

Here is a story for me: representation and visibility in *Miss Saigon* and *The Orphan of Zhao*

Abstract

This article places *The Orphan of Zhao* casting controversy into dialogue with another problematic theatrical representation of East Asians, Claude-Michel Schönberg, Alain Boublil, and Richard Maltby Jr's musical *Miss Saigon*. Drawing on his personal experiences of playing the role of Thuy in *Miss Saigon* in 2005, Chow suggests that the problematic hyper-visibility of East Asian performers in a number of stereotypical roles in *Miss Saigon* may actually lead to moments in which the labour of the East Asian actor might be perceived *in excess* of the character. Therefore, while *Miss Saigon*'s narrative constructs an orientalist vision of the East, its embodiment in the theatre creates moments of possible resistance. Understanding the relation of actor to role in this way, the RSC's casting of *The Orphan of Zhao* can be seen as exclusionary, as its particular distribution of roles polices East Asian embodiment, presence and speech. Chow suggests that rather than being problematic for the use of 'yellow-face', the RSC's casting of non-East Asian actors in East Asian roles was troubling for a different reason: it silenced its East Asian actors and hid them in plain sight, therefore replicating the way East Asian subjects are hidden and silenced within contemporary British discourse.

Introduction

In October 2012, the RSC mounted its first ever play of Chinese origin, *The Orphan of Zhao*. Director Gregory Doran's decision to cast only three actors of East

Asian descent in the new adaptation by writer James Fenton, in the roles of servants, guards, and the Demon Mastiff (or, as I called it at the time, ‘two dogs and a maid’)¹ provoked me to write a personal reflection on the controversy, which I posted to my blog.² At the height of what came to be known as ‘Zhao-Gate’, it was passed around various social networks, and was eventually posted by Filipina actress Lea Salonga on her Twitter account. As I write this in 2014, the subsequent year and a half has seen the formation of the advocacy group British East Asian Artists (of which I am a part), and the ground breaking Opening the Door: East Asian in British Theatre event for East Asian actors at the Young Vic on 11 February 2013, organized by members of BEAA and Equity. It has also seen a large number of plays about China, including *#aiww: The Arrest of Ai Wei Wei* at the Hampstead Theatre, the National Theatre’s *The World of Extreme Happiness*, and Lucy Kirkwood’s *Chimerica*. As for myself, a former actor turned theatre academic and performance maker, this year of ‘visibility’ of East Asian bodies, voices, and subjectivities on Britain’s stages has been an opportunity to reflect on how much things have progressed for the representation of East Asians onstage (and in television and film), and how far we still have to go.

This article revisits and builds upon my blog post of 2012. I put my reading of the Zhao controversy into dialogue with my experiences playing the role of Thuy in Claude-Michel Schönberg, Alain Boublil, and Richard Maltby Jr’s *Miss Saigon* at the Arts Club Theatre Company in Vancouver, Canada, in the summer of 2005.

Contrasting the productions of these two texts – one, a ‘Western’ representation of the East, the other, a classic of Chinese literature – I argue, shifts our focus to the way the material conditions of the theatre makes certain persons visible and audible, or rather,

¹ In actual fact, it was *two-thirds* of a dog, and a maid.

² Broderick Chow, ‘Two Dogs and A Maid: Theatricality, Visibility and the Royal Shakespeare Company’s *The Orphan of Zhao*’, *BroderickChow.com* <<http://dangerology.wordpress.com/2012/10/19/two-dogs-and-a-maid-theatricality-visibility-and-the-royal-shakespeare-companys-the-orphan-of-zhao/>> [accessed 25 June 2014].

able to be seen, and heard. This is a very different site of analysis from what often seem like more pressing questions about the politics of East Asian acting, such as representations, stereotyping, or which East Asian story ‘should’ be told. In effect, I establish a dialectic between the representation of the East Asian actor and his/her presence. The East Asian body made visible and audible by the theatre, defiantly asserts its unruly presence (which is always in excess of the role played) in the presence of the audience, providing opportunities for the subversion and undoing of stereotypes by both actor and spectator. While many during Zhao-Gate critiqued the RSC’s use of ‘yellow-face’, we are not on the territory of the clownish grotesquerie of, say, Mr Yunioshi or Fu Manchu.³ For me, the RSC’s casting of non-East Asian actors in East Asian roles was even more troubling for a different reason: it silenced its East Asian actors and hid them in plain sight. In this way, it replicates the way East Asian subjects are hidden and silenced within contemporary British society in general.⁴

This dialectic of presence/representation also challenges the way we understand stereotypical representations, such as *Miss Saigon*. The show has rightly been critiqued for its problematic representations of race, particularly in connection to gender. Without challenging these criticisms, I want to offer a counterpoint to them, an unapologetically personal reflection on the pleasures of being able to *appear*, to simply *be*, which is potentially subversive since theatrical *being* is always *being-in-excess*. This is a more nuanced way of understanding theatre’s function, because

³ Mr Yunioshi is a Japanese character in Truman Capote’s *Breakfast at Tiffany’s*, subsequently portrayed by Mickey Rooney in Blake Edwards’ film of the same name; Fu Manchu is author Sax Rohmer’s iconic Chinese villain, portrayed by, among other actors, Christopher Lee and Peter Sellers in film adaptations of Rohmer’s novels.

