

Orientalism in the American Theater, Late Nineteenth Century to the 1970s

Sung Hee Choi

This study investigates how Asians have been represented in the American theater by examining both images and actors with an emphasis on the dynamics among images, performers, and their socio-political contexts. Reflecting current trends in critical theory, much of the work examines the interrelationship of multiple identities and positions (race, gender, class, playwrights, directors, actors, audience) and their relation to power. I also interpret the dynamics of various positions and powers in light of critical theories, with the basic assumption that human identity (including race) is socially and discursively constructed and, therefore, continually negotiated and transformed through social and cultural practices.

Since the nineteenth century, when Asian freak exhibits and dramatic characters began to appear on the New York stage, Asia and Asians have been fascinating American audiences as an exotic Other. Before World War II, the image of Asians was largely tinted by the ideas of social Darwinism and the Yellow Peril, which perceived Asians — both domestic and overseas — as a degrading threat to American norms and hegemony. The first Asians who appeared in the American show business were people categorized as “human curiosities” or “freaks.” Beginning with the original Siamese Twins, who had their first American tour in 1829, exotic Orientals were repeatedly displayed in museums, fairs, amusement parks, and circuses throughout the nineteenth century. Most Americans, who had never traveled to Asia or had direct contact with Asians, had their first encounter with live Asians in these “freak shows.” The presented images of Oriental exhibits, therefore, had significant power to shape America’s perception of Asia and Asians.¹⁾

Nineteenth-century freak shows presented Oriental “human curiosities” as representative specimens of their race. In many cases, the freak show presented the exhibit’s difference — physical anomaly, skin color, and cultural practice — as deviance and rendered American spectators as safely standard and racially superior. This racial hierarchy constructed in the popular culture perhaps prepared the American public to accept and even support the nation’s imperialistic expansion to the East in the late nineteenth century.

Similarly Broadway began to present stereotypical Asian characters from the 1870s: the unassimilable “Heathen Chineese”, the submissive Oriental woman as a romantic heroine, and the treacherous Yellow Peril characters. Until the 1920s, when Asian actors began to appear on the Broadway stage, Broadway produced more than eighty musicals and plays with Asian characters. These cluster around four different representative types: Chinese immigrant as comic foil (Ah Sin type), Asian female who

sacrifices herself for the love of Western man (Madame Butterfly type), Oriental villain (Mr. Wu type), and vengeful vamp (Madame Goddam type).

These characters dominated Broadway's Oriental shows until the end of World War II. Yet from the beginning, there were internal contradictions in the images of these characters. They were romanticized and beautified, on the one hand, but condemned as quaint and perilous, on the other. As Homi Bhabha argues for racial stereotype, Asian stereotype too was a "complex, ambivalent, contradictory mode of representation, as anxious as it is assertive."²⁾ No matter how they were depicted — superhuman, subhuman, or inhuman — these Asian characters were void of complexity, reality, and therefore humanity.

These Oriental plays epitomized the Orientalism that Edward Said defines as "a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between 'the Orient' and 'the Occident.'"³⁾ In spite of variations in gender, class, and temper, the four representative Asian types — Ah Sin, Madame Butterfly, Mr. Wu, and Madame Goddam — all represented and underscored the alien body and inscrutable mind of the Orient the ultimate Other. The yellowface acting, which excluded Asians from portraying their own images, also exemplified Orientalism, "a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient."⁴⁾ American culture gained in strength and identity, as Said argues, "by setting itself off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self."⁵⁾

America's formation of Asia as its Other was part of the nation's struggle to make sense of and order the fast expanding world, in which Americans referred to themselves (along with Europeans) as the "West" — a cultural more than geographical entity — and called Asia and Asians the "East." This classification not only provided Americans a sense of belonging and power but also helped them manage the anxiety provoked by the presence of an "alien" race both in and out of the country. They needed Asia to be utterly Other, because there could be no West without its East, no Self without its Other, no America without its foil. Consequently, American theater became a cultural laboratory where strange lands were mapped, exotic specimens were classified, alien customs were interpreted, "us" was distinguished from "them," and finally order was imposed.

