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Editorial: A Controversial Company: Debating the Casting of the RSC's *The Orphan of Zhao*

Amanda Rogers and Ashley Thorpe

Who has a stake in intercultural practice, and on whose terms is it conceived? Can a particular group or individual claim ownership over performance concerning a locality, a tradition, or a form, and what happens if they do? Any attempt to answer these questions will, out of necessity, become context dependent: we need to know who is performing, for whom, where, and what specific traditions and locales of performance are being engaged with. These variables can be keenly discerned in one of the least explored areas of theatre-studies: casting. Casting forcefully connects to discourses pertaining to race and ethnicity, the national, international and transnational, relationships between self and other, as well as issues of inclusion and exclusion.

In theatre that speaks to a specific geographical region and its traditions of performance, should the company of actors be authentically cast – that is, should they *look like* they are from, or have heritage pertaining to, the geographical location of the performance? Here, authentic casting might be seen to provide opportunities for showcasing the cultures of specific ethnicities, races, or geographies. For ethnic minority groups in Britain, this approach could provide a platform on which to assert a cultural and economic presence. Yet, such casting practice also risks serving up disingenuous identity essentialisms that mark the ethnic 'Other' as homogenously exotic. As Cláudia Tatinge Nascimento has argued, there is danger in:

the myth that, particularly in the case of Asian performers, the actor *knows* all that there is to know about [...their] culture prior to undergoing theatrical training. Such perception is based on romantic assumptions and stereotypes about non-Western performers; in many ways, it is informed by the spectator's expectation that race and cultural knowledge are necessarily and inherently linked, and the uninformed notion that Asian culture is "pure" and "natural" among its artists.¹

The expectation behind authentic casting, that a body is naturally and unavoidably indoctrinated with culture from the geographical domain to which that body is considered to 'belong', essentializes the relationship between racial-ethnic identity, culture and place. The effect of this is to circumscribe theatrical possibilities, but it also has a markedly disempowering, and economic, effect on actors: an actor can only play those roles that seem to pertain to their own race.

What, therefore, of 'in-authentic' or 'colour-blind' casting? Critics have argued that the terminology surrounding colour-blind casting and its non-traditional, multicultural and cross-cultural cousins is exceptionally slippery. Nevertheless, colour-blind casting,

¹ Cláudia Tatinge Nascimento, *Crossing Cultural Borders Through the Actor's Work* (New York & Abingdon: Routledge, 2009), p. 38.

ignores the appearance of an actor, her “color,” and hires the most skilled performer for each part. It is a practice anchored in the belief that talented actors can play any role and, more specifically, can quickly convince spectators to overlook whatever gaps exist between themselves and the characters whom they play.²

As an attempt to promote racial and ethnic diversity in theatre, colour-blind casting therefore negates race. However, in practice, colour-blind casting often encompasses other elements of a broader non-traditional casting project that attempts to ‘dislodge established modes of perceiving and patterns of thinking’, particularly by promoting strategies and tactics that explicitly draw attention to racial identity.³ Indeed, in *Colourblind Shakespeare*, Ayanna Thompson highlights three different understandings of colour-blind practice: the first, where race is not seen to matter; the second, where race is not to seen to matter except for racially specific roles; and a third where a director explicitly deploys race in casting choices to make a socio-political point, so-called ‘colour-conscious’ casting.⁴ Such casting approaches potentially provide an opportunity to refute identity essentialisms.

The idea that an actor of any race might play any role provides an opportunity to engage with the theatricality of performance more fully, yet what is the power dynamic in which this takes place? Might colour-blindness in fact serve to maintain the dominant group’s power in theatrical representation? After all, if any actor can play any role, what need is there to engage with actors from ethnic minority backgrounds? Why deploy a ‘colour-blind’ casting approach that attempts to ameliorate exclusion by protecting racially specific roles through casting authentically. As this Special Issue of *Contemporary Theatre Review* explores, the operation of two seemingly antithetical systems, of colour-blind and authentic casting, has the capacity to lead to misunderstanding, controversy, and charges of racism.