⁴ In addition to the underrepresentation of British East Asians on screen and onstage, *hiding* and *silencing* also touches on other contemporary East Asian experiences in the UK. Consider, for example, the hiding of East Asian migrant labour – for example, Filipino domestic workers, or Chinese labourers and sex workers. See, for instance, Hsiao-Hung Pai, *Chinese Whispers: The True Story Behind Britain’s Hidden Army of Labour* (London: Penguin Books, 2008).

representations, even ‘realistic’ ones, are always accompanied by and potentially undone by the performative force of presence. Presence is potentially subversive, I show, when there is pleasure in it. I draw heavily here on Lucy Mae San Pablo Burns’ study of Filipino/a performance, and her concept of *puro arte*, developed from the Tagalog phrase ‘*puro arte lang iyan*’, or ‘She’s just putting on a show’ (or, in my translation, the non-gender specific ‘That’s all show!’)⁵ In Tagalog, the phrase is used to draw attention to self-conscious histrionics; to attention seeking and showing off. For San Pablo Burns, however, *puro arte* expresses a ‘dual structure’, simultaneously recognising (as it puts it down), ‘the theatrics at play [...] the labour of artful expression, of the creative efforts required to make something out of nothing.’⁶ *Puro arte* is deployed by Filipino/as ‘[...] to exceed their erasure as subjects.’⁷ I adapt the concept here to encompass a labour of theatricality that exceeds the erasure of East Asian subjects as the ‘model minority’ while maintaining the term’s Filipino/Spanish origins.

I draw on *puro arte* for personal reasons as well. I am half Filipino. My mother is a Chinese-Filipina from Makati, Manila, and my father a Xiamen-born Chinese raised in Hong Kong. Both have lived most of their lives in Vancouver, Canada, where I was born and raised. Growing up, I often was encouraged to put on a show: at Christmas I’d often hear ‘Play piano for Auntie’ or ‘Sing for Auntie.’ However, like many Asian families, mine was apprehensive when I declared that putting on a show was what I wanted to do *for a job*. ‘You have a yellow face’, my father declared bluntly. ‘Don’t forget.’ He meant well, of course. One rarely ever saw

⁵ Lucy Mae San Pablo Burns, *Puro Arte: Filipinos on the Stages of Empire* (New York: New York University Press, 2013), p. 1.

⁶ Ibid, p. 2.

⁷ Ibid.. She draws here on the playwright Glecya Atienza’s statement, that ‘*Kaya pala mukhang maarte ay dahil may mga di masabi*’ (ibid). [She is overacting precisely because there are things she cannot say].

Asian faces in Vancouver theatres or film and television. The announcement of *Miss Saigon* at the Arts Club – Vancouver’s largest and highest-profile professional theatre company – seemed to validate my choice of career. Certainly the community of Asian Canadian actors of which I was a part couldn’t believe its luck. ‘Finally’, we thought, ‘Here is a show for us. Here is a show about Asia. Here is visibility.’ It wasn’t that I was ignorant of the history of criticism of the musical. But the opportunity to deploy my *puro arte* exceeded the problematic representations of *Miss Saigon*.

In the first section of this paper I intersperse a critical reading of *Miss Saigon*’s orientalist construction of the East as available/dominated Other with a thick-descriptive, phenomenological analysis of performing in the Vancouver production. In the second I switch analytic modes to consider Doran and Fenton’s *The Orphan of Zhao* and the way its casting and script organizes an aesthetic presentation that silences its East Asian performers. Because I was not a performer in *Zhao*, this dialogue between *Saigon* and *Zhao* cannot be an equal conversation. Instead, I place my experiences first in order to provide a ‘shadow’ that might haunt analyses of *Zhao* and its casting processes. I do not intend to suggest my experiences as an Asian actor are universal. I merely hope to provide another twist in the knot of race and representation, one that perhaps points to a way to trouble what Jacques Rancière calls the ‘distribution of the sensible’, the aesthetic order of things that partitions people to roles and places.⁸

***Miss Saigon* in Vancouver: Asia Made Visible**

⁸ Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, trans. by Gabriel Rockhill (London: Continuum, 2006).

On the threshold between the Americas and Asia, Vancouver has a significant East Asian and South Asian population, including first, second, third and fourth generation Chinese, Japanese, Filipino, Punjabi, and Vietnamese immigrants. Over half of Vancouver's population comes from a 'visible minority.'⁹ As of 2011, 27.7% of residents identified as 'Chinese', 6% as 'Filipino', 6% as 'South Asian', 3% as 'Southeast Asian', and 1.7% as 'Japanese.'¹⁰ Despite these demographics, theatre in Vancouver remains largely 'white.' Until the formation of Vancouver Asian Canadian Theatre in 2000, there was no company devoted to Asian Canadian theatre. In 2005, the Arts Club Theatre Company finally responded to the demographics of its local pool of talent by producing *Miss Saigon* an 'Asian' story. It was programmed at the Stanley Industrial Alliance Stage, directed by Bill Millerd and choreographed by Valerie Easton. (*Here is a show for us*). After a series of auditions, I was cast as Thuy, the betrothed cousin of the female lead, Kim, and that summer I shared the stage with a group of talented Asian Canadian singers, dancers, and actors, embodying a series of stereotypical and problematic depictions of Asian subjects, and truly enjoying it. It wasn't a job we grudgingly accepted *despite* the negative representations inherent to the roles. There was a sheer enjoyment and pleasure taken in our *puro arte*, our theatrical labour that allowed us to play and challenge these representations from the inside while still performing the mimetic labour that brought them into being. To use José Esteban Muñoz's term, I suggest we were engaged in a performative

⁹ This is the preferred Canadian term for non-white persons.

