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STUDENTS

How Concerns Over Race and Casting Brought Down a Campus Play

By Kate Stoltzfus | NOVEMBER 16, 2015

One week before opening night, the students and crew in Clarion University of Pennsylvania's production of *Jesus in India* received news no cast wants to hear: The show would not go on.

Days prior, Lloyd Suh, the play's author, had objected to the director's casting of white and mixed-race students in the roles of three Indian characters. When he requested that those actors be replaced by students of Asian descent, the university said it did not have the option to recast. So Mr. Suh, who is Korean-American, requested by email that the students not perform his play.

Marilouise (Mel) Michel, a professor of theater who was the play's director, said she broke the news to her cast on Tuesday to "stunned silence, immediate tears, and anger." Students had worked since October, Ms. Michel said, studying the culture, religions, and races of the play's Biblical time. For one of the stars, the project was to be a senior capstone.

"The point of acting is to be something you're not," said Victoria A. Heckert, a sophomore who played a friend of Jesus in the production. "When you're told that you *do* have to be something, it doesn't make sense."

Issues of race and representation are by no means new to the theater. (The comedian and actor Aziz Ansari, for example, recently lamented portrayals of Indian characters by white actors in film.) But in the current campus climate, where issues of race and identity are especially fraught, so are casting decisions.

And at institutions like Clarion, the wishes of playwrights — and the incentive for diverse representation — can come into conflict with the makeup of the student body.

Clarion, Pa., is in "a very rural part of Pennsylvania," said Ms. Heckert, and the university reflects the demographics of its hometown. More than 85 percent of Clarion's nearly 5,000 undergraduates are white, according to university data, and Asian and Pacific Islander students make up just 1.1 percent of the student body. That makes Asian-American actors hard to come by.

Ms. Michel said her job "is to offer opportunities to the student-body population" Clarion actually has. But Mr. Suh's protest presented a hard question: By trying to stage *Jesus in India*, was the theater department taking steps to promote diversity or setting the cause back?

‘An Environment of Hostility’

If she considers race a central issue of a play, Ms. Michel said, she works to make sure the casting is appropriate. So students in her class study many plays with "the acknowledgment that we can't produce much of that work," the professor said. But she felt Mr. Suh's coming-of-age play — which follows Jesus as an 18-year-old rebel on a quest to find himself in India, alongside hippie stoners and Buddhists — was more "universal." So the theater "didn't take anyone's color into consideration when casting this show," she said.

Mr. Suh disagreed with that decision. "Your citing of 'color-blind casting' as an excuse for selecting white actors to portray nonwhite characters is a gross misunderstanding of the practice, and denies the savage inequities that exist in the field at large for nonwhite performers, both in professional and educational settings," he wrote in an email to Ms. Michel through his agent last Monday. "I contend that by producing this play in this way, you are contributing to an environment of hostility towards people of color, and therefore perpetuating the lack of diversity at Clarion now and in the future."

Ms. Michel, who shared the email with the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, said that in response to the author's concerns, the theater department had offered to explain before each production why no Indian actors had been cast and to provide space in the program for a statement by Mr. Suh. He declined, she said.

Mr. Suh's agent, Beth Bickers, did not respond to a request for comment from the playwright.

Miscommunication may have played a part in the flap. Ms. Michel said the department had reached Mr. Suh through Ms. Bickers last spring — a standard practice when it plans to perform the work of a living playwright — but she said the playwright was too busy and did not respond to requests for more involvement. Mr. Suh said in a statement on Facebook that while he was aware the university was using the play, he was "not aware of any production" nor of any negotiations between the department and his agent.

Whatever the case, the situation has turned acrimonious. Several days after the production was canceled, Karen M. Whitney, Clarion's president, said in a statement that the university has "no further desire to engage with Mr. Suh, the playwright, as he made his position on race to our theater students crystal clear."

Ms. Whitney said she would "prefer to invest my energy into explaining to the student actors, stage crew, and production-team members why the hundreds of hours they committed to bringing *Jesus in India* to our stage and community has been denied since they are the wrong skin color."

Had the university and the playwright spoken earlier, Ms. Michel believes, they "could have come to a consensus, and I could have tried to produce a play without hurting so many people."

‘Outside the World of the Play’

Clarion isn't the only university to discover that casting choices can have broader implications. At Kent State University's African Community Theater, the playwright-in-residence and director, Michael L. Oatman, double-cast the role of Martin Luther King Jr. in a production this fall of *The Mountaintop*, a play that depicts the final night of the civil-rights leader's life, with one black actor and one white actor. Mr. Oatman said in an interview that he wanted to explore whether actors "can portray an iconic American across racial lines."

"People should then be allowed to react to it," he said.

But after the production had closed, Katori Hall, the play's author, expressed her outrage at the idea and adjusted the play's license to require that actors in the lead role be black. (There was no specific casting stipulation in the rights for *Jesus in India*.)

There are arguments to be made on both sides, said David Henry Hwang, an associate professor of theater at Columbia University's School of the Arts, but the playwright is the ultimate authority on how his or her work can be produced, even as the students at Clarion "were victims in the situation."

Mr. Hwang, who tackled issues of racial representation in his play *Yellow Face*, said the situation at Clarion is "messy" but raises "really important questions about transitional moments in our current society."

It's a valuable goal for theater departments to "reflect the diversity of the local community or, ideally, the world," said Harvey Young, chair of the theater department at Northwestern University. "That is the magic of the university — to introduce people to a variety of perspectives and points of view."

But at Northwestern, Mr. Young said, the department uses a variety of strategies to avoid what could be racially problematic casting. The department has hired outside actors to play some roles and serve as mentors to students, reached out to minority groups to let them know about acting opportunities, and staged readings at which only voices are represented.

"The goal is to devise strategies that allow you to engage the work while being aware of whatever limits exist," Mr. Young said.

Many roles can be embodied by actors "who vary in terms of complexion or gender identity," Mr. Young said. But some parts call for particularity.

"What does it mean," he asked, "for a certain person to have a particular role that will trigger associations that are outside the world of the play?"

The fight over *Jesus in India* has prompted Clarion's theater department to ask some tough questions for the future, Ms. Michel said. The department plans to produce a play with Irish characters in the spring. Now Ms. Michel wonders about the accents.

"We are limited in the number of stories we can tell because of our racial makeup," she said. "I want to teach my students how to tell the stories of people they are not, to try to understand them."