The Orphan of Zhao’s Production Context

The storm surrounding the Royal Shakespeare Company’s (hereafter RSC) 2012-13 production of *The Orphan of Zhao* brought to the fore issues of racial-ethnic theatrical representation in casting. *The Orphan of Zhao* is a classic ‘revenge tragedy’ of Chinese theatre and although its narrative has constantly mutated, it is most often attributed to the thirteenth century dramatist Ji Junxiang. The RSC staged the production in repertory with new adaptations of Brecht’s *Life of Galileo* by Mark Ravenhill and Pushkin’s *Boris Godunov* by Adrian Mitchell. These three pieces were staged together as part of the ‘A World Elsewhere’ season, which explored theatres and events occurring during Shakespeare’s time in different corners of the globe. The narrative of *The Orphan of Zhao* begins with Zhao Dun, a courtier and minister,

² Harvey Young, *Theatre & Race* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 56.

³ Angelo Pao, *No Safe Spaces: Re-casting Race, Ethnicity and Nationality in American Theater* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010), p. 2

⁴ Ayanna Thompson, ‘Practising a Theory/Theorizing a Practice: An Introduction to Shakespearean Colorblind Casting’ in *Colorblind Shakespeare: New Perspectives on Race and Performance* ed. by Ayanna Thompson (London: Routledge, 2006), pp. 1-24 (pp.6-7).

insulting the Emperor. His actions lead the Emperor's right-hand man, Tu'an Gu, to order that Zhao and his whole clan are killed, including Zhao's newborn son. However, the baby is smuggled from the palace by a country doctor, Cheng Ying, who sacrifices his own son in order to save the titular orphan's life. The child grows up in the palace as Cheng Bo with Tu'an Gu as his adopted father. When he comes of age, he discovers his true identity and takes revenge for his family's slaughter.

The RSC production in the Swan Theatre did not use a direct translation of *The Orphan of Zhao* text, but a new adaptation by James Fenton. This was a significant choice, perhaps signalling that the performance of the text was not attempting to be an 'authentic' rendering of this play according to the aesthetics of Chinese performance, but was a creative response to various aspects of Chinese culture. The performance was situated as an intercultural adaptation: it did not attempt to imitate Chinese opera, but offered a response to its theatricality, which was explored through the symbolic use of space, sound, lighting and props. In order to demonstrate a thoughtful approach that went beyond a superficial engagement with cultural difference, the Artistic Director of the RSC, and the director of *The Orphan of Zhao*, Gregory Doran, detailed his week-long research trip to China on the RSC blog (entitled 'In Search of the Orphan').⁵ Costume drawings based upon an historical understanding of Chinese clothing styles were also posted online.⁶ A research symposium with leading US-based Chinese theatre scholars was held on 12 March 2012 at the University of Michigan's Confucius Institute to provide an academic context for the research undertaken by the production team, and the cast received a one-day workshop in Chinese opera movement back in the UK.⁷

The resulting performance was non-realistic in style, drawing upon puppetry, music and song to tell the story in a highly theatrical, yet visually restrained way. The scenery was not specific to each scene, but remained the same throughout. It broadly referenced Chinese architectural styles, most noticeably a 'moon gate' (*yue men*) – a circular opening often found in classical Chinese gardens – which was constructed by a lattice wooden frame and placed upstage. However, the use of props drew upon Western conventions to imply meaning between colour and symbolism (for instance, red petals falling over a dead character to imply a bloody death, rather than white, the colour of death in Chinese culture).

If the piece might be conceived of as an intercultural response to Chinese theatre, the casting seemed to reinforce this. The cast comprised 'three Asian actors, three mixed race actors, ten Caucasian actors and one Arab actor.'⁸ Yet the play was marketed with a picture of a scruffy 'Chinese' boy alongside a Mandarin language campaign aimed at Chinese tourists and audiences. Why market an intercultural work with a picture of a *Chinese* boy who was not even in the production?

⁵ Gregory Doran, 'In Search of the Orphan' *The RSC online*, 24 July-20 August 2012, <<http://www.rsc.org.uk/explore/blogs/in-search-of-the-orphan/>> [accessed 29 May 2013]. Link has now been removed.

⁶ See <<http://www.rsc.org.uk/explore/other-writers/the-orphan-of-zhao-costume-designs.aspx>>

⁷ Youssef Kerkour, 'Chinese Opera', *The RSC online*, 19 September 2012, <<http://www.rsc.org.uk/explore/blogs/whispers-from-the-wings/chinese-opera/>> [accessed 27 June 2014].

⁸ *The Orphan of Zhao* company, letter to Malcolm Sinclair (President of British Equity), 26 October 2012. Provided to the authors by the RSC.

The explicit invocation of China in the promotional materials, alongside the fact that this was the first time that the RSC had staged a Chinese play, suggested that there might be opportunities for the British East Asian (hereafter BEA) acting community to be represented on stage through the practice of authentic casting. Undoubtedly, the decision to deploy 'Chinese' cultural references in the marketing seemed to 'root' the production to its source. As Nascimento has also suggested, the:

idea of "rooting culture" assumes and prescribes a correlation between practice and region, and consequently attributes a region's cultural practice exclusively to its native people – in spite of the fact that more often than not contemporary nations are people by various ethnic groups who in turn exchange and engage in multiple cultural practices.⁹

However, the RSC's decision to connect the performance's cultural location to China through the marketing appeared to contradict their decisions about casting. Indeed, the casting controversy arose when BEA practitioners realised that only three out of seventeen roles were cast using actors from East Asian backgrounds, with the company dominated by white actors playing Chinese characters. The three actors were all of different ethnicities and indeed, nationalities, including Scottish-Chinese, British-South East Asian and British-Eurasian of Japanese descent. The concerns over the number of BEA actors involved rapidly turned into a discussion about the *types* of roles that the three were performing. Siu Hun Li played a variety of small onstage parts but spoke only one line, Chris Lew Kum Hoi played The Ghost of the Son, and together, they also operated puppets such as the Demon Mastiff dog. Susan Momoko-Hingley played the Maid, a character who sacrifices her life in order to conceal the orphan's location. However, given colonial stereotypes of Chinese as subhuman 'dogs' and Japanese women as suicidal butterflies, the three parts appeared distinctly problematic, as encapsulated by the writer and performer Anna Chen, who described the performances by BEA actors as representing 'dogs and maids.'¹⁰ This tagline brought together a range of ethnic-specific associations that were harnessed to highlight the shared problems of stereotyping, invisibility and marginalisation faced by the wider racial-ethnic community. However, this descriptor was contested by the RSC and by actors in *The Orphan of Zhao* who viewed their parts in relation to the narrative conventions and frameworks of Chinese theatrical storytelling.

Criticism of the production's casting became increasingly public as the controversy wore on. The argument between British East Asian Artists (BEAA) and the RSC – documented in this journal – generated international comment in newspapers and on blogs, and the Asian American playwright David Henry Hwang issued a statement criticising the RSC. As our interview with the RSC in this volume attests, the company was sensitive to the international criticism it received. Indeed, for both parties embroiled in the row, there was much at stake in terms of

⁹ Nascimento, *Crossing Cultural Borders*, p. 49.

¹⁰ Anna Chen, 'Memo to the RSC: East Asians can be more than just dogs and maids', *The Guardian Online*, 22 October 2012, <<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/oct/22/royal-shakespeare-company-east-asians>> [accessed 23 October 2012].

reputation and cultural legitimacy. Although the production was a critical success, following the completion of its run there was an institutional effort by Britain's theatrical establishment, including, but not limited to, the RSC, to engage with BEA frustrations.¹¹

Interculturalism, Identity Politics and *The Orphan of Zhao*

Reputational damage resulting from the staging of a classic 'Chinese' work takes on even greater significance given the global rise of China and a consequent desire to use performance to engage with different cultures from the 'East' that the 'West' seeks to understand. Although the World Shakespeare Festival (produced in association with the RSC) hosted performances of *Richard III* in Mandarin by the National Theatre of China, and *Titus Andronicus* in Cantonese by the Tan Shu-Wing Theatre Studio in 2012, BEA actors did not contribute to this season and were overlooked in favour of the Chinese mainland and its territories. The RSC contributed to this transnationalization of Chinese cultural practices not only by staging *The Orphan of Zhao*, but by marketing it as part of their 'A World Elsewhere' Season. Yet, in its decision to cast BEA actors only in supporting roles, the RSC might, once again, be charged with overlooking BEA artists. The narrative of Otherness for BEAs that connected both of these seasons speaks to much older and wider lines of intercultural theatrical inquiry and the political tenor of such encounters, particularly regarding Orientalism. More than twenty years since Rustom Bharucha (1993) offered his 'view from India' on the intercultural politics of Peter Brook's *Mahabharata*, accusations of cultural imperialism were also leveled at the RSC. The performance evoked Bharucha's view that:

Unavoidably, the production raises the question of ethics, not just the ethics of representation, which concerns the decontextualisation of an epic from its history and culture, but the ethics of interacting with people [...] in the process of creating the work itself. [...] It is at the level of interactions that the human dimensions of interculturalism are, at once, most potent and problematic.¹²

Bharucha's assertion that interculturalism is most vexed at the level of human interaction is insightful for the RSC case, but also raises thorny issues. Undoubtedly, *The Orphan of Zhao* highlighted the contradictory situation that BEA actors remain in, one where they attempt to establish visibility through a relatively small selection of roles which are predominantly based upon supposedly 'authentic' casting. The lack of BEA involvement in the production inferred de-territorialization and exposed the view that the production was divorced from the East Asian community that might be seen to 'own' it. If BEAs *do* feel that they have cultural ownership of the

¹¹ The RSC sent five members of staff to the *Opening the Door: East Asians in British Theatre*, Open Space event held by Devoted and Disgruntled at The Young Vic on 13 February 2013 and organised in partnership with Arts Council England, SOLT/TMA, CDG, Equity, ITC and the Young Vic. This event aimed to address issues of under-representation of British East Asians in mainstream theatre.

¹² Rustom Bharucha, *Theatre and the World: Performance and the Politics of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 84.

play, then the fact that the production raised a level of protest unparalleled among BEA practitioners is unsurprising.

Yet claims of cultural ownership and decontextualization were uneven, and to think in these terms is to imply a reductive view that essentializes race and ethnicity. Indeed, casting practice perpetuates such problems as different Asian ethnicities are often substituted under the essentialist presumption that all Asians 'look alike' whilst comparing an actor's visual appearance to a single, often quite prescriptive phenotypical imagination of 'Chinese' identity. Broader East Asian identity tropes may be conveniently collapsed into this imagination and the terms 'East Asian' or 'British East Asian' can also be said to be guilty of collectivising experiences across regional boundaries, assuming internal coherence between different ethnic, communal, social and historical positions. However, actors claim 'British East Asian' as a strength-in-numbers 'associational' identity that allows them to collectively struggle against a perceived – and palpably felt – sense of discrimination.¹³

By arguing for greater participation in *The Orphan of Zhao*, BEA actors opened themselves up to charges of reinforcing the very identity essentialisms, and authentic casting according to race, that they were seeking to deconstruct. Yet many BEA actors want to be colour-blind cast in meaty roles to which they *cannot* lay claim via their racial-ethnic heritage. To increase their visibility in British culture, BEA actors therefore find themselves at the centre of a paradox, demanding roles that are racially determined as part of a broader project of profile raising whilst, at the same time, arguing that race should be irrelevant in casting. Casting is the most visible terrain on which this paradox operates, and, as this volume demonstrates, actors of East Asian descent feel excluded from, and are invisible at, many mainstream theatrical institutions.

What emerges from the above is that the production of *The Orphan of Zhao* became mired in questions of cultural power: who owns what? How does the fact that the play was produced by one of Britain's most prestigious institutions, the RSC, influence the objections that were made? Is it the lack of recognition by British theatre institutions that really lies behind the furore? Jami Rogers has recently argued that there remains a glass ceiling for actors from ethnic minority backgrounds.¹⁴ Whilst her argument is carefully made, she only examines the representation of black and Asian ethnicities in Shakespeare, excluding discussions of the lack of visibility for other minorities, including East Asians. BEA actors have so far, with one exception, only been offered supporting parts in performances of Shakespeare.¹⁵ Have BEA actors even reached the stage of having a 'glass ceiling'? Certainly, if BEA actors are invisible on Britain's stages, this is matched only by their invisibility in British academic discourse. Indeed, this Editorial introduces the first ever Special Issue of any journal to engage with the cultural politics of BEAs.