¹⁰ National Household Survey, Vancouver, *Statistics Canada*, <<http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/nhs-enm/2011/dppd/prof/details/page.cfm?Lang=E&Geo1=CSD&Code1=5915022&Data=Count&SearchText=Vancouver&SearchType=Begins&SearchPR=01&A1=All&B1=All&Custom=&TABID=1>> [accessed 22 February 2014].

‘disidentification’, finding ourselves ‘thriving on sites whose meaning does not properly line up.’¹¹

The criticisms of *Miss Saigon* are well known. The musical is an adaptation, by two French men, of Giacomo Puccini’s *Madama Butterfly*, itself a ‘paradigmatic rendition of orientalist articulations of Asian female difference.’¹² Transposing the action of *Madama Butterfly* from 1904 Nagasaki to the Vietnam War, *Miss Saigon* depicts the story of a young Vietnamese girl, Kim, whose village and family have been lost to the war, falling in love with Chris, a white American soldier. After the war is lost to North Vietnam and the Americans retreat, Kim has Chris’s child, travels as a refugee to Bangkok, and eventually kills herself to ensure her child’s future with Chris and his new American wife, Ellen. The narrative updates what Maria Degabriele calls the ‘Madame Butterfly’ myth, a ‘key orientalist intertext’ in a century long tradition of ‘popular orientalism.’¹³ *Miss Saigon* constructs, around a mythologized version of the Vietnam War: ‘a myth of America as the land of goodness, freedom and democracy.’¹⁴ In this way, like other orientalist texts, it presents an image of the East as weak, subdued, and open for conquest, while simultaneously constructing the West as strong, prosperous and paternalistically benevolent. In the musical, orientalism is located especially in gender difference, as the Asian female characters are ‘prostitutes’, either ‘hypersexualized Dragon Ladies in string bikinis or Kim, the single Lotus Blossom - shy, passive, virginal in an ersatz Vietnamese wedding gown.’¹⁵ The sexual availability of the Asian female characters

¹¹ José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Colour and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), p. 78.

¹² Joshua Takano Chambers-Letson and Elizabeth W. Son, ‘Performed Otherwise: The Political and Social Possibilities of Asian/American Performance’, *Theatre Survey*, 54:1 (January 2013), 131-139 (p. 133).

¹³ Maria Degabriele, ‘From *Madama Butterfly* to *Miss Saigon*: One Hundred Years of Popular Orientalism’, *Critical Arts*, 10: 2, 105-118, (p. 105).

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 115.

¹⁵ Karen Shimakawa, *National Abjection*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), p. 32.

is indexed to a notion of national conquest.¹⁶ However, as Celine Parreñas Shimizu points out, the response of both spectators and actors to the ‘bind of representation’ that *Miss Saigon* presents is much more complex than simple rejection, rather she posits that ‘hypersexual representation is an experience of both power and powerlessness for minoritized spectators and actors.’¹⁷ In particular, she points out the creative agency of Asian female actors in both the Toronto and New York productions of *Miss Saigon*. The actors playing bar-girls noted that ‘anger’ was a major choice in playing their roles, which was often at odds with the preconceptions in the audience of what a female Asian body ‘should’ do or be.¹⁸ In this way, Shimizu’s analysis points to the way performance and embodiment exceeds the constraints of character.

By seeking out female actors in Manila to play prostitutes, the producers construct an image of the ‘First World’ discovering talent and labour in the ‘Third World’, exacerbating the show’s orientalist narrative and reifying a colonial position of Western benevolence.¹⁹ The Philippines was sought out as an audition hotspot after North American auditions failed to find a suitable actor to play Kim, and has remained a source of performer labour for various productions ever since.²⁰ Casting Filipino actors provided ‘authenticity’, the presentation of which hinged on a set of distortions and theatrical slights of hand, as the producers decided not to highlight certain facts including Lea Salonga’s fame as a musically gifted teenage star on

¹⁶ While the first act’s primary antagonist, Thuy, claims a ‘right’ to Kim’s body and hand in marriage, he is not presented as a romantic threat to Chris. Rather, his claim to Kim is about filial piety and tradition; in this way, he slips into the asexual stereotype of the East Asian male.

¹⁷ Celine Parreñas Shimizu, ‘The Bind of Representation: Performing and Consuming Hypersexuality in *Miss Saigon*’, *Theatre Journal*, 57: 2 (May 2005), 247-265 (p. 248).

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 257-258.

¹⁹ Documented in *The Heat is On - The Making of Miss Saigon*, directed by David Wright (1988; London: Fremantle Media, 2008), DVD.

²⁰ San Pablo Burns and Tzu-I Chung both examine the global circulation of specifically Filipino labour in the stage industry of *Miss Saigon*. Tzu-I Chung, ‘The Transnational Vision of *Miss Saigon*: Performing the Orient in a Globalized World’, *Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States*, 36:4 (Winter 2011), 61-86. Do we need a Burns ref here too?

Filipino television. In the documentary *The Heat Is On – The Making of Miss Saigon*, we see footage of a *very* young Salonga auditioning for Kim. She is dressed in Catholic white, hair tied back and decorated with *sampa gita* (the national flower of the Philippines, a small white blossom). Looked on by a table of middle-aged white men, Schönberg, Boubil, and director Nicholas Hytner, she sings ‘Sun and Moon’ in a fantastically clear and resonant mezzo-soprano, a voice that would later help invent the accepted sound of Disney princesses in future films. This is a familiar image of exoticism: Salonga is plucked from obscurity to showcase her ‘natural’ talents on a global stage.

In San Pablo Burns’ analysis of the production, this narrative collapses sign and referent, in that it presents the Asian and female actors as incapable of mimesis. Here, she draws on feminist scholar Lynda Hart’s critique of the realist theatre and its erasure of the labour of the female actor, who is not acting, only ‘being.’ By analysing Filipino labour through the history of *Miss Saigon*, San Pablo Burns aims to ‘make visible the *conditions* that collapse the sign and referent.’²¹ However, I suggest the show *already* provides a number of opportunities for audiences, performers, and critics to (as San Pablo Burns advocates) ‘recognize mimesis as a method, a practice, an act that provides the separation, the distance between the sign and referent’²², opportunities that, as I will later argue, Gregory Doran’s production of *The Orphan of Zhao* tries to deny.

Consider the exploitative hyper-visibility of Asian bodies on stage: the bar-girls are depicted in states of undress, while the Asian male chorus is featured in feats of dance and acrobatics that ‘other’ them through a simplistic set of pan-Asian signifiers (a Lion Dance, red silks, ribbons). It would be easy to read this hyper-visibility as the

²¹ San Pablo Burns, *Puro Arte*, p. 119.

²² *Ibid.*

objectification of the ‘feminized Asian actor by the masculinized white spectator’²³, and, in one sense, this is precisely what it is. However, as Josephine Lee suggests, theatre’s liveness immediately tends to undo or at least complicate this generalized viewing relationship, since ‘[t]he physical response of the spectator to the body of the actor complicates any abstraction of social categories.’²⁴ To accomplish its objectifying hyper-visibility, the production needs to present Asian bodies *at work*, engaging in the labour of representation. The original producer’s own insistence on ‘realism’, by casting ‘authentic’ Asian performers creates a situation where the performance itself begins to trouble its own racial categories. The labour of representation, the performance’s *puro arte*, is foregrounded by the first scene of the musical, set backstage at Dreamland, the club and brothel run by The Engineer for the patronage of the American military. The bar-girls are shown engaging in backstage labour (putting on make-up, fixing costumes) while Kim, dressed in a white *áo-dài* (a Vietnamese traditional dress), is teased for her lack of performative savvy; she does not know how to play her part.

As the location of the scene shifts from backstage to frontstage, the actors’ representational labour becomes further complicated. The first number in Dreamland, ‘The Heat is on in Saigon’ present a doubled spectatorship. In this diegetic musical number the girls face away from the audience, dancing and performing to an audience of GIs, who face out to the audience in the theatre. Rather than reading this moment as a literal effacing of the actresses’ and their subjectivity in order to showcase their buttocks in revealing costumes – which, of course, is what is literally happening – one might argue that the staging of this scene, and the diegetic nature of the number (the characters are aware they are signing and dancing) highlights the labour of

²³ Josephine Lee, *Performing Asian America: Race and Ethnicity on the Contemporary Stage* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997), p. 41.

²⁴ Lee, *Performing*, p.7.

performance. This is further compounded when Mimi, the first bar-girl to sing, turns to the theatre audience and belts: ‘See my bikini, it’s just the right size’, followed by Yvette, who sings: ‘Don’t you enjoy how it rides up my thighs? / Look from behind, it’ll knock out your eyes.’ This address of the audience is a convention of musical theatre, but by drawing the (theatre) audience’s awareness *to itself*, the actors playing Mimi, Yvette, Yvonne and Gigi also insert a distance between themselves and the character they are playing. It is not enough for them to appear objectified in a bikini, they excessively comment on it, pointing to it: ‘See my bikini?’

Further distance is imparted by the writers’ removal of any language barrier between the Asian and Western characters. All the Asian characters (with the exception of the Engineer, who has occasional lines in French) sing in English with no hint of accent. Unlike *Flower Drum Song*, Rodgers and Hammerstein’s comic musical set in San Francisco’s Chinatown, *Miss Saigon* is, with the exception of one scene, entirely set in two Asian cities (Saigon/Ho Chi Minh City and Bangkok), and features Asian, rather than Asian American characters. The use of the universal English language, therefore ‘globalizes’ and simultaneously ‘colonizes’ the musical, but also provides a gap through which the performers’ mimetic labour can be perceived. In particular, this is true of the character of Kim, who, as actress Aura Deva points out, sings over 65 per cent of the music in the show.²⁵ Part of the initial difficulty of casting Kim was finding a youthful and slim Asian actor who could bear the vocal weight of the show, a challenge that the producers emphasized.²⁶ Therefore, at the same time as the character of Kim becomes a signifier of a feminized Asia bowing down and making a sacrifice to the masculinized West, the *role* of Kim and its demand for representational and vocal labour works as a countervailing tendency

²⁵ Quoted in San Pablo Burns, *Puro Arte*, p. 126.

²⁶ *The Heat is On*. DVD.

to the show's ideology. While we may cringe at the subservience of Kim's undying love for her American GI, simultaneously we are stirred by Lea Salonga's pleasure of putting on a show, her *puro arte*, as she sings: 'A song / played on a solo saxophone / a crazy sound / a lonely sound / a cry, that tells us love / goes on and on.'²⁷

All of this is not to let *Miss Saigon* 'off the hook', as it were. The stereotypes are *still there*. The Asian leads all depict a particular stereotypical East Asian trope: Kim – submission, devotion; Gigi – hypersexuality; the Engineer – venality, corruption; and Thuy – inscrutability, fundamentalism. But for Homi K. Bhabha, the stereotype is always haunted by its own undoing – by asserting the fixed, unassailable difference of the Other, colonial discourse betrays its own anxiety towards sameness.²⁸ Anne Anlin Cheng, following in this vein, writes, '[i]t is always easy to identify grotesque, racist images. [...] The issue, however, gets stickier when we encounter more elaborate fields of representation [...] when that representation foregrounds itself as the very *technology* of embodiment.'²⁹ *Miss Saigon*'s realism is one such field, in which to make the stereotype seem naturalised requires an enormous amount of representational labour and requires the show to put the audience into proximity with racial embodiment, which risks simultaneously undoing its ideological work. The excessive, 'showy' embodiment of the Asian actors enacting the quintessentially American art form of musical theatre can be seen as a form of what Bhabha calls 'mimicry', a means by which the colonized overidentifies with the dominant discourse and in doing so, asserts its agency.³⁰

The above analysis of *Miss Saigon* is a way of theorizing my complex love for a show that I, as a Chinese-Filipino-Canadian subject should by all rights not love. As

²⁷ Alain Boublil, Claude-Michel Schönberg and Richard Maltby Jr., *Miss Saigon* (New York: Musical Theatre International), p. 105.

²⁸ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 2004, 2nd edition), pp. 94-100.

²⁹ Anne Anlin Cheng, *The Melancholy of Race* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 36.

³⁰ Bhabha, *Location*, pp. 122-23.

the show returns to London's West End protests have again arisen, this time online.³¹ I look at statements online such as 'Miss Saigon lies about Vietnamese people to protect America's racist legacy'³² and I agree. But all the same, my experience playing Thuy – a character whose narrative arc embodies some of the worst generalisations about Asia as backwards or barbaric (forced marriage, subjugation of women)³³ – tells me that there is great pleasure and even resistance to be had in the sheer labour of the theatre. Despite Thuy's function in the narrative as a stand-in for a paternalistic and militaristic Vietnam that must be annihilated, Schönberg and Boubli could not resist giving him a spectacular and indulgently melismatic death scene, which I milked for all it was worth. The scene demands that the actor belt, full-voice, B ♭ above middle C, a note at the upper limit of my range. Some shows it wouldn't come at all, and I resorted to shouting. But when it worked, when my labour of rehearsal and training clicked into gear and the note rang out, the feeling of putting on a brilliant show was magical. I would sing my final line of the scene – 'you don't know how to kill!'³⁴ – to Kim, with its three note descending melisma, pick up the child actor playing Tam, raise my prop knife and wait for the sound of the gunshot. As the audience gasped at the sudden sound, my back would hit the boards of the stage, and I would listen to the chorus start up behind us, beaming inside at a job well done. A friend came to see the show and afterwards described Thuy's death as

³¹ See the 'Don't Buy *Miss Saigon*: Our Truth Project' collaborative website at <http://dontbuymiss-saigon.tumblr.com/> [accessed 18 February 2014].

³² <http://dontbuymiss-saigon.tumblr.com/post/62719445243/i-am-a-vietnamese-american-womyn-and-this-is-my>, emphasis in original [accessed 18 February 2014].

³³ One contributor to 'Don't Buy *Miss Saigon*: Our Truth Project' points out that forced marriage is not a part of Vietnamese culture, and that in fact traditional Vietnamese culture ensures property rights for women as well as inheritance rights for daughters: <http://dontbuymiss-saigon.tumblr.com/post/61968240562/i-am-a-vietnamese-american-woman-and-this-is-my> [accessed 18 February 2014].

³⁴ *Miss Saigon*, p. 175.

‘erotic’, which is in some ways a perfect description of *puro arte*; there is some excessive, mercurial ‘eros’ in the labour of putting on a show.

There was also a kind of community and solidarity in our community of Asian Canadian actors. The Asian cast of *Saigon* is over half of the total cast of the musical, and appearing visible in this way, as a group, felt like a refreshing change from the roles we were so often relegated to play, which were generally predicated on a marginal visibility: the computer guy, the shadowy drug lord, the waiter. *Miss Saigon* created a stage not only to be visible, but to be heard, noisy, loud, singing together full-throated and raw. We would put the stereotypes into dialogue with our own lives as Asian-Canadians. On occasion, the Filipino/a-Canadian actors in the cast (including Nena, who played Kim) would get together and sing the musical’s songs in a thick Pinoy accent: ‘I’m *sebenteen* and I’m new here today / The *billage* I come *prom* is so *par* away / All of the girls knows much more what to say / but I know / I *hab* a heart like the sea / A million dreams *is* in me.’ That, we would say, is how Kim *should actually* sound, ‘she’s an actual *FOB*’.³⁵ The mechanics of *Miss Saigon* as a piece of theatre gave us the gap necessary to distance ourselves from the representation and identify not with the character we were playing, but our own labour of mimesis. This excessive play and pleasure within the gaps of the roles we were portraying recalls Muñoz’s concept of disidentification, which he argues is, after assimilation and utopianism, ‘the third mode of dealing with dominant ideology, one that neither opts to assimilate within such a structure nor strictly opposes it [...] disidentification is a strategy that works on and against dominant ideology.’³⁶ This is not to negate or counter projects that take the utopian route (such as the current online

³⁵ The name refers to the derogatory expression ‘F.O.B.’ or simply ‘Fob’, meaning ‘Fresh Off the Boat’, which is also the name of a 1980 play by David Henry Hwang. David Henry Hwang, *FOB and Other Plays* (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 1991).

³⁶ Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, p. 11.

protests against *Miss Saigon*) but rather to show that the theatre itself offers modes of resistance to the dominant ideology even as it attempts to construct it.

In the next section I will turn to the Royal Shakespeare Company's *The Orphan of Zhao*. Following on from my analysis of how *puro arte* can exceed racially problematic representations, I will examine how the casting of *Zhao* limited the opportunity for this minor form of resistance by silencing and hiding its performers.

The Orphan of Zhao: Asia Invisible

In reflecting on my experiences as a performer in *Miss Saigon*, I have advocated for presence and visibility as a space in which the agency of the minority performer can emerge. While we, as Asian-Canadian actors recognized it may not be exactly *a story for us*, it was a story we could *embody*. *Here was visibility*.

The RSC's production of James Fenton's adaptation of *The Orphan of Zhao*, on the other hand, was a work that seemed calculated so as to *deny* visibility to the persons it supposedly represents. The adaptation retains the Yuan Dynasty setting and Chinese character names. Fenton has also taken some pains to retain formal aspects of the original that jar with Western theatrical sensibilities.³⁷ The RSC's publicity for the show depicts a young boy (in modern dress) of East Asian origin (whom a casual viewer would assume is the eponymous 'orphan'), and its website courts Chinese audiences, with information on the play given in Mandarin. All this in mind, it would be reasonable for the British East Asian acting community to think: here is a show for us.

³⁷ At the top of each scene, a character enters, states his/her name, and recounts their purpose in the plot. While this initially appears over-laboured, it soon becomes a necessity aid in parsing the complicated narrative.

Instead, the director Gregory Doran's cast of seventeen included only three actors of East Asian origin. As controversy around the piece grew, on 19 October 2012 The RSC issued a response that stated they had 'cast an ethnically diverse company, including several actors of Chinese and East Asian heritage', and ultimately 'We cast the best people available for the range of roles required.'³⁸ The company 'reflects British society.'³⁹ This justification is strange, because the text being staged does *not* reflect British society. It is rather an appropriation of a classical Chinese play rooted in Confucian ideals of justice and interpersonal morality. Accordingly, Doran and The RSC were accused of 'yellow facing', that is, having actors not of East Asian descent playing East Asian characters. While certainly the sight of white British actors wearing costumes and wigs that refer to various Chinese dynasties brings to mind the appearance of Christopher Lee as Sax Rohmer's Chinese villain Fu Manchu in *The Face of Fu Manchu*, in what follows, I suggest that the visible spectacle of non-Asian actors in Asian roles is less important than the *invisibility* of the three East Asian actors.

Doran's failure to consider the visibility of Asian performers in this production is a failure to understand the very nature of theatre and the real effects beyond representation it can have. While theatre trades in representations, illusions, and shades, as we have seen, it accomplishes these things through embodiment in the *real*, through an organization of bodies, materials, and images. In other words, it is representational but also *aesthetic* – presented to the senses. Rancière's concept of the 'distribution of the sensible' is useful in understanding this dual nature of theatre.⁴⁰

³⁸ The Royal Shakespeare Company, Facebook Page, (2012), <https://www.facebook.com/thersc/posts/10151107942763235> [accessed 15 February 2014] (para. 3 of 4)

³⁹ Ibid. (para. 4 of 4).

⁴⁰ Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. and ed. by Gabriel Rockhill (London: Continuum, 2006), pp. 12-13.

For Rancière, aesthetics is always-already politics in that it establishes common modes of perception that in turn establish modes of *real* participation in society – who can speak, who can act. Therefore, art, and by extension, theatre, may be false or make-believe, and yet its effects are no less real, because it establishes ‘common sense’ perceptions.⁴¹ To read a piece of theatre as a distribution of the sensible means to look for the way it establishes what *is* and *is not* able to be seen or represented. In Rancière’s philosophy of radical equality, however, common sense perceptions are not simply a question of stereotyping or identity, but elide with the social field because they help establish what he calls the ‘police order’, using ‘police’ as a verb, *to maintain order*.⁴² It establishes the unspoken but understood rules that determine social roles: who may appear, speak, participate in democracy.

With *Miss Saigon*, as I have argued, we have a Western-centric, Orientalist theatre piece in which the *puro arte*, the very embodiment of the Asian performers was able to trouble the intended distribution of the sensible. In *The Orphan of Zhao*, the situation is reversed: a theatre piece, that in its source material ‘speaks from’ China, is manipulated to *police* its Asian cast. The casting of *Zhao* polices the potentially troubling and excessive presence of racial difference on the stage by relegating the East Asian actors to roles without agency and with little visibility.

The RSC states that:

To say the East Asian actors we’ve cast are playing a maid and a dog is a distortion of their roles in *The Orphan of Zhao*. ‘The Maid’ is one of the key roles in the play. She stands up to tyranny and is executed. Two actors participate in a spectacular piece of puppetry, performing the Demon Mastiff -

⁴¹ I am deliberately referring to the dual meaning of sense here, following Rancière’s lead, meaning both a perception through the senses and the meaning or understanding that arises therefrom. This dual meaning exists in the original French word *sens* as well.

⁴² Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, p. 89.

a highly skilled piece of work, as well as taking on a variety of key roles in the production.⁴³

The problem is not that The RSC is engaging in deception here, but that they are correct – The Maid does stand up to tyranny, and the Demon Mastiff is a spectacular piece of puppetry. But the roles that Chris Lew Kum Hoi, Siu Hun Li, and Susan Momoko Hingley portray are purely reactive. It is the non-Asian actors who portray roles with agency and are able to determine the course of the narrative (Tu'an Gu, Cheng Ying, The Princess, and Cheng Bo, the orphan). Firstly, the 'variety of key roles in the production' is a series of 'Guards.' These characters are subservient to the story's protagonists, as is the Maid, whose role in the narrative would not affect its progression were the scene excised (she disassembles in order to hide the location of the orphan, and is executed when a slip of the tongue confirms the wicked minister Tu'an Gu's suspicions).⁴⁴

Secondly, I suggest that the retaining of the original convention by which principal characters introduce themselves onstage further emphasizes the division between those who can speak, act, and be seen, and those who cannot. This is established early on, for example, Cheng Ying's first appearance, in which he declares:

I am Cheng Ying, a simple country doctor. Most of my life has been spent on the hillside, gathering herbs and roots for my medicine chest, and in my village tending the sick. Who would have thought that I should be summoned to the city, to deliver the first-born child of the Princess?⁴⁵

⁴³ RSC, Facebook Page (para. 4 of 4)

⁴⁴ Fenton, p. 31.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

The roles that Hoi, Li, and Hingley play are afforded no such luxury. While the Princess (Lucy Briggs-Owen) announces: ‘I am a princess’, the Maid is announced with:

Maid: You are the doctor? Come quickly.

Cheng Ying: Is the Princess already in labour?

Maid: You will see for yourself. She is grieving terribly. She has been groaning all night.⁴⁶

The effect of the original script’s announcements of the characters is similar to Mimi’s declaration in *Miss Saigon* (‘See my bikini?’) in that it points to the disjuncture between sign and referent, and opens a gap in which to perceive the labour of mimesis. Meanwhile, the *lack* of such declarations for the characters portrayed by the East Asian actors means that their (few and far between) acts of speech are naturalized. The connection between East Asian embodiment and the speech act ‘I obey’⁴⁷ reproduces the existing distribution of the sensible in which East Asian subjects are considered quiet or passive.

Finally, the Demon Mastiff role, which had originally stirred much ire,⁴⁸ demands close analysis. Three actors, Li, Hoi, and Joan Iyiola (a black British actor) manipulate the puppet, which appears in two scenes. As stated above, the RSC defended the casting choice by noting the impressive nature of the performance; calling it a ‘spectacular piece of puppetry.’ One might argue that the spectacle of the puppetry would provide an opportunity for a moment of *puro arte*. But I am also struck by the way in the Demon Mastiff’s role in the narrative seems to police,

⁴⁶ Ibid, p.17.

⁴⁷ Spoken by Guard (Siu Hun Li), Ibid, p. 19.

⁴⁸ The connection between ‘dogs’ and ‘Chinese’ has historical resonance with the exclusion of both dogs and Chinese from Huangpu Park in Shanghai prior to 1928, as well as the use of ‘dog’ as a derogatory term among Han Chinese for other Chinese ethnic minorities. See Robert A. Bickers and Jeffrey N. Wasserstrom, ‘Shanghai’s “Dogs and Chinese Not Admitted” Sign: Legend, History and Contemporary Symbol’, *The China Quarterly*, 142 (June 1995), 444-466.

discipline, and importantly, *silence* this excess. On one level, the audience is thrilled by the representational work of the actors, who operate the dog puppet in such a way as to create the illusion of a real dog, or, as the script puts it, ‘*a terrifying display of hunger and rage.*’⁴⁹ On another level, though, the audience perceives three actors of colour laboring together, and unable to speak. Doran’s casting creates a *mise-en-scène* in which three actors of colour are two levels removed from visibility and speech: they are three represented as one, and they are made present through an avatar that draws attention away from their material otherness, their bodies. This positions the actors as unable to be heard, or even seen, except through a disguise or covering. The first appearance of the Demon Mastiff in its scene with its master, Tu’an Gu (Joe Dixon), demonstrates this further. The Demon Mastiff appears, gives a display of ‘hunger and rage’ to the audience, and then is then domesticated by the presence of another actor who *is* given the opportunity to speak:

Tu’an Gu: [...] Come here, boy. There! You have to know how to handle them, or you can lose a limb. Down! I said. Down, boy! Get them young enough, you can train any sort of dog. [...] Heel, boy, heel. *Back to your cage. Your moment is yet to come.*⁵⁰

The role, and the scene, is organized in such a way as to literally police the unruly presence of the actors behind the avatar. The other actors portraying The Princess, Cheng Bo, Cheng Ying, and the other protagonists are able to appear without the mediation of a puppet. They speak, act, and determine their narrative. The position of voiceless-ness and removal from visibility to which the East Asian actors have been

⁴⁹ Fenton, p. 5.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 5-6, emphasis added.

partitioned simply reproduces the existing police order in which East Asian subjects are silenced as a ‘model minority.’

