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Orientalism in Western Musical Theatre

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ABSTRACT

From characters like *The Mikado*'s Princess Yum Yum to *South Pacific*'s Liat to *The King and I*'s King of Siam, Asian people in musicals have been relegated to stereotyped positions and caricatures of white society. When looking at the overarching canon of Asian stories in western musical theatre, it has only been within the last decade that Asian characters have begun to be freed from biased and racist depictions. This paper explores the development of Asians in western musicals. From operettas, to golden age musical theatre, to Sondheim, and finally to contemporary Broadway, the role of the Asian is discussed to find how a truly respectful and authentic story can be told about Asian people and places. (Spoiler alert: it's by having Asian people write, create, direct, and act in our own stories). From a contemporary perspective, we are blessed with having modern day examples that can be utilized as examples of how the canon should continue to grow - allowing more nuanced, fully-fledged Asian characters. Growth can always still be made in allowing Asian characters to live truthfully, and commercially successfully, on stage. However, only by mining the past for information, can we find the progress that still needs to be made.

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Introduction

“Asians are the most populated race in the world, there’s so many opportunities for different stories and yet, Asian stories onstage are just one or two things: stories of war and historical events and being saved by white men” (Helen Park, LA Times).

KPOP the musical opened at the Circle in the Square Theatre on Broadway on November 20th, 2022 and promptly closed on December 11th, 2022. With an official run of 17 performances, *KPOP* had the shortest Broadway run of any musical in the 2022 season. As a Korean-American theatre artist, *KPOP* smashed a boundary that I truly believed I would never see fall. Watching a half-Korean half-white character sing a song (“Halfway” by Helen Park and Max Vernon) about his struggles growing up mixed race in America - never feeling Asian enough or white enough to fit in in either spaces. Feeling halfway between two worlds is an experience I, personally, have struggled with through every stage of my academic life. Growing up in Davis, California, I was surrounded by ‘full-blooded’ Korean and East Asian peers. Many people in my town were either immigrants or children of immigrants; while my dad immigrated from South Korea when he was 28, he had the ‘my children will be American’ mentality. And we were Americanized, especially through language. While I looked Korean, I was always reminded by my peers that I was a banana: yellow on the outside, white on the inside. When I got to Penn State, that mentality switched. At a predominantly white institution, in a predominantly white major, I was quickly made painfully aware of my identity as an Asian man. There were regular occurrences where I was the only Asian person or, even, the only person of color at meetings, social events, classes, and parties. By studying musical theater in this

environment, I became fascinated by how the western musical theatre canon has treated East Asian characters and stories. By dissecting inexcusably racist operettas like *The Mikado* by Gilbert and Sullivan to thrilling East Asian written, created, and performed contemporary works like *KPOP*, we see that the canon has come a massive way in providing honest and respectful depictions of East Asian people.

Definitions of Orientalism

Orientalism began with the fascination surrounding the ‘exotic’ cultures of non-western countries in Asia and Northern Africa. As a subject of study, Orientalism now encapsulates many ideas. For this paper, I am using the following definitions:

1. “[the] scholarship, learning, or study in Asian subjects or languages [...] now often used with negative connotations of a colonialist bias underlying and reinforced by such scholarship” (merriam-webster.com)
2. “The way the Occident imagines Asia, especially the Middle East, in a mysterious but ultimately inferior to the West. This attitude is rooted in the colonialist era and continues to shape the West’s socio-cultural and economic policies toward the non-Western continents” (Cicek)

Edward Said was a cultural critic and professor of literature at Columbia University. He wrote the controversial, yet transformative, book *Orientalism* which analyzes how the Western world views and interacts with the countries historically described as ‘oriental’. In his book he uses the definition: “Orientalism is a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between ‘the Orient’ and (most of the time) ‘the Occident’”

(Said 10). Said goes further to discuss how the sheer study of Orientalism is in its own way a means of domination, “Orientalism can be discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating restructuring, and having authority over the Orient” (Said 11). Said’s timeline, “from the beginning of the nineteenth century until the end of World War II France and Britain dominated the Orient and Orientalism; since World War II America has dominated the Orient” mirrors the shift of music theatre, like European created operettas, to American musicals. Gilbert and Sullivan, both English, dominated the world of operettas, releasing major hits like *The Mikado*. However, post World War II, musicals truly flourished with the works of Americans Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II. Both sets of writers utilized their ideas of ‘oriental’ cultures to create some of their most popular shows.