This experiment in theater to define the young nation's identity completely excluded any Asian participation. Until the end of World War II, almost all the Oriental characters were originated and played by white actors in yellowface. (Film stars Sessue Hayakawa and Anna May Wong and leading dancers like Sono Osato were rare exceptions.) These Oriental impersonators portrayed Asian characters mainly by performing bodily differences in an attempt to embody the inner — mental and moral — differences of Asians. Actors like Charles Parsloe, Walker Whiteside, and Florence Reed put on a make-up that exaggerated and distorted the features of the Asian face and added grotesque gestures and intonation in order to achieve a believable Oriental appearance. Their histrionic ability contributed to stereotyping Asians by Orientalizing — othering — their bodies and, in many cases, inscribing "realistic death" as the Asian's final fate.

For the audience, the exotic character conjured up fascination and fear alike. The Oriental's dangerous differences — both physical and mental — served to reinforce

the comforting perception of the audience's own safe order and reasonableness. The enjoyment of the Oriental show was, therefore, a unique combination of fear, excitement, and pleasure. And this enjoyment was safeguarded by having white actors — insiders — playing the role of outsider, which otherwise would be perceived as uncomfortably real and threatening. This racial cross-dressing, not unlike female impersonation and blackface minstrelsy, provided a safety valve for anxieties. It offered a way to play with collective fears for the Other while, at the same time, maintained some symbolic control over the “unruly” Asian body. Thus, the yellowface acting, in a way, was a safe exorcism of the Yellow Peril, because the actors performed the equivalent of a shaman, the one who often enacts an evil spirit in the old religious ritual.

In addition, the sex, violence, and moral depravity that were typical ingredients of Oriental melodramas also contributed to the pleasure of this genre. The Oriental setting — a fantasy world where all the normal rules and rigid morals could legitimately be suspended — afforded a kind of moral “time-out,” a legitimate license otherwise not allowed.⁶ In 1926, for example, the District Attorney and play jurors closed *Bunk of 1926*, a musical comedy, and warned another musical *Great Temptations* to drop a scene for being “objectionable from the point of view of public morals.” But both *The Shanghai Gesture* and *The Love City*, which were set in Chinese brothels, safely passed muster.⁷ *The Shanghai Gesture*, in particular, was officially noted in complaints to the District Attorney for its nudity and graphic exhibition of depravity. But *The Shanghai Gesture* was pronounced “inoffensive inasmuch as no verdict was reached by the juries that viewed the show.”⁸ It seems that the Oriental locale, which had been traditionally depicted as a place where irrationality and immorality ruled, sanctioned the show's graphic depravity as realism.

This occasion indicates that Oriental shows allowed both the actors and the audiences a sanctioned opportunity to transgress the strict moral codes of Victorian culture. The exotic locale and characters liberated them from their confined time and space and opened up other possibilities. The Oriental characters were then not only the Other separated from the Self, but also the repressed Other *within* the Self; both actors and audiences projected the *other* side of themselves — the desire that as repressed and forbidden by “white” men's civic virtue — onto the Asian characters on the stage. The Oriental show in the early twentieth century was, in other words, a kind of masquerade of the suppressed Other within the American Self.

More importantly, this escapist pleasure of the Oriental show went hand in hand with mercantile interests of the producers. The Broadway producers — following P.T. Barnum's legacy — galvanized, satisfied, and profited on people's curiosity and fantasy about Asia. The perpetuation and exploitation of Asia and Asians on the theater industry were less an individual malice or bigotry than an institutionalized racism and capitalism. Ironically, most of the perpetuators (playwrights and actors) were self-defined “Oriental lovers,” and they thought they were contributing to America's understanding of Asia. Those playwrights and actors, who personally had respect and sympathy for the East, had to satisfy the kind of pleasure audiences expected and to collaborate with producers to maximize the profit. As a result, their affection for Asia was deeply circumvented by the social attitudes and cultural references of their time

that was marked by Anti-Chinese movement and the Yellow Peril. Acting an Oriental, as Whiteside once unwittingly put it, depended more on “unconscious absorption” than on “conscious study.”⁹⁾ The image of Asia and Asians, therefore, prospered in the level of collective consciousness or unconsciousness of America.¹⁰⁾

Throughout the history of American theater, World War II marked the most distinctive shift in the representation of Asians on the American stage. Until World War II, Asians had all been lumped in the ambiguous category “Orientals,” without recognition of their different nationalities and different cultures. During the war, however, the media coverage separated America’s allies from its enemies. A Gallup poll taken in 1942 captured this same distinction. Respondents characterized the Chinese as “hardworking, honest, brave, religious, intelligent, and practical.” Japanese, on the contrary, they described as “treacherous, sly, cruel, and warlike.”¹¹⁾

After the war, however, the general public held an image of Asians — including Japanese — that was much more sympathetic. Political and social changes in post-war America further enhanced the public’s interest in Asia. After World War II, America’s political interests became inextricably tied to Asia. The defeat of the Japanese, the fragmentation of China by civil war, and the demise of Europe’s Asian colonies left the United States as the major power in the region. As American political influence spread eastward, the public’s interest in Asia also burgeoned. In addition, American soldiers, returning with exotic tales from the Pacific, spurred people’s curiosity about the East.

The new socio-political context after World War II—America’s newly established power as a world leader, the improved images of Asians, and increased public interest in Asia — stimulated Asian American integration into mainstream culture, creating unprecedented opportunities in many fields. The publishing industry exhibited interest in Asian American writing. Major houses published Chinese Americans’ autobiographical novels during and right after the war, when the American public was more sympathetic to China and more aware of Asian Americans than ever before. Hollywood also began to provide more jobs for Asian Americans.

Broadway too changed the way in which it presented Asia on the stage. Starting with *South Pacific* (1949), Broadway began to produce many hit shows which focused on Asian characters who were sympathetic and favorable. These included the Siamese king in *The King and I* (the longest-running show in 1951), the Japanese peasant/interpreter who outsmarts his American boss in *The Teahouse of the August Moon* (the longest-running play of 1953), the Hong Kong bargirl with a heart of gold in *The World of Suzie Wong* (the second longest-running play of 1958), the fresh-off-the-boat picture bride in *Flower Drum Song* (the third longest-running musical in 1958), and the charming Japanese businessman in *A Majority of One* (the second longest-running play in 1959).

Although Broadway did present sympathetic and favorable Asian characters, they were still foreigners in exotic costumes and settings. Furthermore the Asian characters in the 1950s remained unchanged in the intrinsically alien qualities of both their body and mind. They were, in a way, a new version of the Other, with whom America no longer needed to compete, but whom it had to teach and lead to a better — civilized, democratic, and educated — world. Here, the politics of gender and class worked effectively, depicting Asian women, children, and lower-class people as sympathetic

and innocent, needing the affection and protection of the West/America from the supposedly corrupt and tyrannical Asian male/ruling class (*South Pacific*, *The Teahouse of the August Moo*, *The King and I*, *The World of Suzie Wong*). For example, in the musical *The King and I*, the slave image of Siamese women emphasized the contrast between their limitation and Anna's freedom. This contrast between Asian women as victims of patriarchal despotism and the liberated and independent Western woman as a savior reached a climax in the final scene of the women and children begging Anna for help:

My goodness gracious, do not go away! We are in great need of you. We are like one blind. Do not let us fall down in darkness. Continue good and sincere concern for us, and lead us in right road. Do not leave us. We are afraid without you. We are afraid without you.¹²⁾

Thus, the new Asia in the post-war era was not profoundly new. It was still the inferior Other, but it was an Other that should be contained and subjugated under American power rather than simply eliminated as before.

The Oriental fad in 1950s Broadway, although controversial by today's standards for Asian media images, nevertheless brought work and media exposure for talented Asian American actors. In spite of limitations, these early Asian American actors paved the way for the later development of Asian American theater groups, many of which were founded by Asian American actors themselves. Their experiences in the mainstream theater — both technical training and emotional struggle — were the cornerstones of the next generation of Asian American theater.

Even in the efforts to integrate Asian Americans after World War II, the popular Asian images — no matter how sympathetic and likable — were still foreigners who belonged to the *old* world. This dramatic image was transmitted to Asian American actors as well. As Asians, they were perceived as icons of their *old* race rather than as talented American artists who could actively participate in creating new arts, new images, and new identities. Instead they were continuously expected to represent a fossilized Orient. They were thus in a way living museums, representing the Asian race and culture, not entirely unlike the Asian freaks on display in the nineteenth century. Despite the changed social and cultural climate after the World War II, Asian America was not fully allowed to assimilate — to *melt* in America's melting pot, shoulder to shoulder with Euro-Americans.

Consequently Asian American actors in the 1960s began to explore new meanings and processes of cultural integration. They came to realize that they had to pay a high price to be accepted in the mainstream theater — that is, they had to perform an obsolete Oriental on the stage and a docile “model minority” off the stage. Therefore, they started their own theater companies and claimed the right for Asian Americans to maintain and develop a separate cultural identity without conformity to mainstream values. These Asian American theater groups produced plays written by Asian American writers, which enabled Asian American actors to play dignified and inspiring roles. Instead of joining the mainstream, they joined America's pluralistic society, affirming their equal part in the mosaic of America.

In the 1960s and 1970s, with their long standing efforts at assimilation into the

mainstream theater having been rejected, the East West Players (the very first Asian American theater company based in Los Angeles) and then later Asian American theater companies (Pan Asian Repertory Theater in New York City, Asian American Theater Workshop in San Francisco, Northwest Asian American Theater Company in Seattle, and many others) set out to create their own images and voices for the stage, affirming their right to an autonomous ethnic identity in a culturally pluralist society.

The East West Players, in particular, was a pioneer in venturing the new collective identity of Asian American and in re-envisioning American experience from an Asian American perspective. Starting with eight members in 1965, the membership reached more than thirty in the early 1970s. Norman Cohen, the only salaried administrator at the company, said, "I've never seen a group put its blood, sweat, and tears into projects as much as this group."¹³⁾ Through workshops, playwriting contests, and productions, these early members of the company provided a positive stimulus to the rise of Asian American theatrical talent.

Its playwriting contest, which developed short story writers or novelists into playwrights and let them experience the joy of collaboration in theater, was particularly important in the subsequent development of the Asian American theater. Journalist David Oyama pointed out, "Without the East West Players and its playwriting contests and grants...it is hard to imagine the Asian American theater that exists today. Through its production and encouragement of these writers, East West Players made Asian American theater a reality."¹⁴⁾

It is true that East West Players provided an inspiration and a model for the subsequent Asian American theaters in the 1970s. In the 1970s, while the East West Players continued to develop, several other theater groups of Asian Americans sprang up. All the companies that started in the 1960s and 1970s still exist, and they are prospering with numerous new Asian American theaters throughout the nation. Although they are not free from internal conflicts and contradictory voices, they all share one goal: to provide a positive model for young Asian Americans in a world where Asian Americans are rarely seen or heard in the media.

Finally, what does this study show about human identities and the role of performance in constructing them? Asia had been imagined, articulated, and visualized as the Other in the American theater since the nineteenth century. The imagining, articulating, and visualizing of the Other were actually processes of constituting and reconstituting American identity. And theater was a crucial venue to carry on this experiment, because the visual images — the "look" and "seeming"— which determined the line between the Self and the Other, were powerfully embodied in the theater. Seeming was being.

The dominant society (mainstream theater) tried to fix the "being" of the Other by fixing its look to a certain image — that is, a stereotype. As we have seen, however, neither the Other nor the Self could be fixed as a permanent "being" because each was constantly "becoming" for two reasons. First, the stereotype carried contradiction and ambiguity *within* itself. Second, the Other, who was not merely an image but also a living presence (an Asian American), by creating different images, resisted the given state of "being."

For both the oppressive ideology and the new challenge to it, theater became a

warring place over the “seeming,” which, as we have seen, determined “being.” Yet, as long as people kept imagining, creating, and experimenting with the “seeming” of the Self and the Other, both the Self and the Other were in a continual state of “becoming.” Seeming, being, and becoming, therefore, constituted fundamental dialectics of the construction of identity in the theater.

When we look at the dark side of this study, we can conclude that there was no real “becoming” for Asian Americans in mainstream theater that persistently presented them as “being” Oriental. But there are sunnier sides. Actors who managed to enter the Broadway stage showed that they were not only talented actors but were also inspiring and dignified individuals who challenged and corrected the prevailing view of Asians. Asian American actors’ experience of getting professional training in the mainstream theater made it possible for them to start their own theater company, when the time came. Alternative theater groups such as LaMama ETC (New York) and American Conservatory Theater (San Francisco) collaborated and helped start some of the Asian American theaters. The new theater companies provided Asian Americans a place to not only remember and celebrate who they were, but also to experiment with and imagine what it meant to be Asian American. These companies were also invaluable additions to American theater and to the continuing creation and re-creation of American identities.

The sunniest part is that we are all in a constant state of “becoming,” and we have many chances to improve what we are and what we do. For this purpose, theater, with its relatively low cost and its intimate and supportive environment, provides a crucial medium for less empowered people to start re-envisioning and re-shaping the future by imagining and visualizing their new “look” on the stage.

The history of Asians in the American theater shows both the structure of power and resistance to it. In that sense, this study confirms and reinforces the assertion of current poststructuralist, postcolonial, and cultural materialist discourses that “every history of subjection also contains a history of resistance, and that resistance is not just a symptom of subjection but is the true mark of an ineradicable ‘difference’ which always prevents power from closing the door on change.”¹⁵⁾

End Notes

- 1) Freak shows drew tremendous numbers of patrons in the nineteenth century. Barnum’s American Museum, the home of freak shows in mid-century, for example, was “the most extensively patronized of any place in the country” (*New York Sun*, 14 July 1865). The Museum alone drew the total of 37,560,000 admissions from 1841 to 1865 (Garff B. Wilson, *Three Hundred Years of American Drama and Theater*, [Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1982], 112). Tens of millions Americans — many of them children — therefore, obtained much of their idea of Asia and Asian people from museum and circus presentations.
- 2) Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, (New York: Routledge, 1994), 70.
- 3) Edward Said, *Orientalism*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 2.
- 4) *Ibid.*, 3.
- 5) *Ibid.*, 3.
- 6) For the discussion about exoticism’s moral “time-out,” see “Introduction,” in *Exoticism in the Enlightenment*, eds., G.S. Roussear and Roy Porter, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990).
- 7) *New York American*, 8 June 1926.
- 8) *Ibid.*

- 9) Magda F. West, "The Typhoon," *The Green Book Album*, 8 July 1912, 28.
- 10) The idea that the racial stereotype inhabits people's unconsciousness reinforces Louis Althusser's notion of ideological apparatus. Althusser sees ideology as the "imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence," which operates in the level of unconsciousness rather than consciousness. In Althusser's deterministic view of ideology, the individual, although he or she may see himself or herself as autonomous and free, is in fact interpellated within and created by a preexisting structure. See Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster, (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1972).
- 11) Harold R. Isaacs, *Images of Asia: American Views of China and India*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), 18-19.
- 12) Oscar Hammerstein II, *The King and I*, (New York, Williamson Music Inc., 1951), 70. Concerning the contrasting images between the East and West in *The King and I*, theater historian Bruce McConachie argues that, by making the protagonist a woman, the musical projected the West as a nurturing mother who protected the innocent (Asian women and children) from the pre-modern, despotic, and even savage paternal East. He continued to maintain, "The musicals [Rodgers and Hammerstein's Oriental musicals in the 1950s] certainly served many of the same functions as most cultural products of imperialism, allowing Americans to cloak their racism as benevolence and their lust for power as entitlement....But they may have been more specifically influential in 'Americanizing' Asian culture, naturalizing imperialist economic, reducing countries in Southeast Asia to dominoes, urging their rapid modernization, and, when that failed, justifying the use of force to save them from Communist 'others.' These popular musicals helped to convince American citizens to support U.S. policies in Southeast Asia in the 1960s." See Bruce MaConachie, "The 'Oriental' Musical of Rodgers and Hammerstein and the U.S. War in Southeast Asia," *Theater Journal* no. 46 (October 1994), 385-397.
- 13) Irwin Paik, "The East West Players: The First Ten Years Are the Hardest," *Bridge: an Asian American Perspective* no. 6 (Summer 1977), 17.
- 14) David Oyama, "Asian American Theater-On the Road to Xanadu," *Bridge: An Asian American Perspective* no. 6 (Summer 1977), 4.
- 15) Raman Selden, Peter Widdowson, Peter Brooker, eds., *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory*, (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1997), 192.