Fenton has appropriated a piece of Chinese literature. Niki Turner’s design indulges in non-specific Chinoiserie. And while claiming universality through their multi-ethnic casting, Doran has relegated East Asians to non-agential, subservient, and voiceless roles on the margins of their own story. In this way, *The Orphan of Zhao* is a colonialist project, to a much greater and more insidious degree than *Miss Saigon*, which has explicit neo-colonial overtones in its libretto and narrative.⁵¹ By considering the aesthetic mechanism of theatricality alongside the content of the work, I suggest that we might arrive at a better understanding of representations of race in the theatre.

Conclusion: Putting on a Show

Playing Thuy, I mainly appeared in the second half of the first act of *Miss Saigon*, an important section of the show often ignored by critics in favour of the central love story. Here, the action shifts forward in time three years to 1978, after the fall of Saigon, where we find Kim living in hiding with her son Tam. Thuy orders the Engineer to find Kim. Upon doing so, Thuy and his soldiers threaten to execute Kim and the Engineer as traitors. Thuy reasserts his ‘marriage-bond’ to Kim, who reveals she cannot marry him, as she is married to Chris, and has a child by him. When Thuy

⁵¹ Chris’s Act 2 aria (‘Let me tell you the way it was’) conflates his relationship with Kim with justification for the American’s interventionist war in Vietnam: ‘So I wanted to save her / protect her / Christ, I’m an American! How could I fail to do good?’ (*Miss Saigon*, pp. 331-332). Clearly, ‘her’ refers to both Kim and Vietnam itself.

threatens to kill Tam, Kim shoots him, and the act ends with Kim and the Engineer fleeing Vietnam for Thailand with a group of ‘boat people.’ What is striking is that the climax of the first act features only the three Asian principles (along with the Asian male chorus). The Asian characters are shifted from roles within a Western narrative into the position of *determining* the narrative, which is brought to a head as Kim, the Engineer, and Thuy sing in three-part harmony: ‘I am talking of life and death now / I am talking of staying free!’⁵²

When I was performing *Miss Saigon* in Vancouver, I was struck by the large proportion of the audience that was East Asian, in contrast to other shows at the same theatre. Clearly, the show held out the promise of *something* for the East Asian population of Vancouver and West Coast Canada. I suggest this *something* is the possibility of *identification*, not perhaps, with the characters, but with *us*, the actors, those onstage, acting, labouring, and telling a story. As Kim and Thuy face off, the dual attention of the theatre means they were able to perceive, behind the stand-ins for East Asian feminine submission and East Asian masculine conformity, the Winnipeg born Filipina actress, and the Vancouver born Chinese-Filipino actor, putting on a show.

In this article I put into dialogue two theatre pieces that problematically represent East Asians, in contrasting ways. I suggested that the problematic hyper-visibility of East Asian performers in a number of stereotypical roles in *Miss Saigon* actually led to moments of possibility in which the labour of mimesis of the East Asian performer could be perceived *in excess* of the character. Though the distribution of *Miss Saigon*’s aesthetic elements constructs an orientalist vision of the East, its embodiment in the theatre creates moments of possible resistance.

⁵² *Miss Saigon*, p. 164.

Understanding the relation of performer to role in this way, we can read the casting of *The Orphan of Zhao* as exclusionary by the way its particular distribution of roles polices East Asian embodiment, presence and speech.

Following the furore over *The Orphan of Zhao* we have seen numerous positive developments for British East Asian actors. To top off a year and a half of growing visibility for East Asian actors, a new production of *Miss Saigon* opened at London's Prince Edward Theatre on 3 May 2014. While avoiding any of the yellow face casting that marred the original London run (where white British actors Jonathan Pryce and Keith Burns played The Engineer and Thuy, respectively), none of the Asian principals are drawn from the pool of British East Asian talent. Jon Jon Briones (The Engineer) and Rachelle Ann Go (Gigi) are both from the Philippines, Kwang-Ho Hong (Thuy) is a recording artist in Korea, and Eva Noblezada (Kim) is a seventeen-year-old Filipina-Mexican American who, repeating the usual narrative, has been 'discovered' by the producers. This globally-sourced cast means that this *Saigon* will not provide the same opportunity for British East Asian actors that the Vancouver production did for a group of Asian Canadian artists.

When I was an actor in Vancouver complaining about auditioning for another take-away driver or yet another part in which I had to speak broken English with a Cantonese accent, many people told me: 'well, stop complaining and start making your own work.' It was good advice. The way to truly challenge the distribution of the sensible is not to pine away for the fabled contract at the RSC or six months in *Saigon*. It is to stop saying *here is a story for me*, and to start saying, *here is my story*.