Stereotypes and Their Implications

Within Edward Said’s novel, he draws heavily on *Asia and Western Dominance* (1953) by K. M. Pannikar, an Indian parliamentarian and ambassador. Pannikar, having spent a lifetime straddling England and India, focused *Asia and Western Dominance* on how western people interact with their Asian counterparts. Said utilized Pannikar’s thoughts to say, “There is very little consent to be found, for example, in the fact that Flaubert’s encounter with an Egyptian courtesan produced a widely influential [sic] model of the Oriental woman; she never spoke of herself, she never represented her emotions, presence, or history. He spoke for and represented her. He was foreign, comparatively wealthy, male, and these were historical facts of domination

that allowed him not only to possess Kuchuk Hanem physically but to speak for her and tell his readers in what way she was ‘typically Oriental’” (Said 14). Panikkar’s depiction of an ‘oriental woman’ is a heavy influence on the East Asian women depicted in western musical theatre. Characters including Liat (*South Pacific*) and Tuptim (*The King and I*) are all defined by their relationship to the men in their lives and for their sexual purity that is gifted or sold to the dominant men in their plots. The idea of the ‘Asian lotus’ is rampant in the western view of East Asian women. From the domineering western viewpoint, Asian women are expected, and are written, to follow the lotus blossom trope - “portray[ing] Asian women onscreen as objects of desire, but ones which are disposable. They’re lusted after only as long as they continue to project traits like obedience, subservience, and a baby-like lack of agency or individuality” (thetake.com).

By writing East Asian women characters that subscribe to this stereotype, white writers are playing into dangerous stereotypes. As Morgan Dewey writes for the National Network to End Domestic Violence, “the bodies of Asian women are exoticized and hypersexualized, and the perceived submissiveness of some Asian cultures is glamourized and erotized. This fetishization reduces Asian women to an inaccurate and detrimental stereotype, and creates staggering rates of violence” (Dewey). The direct impact of fetishization leads to an estimated 41-61% of Asian women experiencing sexual violence in their lifetime (Raj and Yoshihama). Theatre is meant to hold up a mirror to the audience. Theatregoers understand that what they see on stage is meant to reveal something about humanity – how does that understanding work when what’s on stage is directly damaging to some audience members? By forcing Asian people to see themselves as weak and submissive they are attacking the autonomy of Asian women and also telling other

audience members that it is okay to perceive Asian women through a stereotypical lens – therefore planting the seeds that lead to direct harm against Asian communities.

Where Were We?

The Mikado

Gilbert and Sullivan's *The Mikado*'s (1885) racism extends from the show's inception through to the show's content. In Desdemona Chiang's article for Howlround, she discusses the 'Japanese Native Village', a zoo created by Dutch entrepreneur Tannaker Buhicrosan to capitalize off London's fetishizing interest in East Asian cultures. In order to research for his upcoming project, Gilbert attended this racist 'zoo' and based his depiction of Japanese culture off this exhibition (Chiang). *The Mikado*'s plot and characters echo this cursory research by being racially problematic. The story revolves around Nanki-Poo, a prince in hiding, as he attempts to marry Princess Yum-Yum. When Nanki-Poo's suit is accepted, Ko-Ko, Yum-Yum's betrothed, comes back to the fictional land of Titipu to take Yum-Yum back. Ko-Ko, Yum-Yum, and Nanki-Poo create an elaborate scheme to comply with the Mikado's decree that an execution must take place. When the Mikado discovers it is his son Nanki-Poo who was 'killed', he becomes enraged, and Nanki-Poo creates a new plot for Ko-Ko to marry Nanki-Poo's betrothed and for Nanki-Poo and Yum-Yum to rise from the dead. While the Mikado is angry no one was executed, Ko-Ko reminds the Mikado that everything he says is as good as done because his word is law (Gilbert and Sullivan). Naming characters with insulting faux-Japanese names like

‘Princess Yum-Yum’ and ‘Nanki-Poo’, and naming the setting an equally ignorant ‘Titipu’, dehumanizes the Japanese people this operetta attempts to portray. *The Mikado* is a direct reflection of the views of two white men living in an imperialist society. Gilbert and Sullivan use Japanese culture to promote their own agenda to lampoon British society. For Gale.com, librarian Masaki Morisawa discusses the lyric of *The Mikado*: “Stripped of the elaborate costumes and visuals, the words alone sound like Gilbert is merely using Japan as a remote, exotic setting to camouflage his biting satire on Victorian England” (gale.com). By using Japan as a vessel for Gilbert and Sullivan’s own self-serving satire, they create an inherently racist dramatic work. Even if *The Mikado* did not use damaging stereotypes, white creators exploiting a non-white culture for their own benefit perpetuates racism due to white supremacy’s global control. *The Mikado* uses non-white characters and a non-white cultural setting in order to make a statement about a white-centric story. As Chiang says in her article, “It matters who has the power to make the story—notice I said ‘make,’ not ‘tell.’ It matters whose story is being made” (Chiang). When white people exploit other cultures for their own gain, it creates a devastating statement for Asian performers and audience goers to hear; Asian people are only useful to advance white narratives and Asian-centric stories are not valued.

In order to protect the legacy of *The Mikado*, productions attempt to ‘fix’ the inherent problems by hiring an all-Asian cast and creative team. These productions do nothing but put a veneer of respectability on a show that directly harms people of Asian descent. As Chiang mentions in her article, *The Mikado* premiered in the United States during 1885 when there was a plethora of anti-Chinese and further anti-Asian sentiment and propaganda being dispersed. Cartoons of Chinese caricatures being hung, whipped, and made to look like pigs were published regularly. *The Mikado* at the same time ran for 250 performances in New York City and

launched 5 national tours. