

The Miss Saigon Controversy

In 1990, theatre producer Cameron Mackintosh brought the musical *Miss Saigon* to Broadway following a highly successful run in London. Based on the opera *Madame Butterfly*, *Miss Saigon* takes place during the Vietnam War and focuses on a romance between an American soldier and a Vietnamese orphan named Kim. In the musical, Kim is forced to work at ‘Dreamland,’ a seedy bar owned by the half-French, half-Vietnamese character ‘the Engineer.’ The production was highly anticipated, generating millions of dollars in ticket sales before it had even opened.

Controversy erupted, however, when producers revealed that Jonathan Pryce, a white British actor, would reprise his role as the Eurasian ‘Engineer.’ Asian American actor B.D. Wong argued that by casting a white actor in a role written for an Asian actor, the production supported the practice of “yellow-face.” Similar to “blackface” minstrel shows of the 19th and 20th centuries, “yellow-face” productions cast non-Asians in roles written for Asians, often relying on physical and cultural stereotypes to make broad comments about identity. Wong asked his union, Actors’ Equity Association, to “force Cameron Mackintosh and future producers to cast their productions with racial authenticity.”

Actors’ Equity Association initially agreed and refused to let Pryce perform: “Equity believes the casting of Mr. Pryce as a Eurasian to be especially insensitive and an affront to the Asian community.” Moreover, many argued that the casting of Pryce further limited already scarce professional opportunities for Asian American actors.

Frank Rich of *The New York Times* disagreed, sharply criticizing the union for prioritizing politics over talent: “A producer’s job is to present the best show he can, and Mr. Pryce’s performance is both the artistic crux of this musical and the best antidote to its more bloated excesses. It’s hard to imagine another actor, white or Asian, topping the originator of this quirky role. Why open on Broadway with second best, regardless of race or creed?” The casting director, Vincent G. Liff, also defended his actions on the same grounds: “I can say with the greatest assurance that if there were an Asian actor of 45-50 years, with classical stage background and an international stature and reputation, we would have certainly sniffed him out by now.”

Actors’ Equity ultimately reversed their decision and Pryce performed the role of ‘the Engineer’ on Broadway to great acclaim. Nonetheless, the production remained controversial during its successful Broadway run. For many, it is seen as one of the most famous examples of contemporary “yellow-face” performance.



Discussion Questions:

1. Why did Wong critique the production? What harms does “yellow-face” performance cause? To whom?
2. What harm is Frank Rich arguing will be caused by not allowing Pryce to perform? How does Rich justify his argument?
3. While the practice of “blackface” performance is widely agreed to be ethically prohibited, there continue to be multiple examples of white actors representing Asians in theatre and film. Why do you think this continues to occur?
4. Is it more problematic for a white actor to portray a person of color than for an actor of color to perform a role written for a white person. Why or why not?
5. How does the history of racial and ethnic discrimination in the United States factor into this debate?
6. In what ways does scarcity of opportunities and representations affect perceptions of minority groups?
7. How can producers and casting directors appropriately represent characters on stage and screen? Should artists and producers purposefully be more inclusive or should they cast regardless of race? Explain your reasoning.

Resources:

Jonathan Pryce, 'Miss Saigon' and Equity's Decision

<http://www.nytimes.com/1990/08/10/theater/jonathan-pryce-miss-saigon-and-equity-s-decision.html>

David Henry Hwang: racial casting has evolved – and so have my opinions

<http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2014/may/12/david-henry-hwang-miss-saigon-yellow-face-racial-casting>

The Problem With Miss Saigon (or how many stereotypes can you cram into one Broadway musical)

<https://blog.davidmura.com/2013/09/11/the-problem-with-miss-saigon-or-how-many-stereotypes-can-you-cram-into-one-broadway-musical/>

Cameron Mackintosh: 'I have been successful beyond anyone's wildest dreams'

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/theatre/10842020/Cameron-Mackintosh-I-have-been-successful-beyond-anyones-wildest-dreams.html>

A History of Asian American Theatre

<http://www.worldcat.org/title/history-of-asian-american-theatre/oclc/70173376>

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