*, 23 October, 1988, <http://www.nytimes.com/1988/10/23/theater/l-nontraditional-casting-when-race-and-sex-don-t-matter-486788.html>, accessed 8 February, 2013.

14 Misha Berson, ed., *Between Worlds: Contemporary Asian-American Plays*, New York, Theatre Communications Group, 1990, p. xi.

15 Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, New York, Vintage Books, 1979.

16 Chow, in his blog article on both controversies, describes how he was also involved in the multi-ethnic production, *Miss Saigon*, whose protagonists were a white American soldier and a Vietnamese woman. *Miss Saigon*, by Claude-Michel Schönberg and Alain Boublil, directed by Bill Millerd, Stanley Industrial Alliance Stage,Vancouver, 19 May – 17 July 2005.

17 Janelle G. Reinelt and Joseph Roach, “Critical race Theory,” in *Critical Theory and Performance*, ed. Janelle G. Reinelt and Joseph Roach, Chicago, University of Michigan Press, 2007, p.136.

18 Royal Shakespeare Company, “There's some Twitter debate about the casting for The Orphan of Zhao.”

19 “Jeff Wayne; The Orphan of Zhao,” Kirsty Lang, *Front Row*, BBC Radio 4, 7:15 PM Friday, 9 November 2012.

20 Ziauddin Sardar, *Orientalism*, Buckingham, Open Univeristy Press, 1999, p. 35.

21 Gregory Doran, “If You Like It: It's Worth It!” *In Seach of the Orphan* (blog), 17 August 2012, <http://www.rsc.org.uk/explore/blogs/in-search-of-the-orphan/if-you-like-it-its-worth-it/>; Gregory Doran, “Traffic,” *In Search of the Orphan* (blog), 20 August 2012, <http://www.rsc.org.uk/explore/blogs/in-search-of-the-orphan/traffic/>, accessed 30 January 2013.

22 See James Fenton, “The Orphan of Zhao at the RSC: a very modern massacre,” <http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/2012/oct/30/orphan-of-zhao-rsc>, accessed 13 May 2013.

23 The RSC, “The Orphan of Zhao, Royal Shakespeare Company” (trailer) *Youtube* video, 0:53, 12 October 2012, http://www.youtube.com/watchv=Pd_W_hG340, accessed 12th December 2012; theRSC “Scene 8 | The Orphan of Zhao | Royal Shakespeare Company” (excerpt), *Youtube* video, 4:01, 21 January 2013 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z8VhVhHkwh4>, accessed 30 January 2013.

24 “Jeff Wayne; The Orphan of Zhao,” Kirsty Lang, *Front Row*.

25 Berson, p. xi.

26 Reginald Spink, *Hans Christian Andersen and his World*, London, Thames and Hudson, 1972, p. 77.

27 Eisenberg.

Pour citer cet article

Référence électronique

Vanessa LEE, « “In Search of the Orphan”: Intercultural Theatre, Multi-Ethnic Casting, and the Representation of Chineseness on European and North American Stages. », *Transtext(e)s Transcultures 跨文本跨文化* [En ligne], 7 | 2012, mis en ligne le 02 décembre 2012, consulté le 29 mai 2013. URL : <http://transtexts.revues.org/455>

Auteur

Vanessa LEE

Vanessa LEE studied English and Drama studies at Trinity College, Dublin. Her interests include the relation between theatre criticism and practice, between theory and literary creation, as well as post-colonial writing and gender/queer studies.

Vanessa LEE est diplômée d'études théâtrales et de littératures anglophones du Trinity College, Dublin. Elle s'intéresse tout particulièrement à la relation entre la critique et la pratique théâtrale, entre théorie et création littéraire, ainsi qu'aux écrits post-coloniaux et aux études féministes et aux « queer studies ».

Droits d'auteur

© Tous droits réservés