

Curtain Opens for “Yellow Face”

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Posted in [Arts](#), Volume 38 No. 16



Lee Osorio, Stephanie Kim and Moses Yim star in ReAct's

A reunion is afoot in Seattle theatre during August.

Local theatre producer and ReAct Theatre board member Roger Tang collaborates again with his college dorm-mate David Henry Hwang in ReAct's production of Hwang's play "Yellow Face".

"I like to joke that I knew Dave before he had a middle name," says Tang. "We were theme associates together in the Asian American theme dorm at Stanford."

Tang reports that this experience was formative for both of them. "Part of our job as teaching assistants was to design and present programming that fit the theme of Asian American culture," Tang says. "We pitched in on a variety of programs and events like bringing in outside speakers and movies to show folks in the dorm."

As part of this job, Hwang wrote a play, "F.O.B.," that launched his playwriting career, and Tang served as lighting designer in the play's first production. Tang followed up that collaboration by producing Northwest premieres of other Hwang plays, including "Bondage" and "Trying to Find Chinatown".

More recently, David Hsieh, artistic director of ReAct Theatre, had met Hwang and was also interested in producing "Yellow Face". Hsieh says, "I read this play when it was first published and loved it. I knew it was something I wanted to work on at some point."

Hsieh and Tang agreed to jointly produce the play. "Since David was on a very short list to direct the play if I was producing it," says Tang, "it just made sense to go in together for a co-production."

Together, they embarked on bringing this fast-paced comedy, which some have described as a "mockumentary," to fruition. The first challenge was casting.

"Ultimately we have white actors playing Asian parts in 'yellow face', women playing men, and Asian actors playing Caucasians in 'white face'," says Hsieh, who is serving as director.

"The ethnicities of the characters are very important in the play," Hsieh says, "but Hwang has allowed much leeway in how the many parts are divided up and how many actors are part of the ensemble."

These experiments were part of the appeal for some of the actors, including Stephanie Kim. "I think the core to the play's attraction lies in the opportunity to play an array of characters; to any actor, this challenge is both appealing and truly intimidating," says Kim. "It's like committing to a skydive: thrilling, maybe you'll look interesting on the way down, and hopefully, you'll land on your feet."

Actor Julia Beers agrees. "I was attracted by the sheer number and variety of characters involved, and that several of us get to be the 'chameleons' of this play," Beers says. "The rapidly shifting voices, bodies, and dialects of the play are challenging — but also terrifically fun."

Other challenges arose from the historical roots of the play, according to actor Jeremy R. Behrens. "This play, which is so deeply rooted in historical events, required a type of character research I was not used to," says Behrens. He especially appreciated the opportunity "to play during rehearsals, to keep attempting to capture the essence of these characters, some of whom are very well-known figures in popular culture today."

Beers concurs. "It's tricky to balance the amount of research and imagination going into a given character," she says. "Some of these characters are individuals with a lot of public exposure and footage available for referencing, and some of them are relatively private citizens, with possibly only anecdotal information available. It's a delicate process."

The actors also focused on perfecting the play's mockumentary style. "Finding the balance between how much real versus how much character to put into the show is a huge challenge," says Stephanie Kim. "Actors want their performances to be honest. At the same time, we enjoy exercising a little artistic license."

Behrens expands on this: "The hardest part for me was recognizing when breaking the 'fourth wall' was the best choice," he says.

"We talked a lot about TV shows like '30 Rock' and 'The Office'," Behrens says, "and never having really watched these shows, I was unaware as to the way in which the actors used the camera as an 'other' in a way that other shows do not."

"Essentially," Behrens concludes, "the audience becomes a confidante in 'Yellow Face'. There are many times where the line is blurred: Who am I speaking to? Who needs to hear this information most?"

Ultimately, for playwright Henry David Hwang, the most important listeners are his audiences. To that end, Hwang visited Seattle during the production, and celebrated this reunion when he attended the show on August 13 and participated in a Q&A session at Elliott Bay Book Company on August 14.

"Yellow Face" runs August 5 – September 3 at the Richard Hugo House, 1418 Tenth Avenue, Seattle.