¹³ Stuart Hall, 'The Multicultural Question' in *Un/settled Multiculturalisms: Diasporas, Entanglements, 'Transruptions'*, ed. by Barnor Hesse (London: Zed Books, 2000), pp. 209–241 (p. 220).

¹⁴ Rogers, 'The Shakespearean Glass Ceiling' p. 428.

¹⁵ David Lee Jones played the lead in *Richard III* with The Festival Players, which toured the UK in the summer of 2012. Other British East Asian actors in Shakespeare include Benedict Wong as Laertes in *Hamlet* (Young Vic, 2011) and Daniel York as Mercutio in *Romeo and Juliet* (Basingstoke Haymarket, 1994) and as Edgar in *King Lear* (Yellow Earth Theatre-Shanghai Dramatic Arts Centre, 2006).

Perspectives on the Issue

Here, we open up the terrain of debate to consider casting practices in British theatre, particularly in non-Shakespearean productions. How do casting choices express ideological values? Who casts and for whom? If there has been a reticence to engage with these questions, perhaps it is because they raise the spectre of difficult answers. Is British theatre as inclusive as it likes to think it is? Does the casting of commercial theatre, and shows produced by national theatre institutions, really reflect diversity? Or is diversity confined to the margins, with institutions making uneven progress in reflecting racial and ethnic difference in twenty-first century Britain?

To explore the tensions and contradictions surrounding the casting of *The Orphan of Zhao* on these various fronts, this Special Issue brings together material from all sides of the debate, from the RSC and BEA actors, from practitioners and academics, to offer a series of documents on what could become a decisive, and positive, moment in the history of BEA performance in Britain. In the opening article, Ashley Thorpe explores how the relationship between actor and role in different performance contexts becomes significant to considering how integrated casting operates according to socio-economic norms of whiteness. In the second article, Amanda Rogers contrasts the specific representation of East Asian ethnicities by non-East Asian actors (i.e. yellowface) in *The Orphan of Zhao* with a production of Bryony Lavery's *More Light* (2009), concluding that colour-blind casting may also re-enforce the centrality of whiteness. This view is expanded by Angela Pao, who argues that the inability of the RSC to cast BEA actors in non-China-related texts demonstrates the shortcomings of colour-blind casting, and its ability to exemplify multiculturalism. Sita Thomas contextualises *The Orphan of Zhao* in the light of other colour-blind productions staged at the RSC, wondering whether theatrical institutions simply meet quota obligations in casting as a means to maintain public funding.

The issue is also comprised of two interviews with the practitioners at the heart of the controversy. The first interview is with Hannah Miller, Head of Casting, and Kevin Fitzmaurice, Producer, both of whom worked on *The Orphan of Zhao* for the RSC. In the interview, Miller and Fitzmaurice discuss the RSC's general approach to casting, before discussing the specifics of *The Orphan of Zhao* controversy. The second interview is with the actor, director and writer Daniel York, and the writer, journalist and broadcaster Anna Chen. Both played a central part in the campaign against the RSC's casting decisions and the interview offers an analysis of the impact of casting from the perspective of BEA practitioners, outlining their objections to the casting of *The Orphan of Zhao*.

In the final article in the issue, Broderick Chow theorises his own position as an actor of East Asian descent by considering how casting choices, even when they may be critiqued as stereotypical and reductive, may still facilitate a visibility that brings with it phenomenological sensations of empowerment. Chow invites us to begin to consider a strategy to resolve the paradox that lies at the heart of *The Orphan of Zhao* controversy – to utilise prescriptive and stereotypical roles to realise

a cultural visibility that articulates a more nuanced and complex intra/intercultural position.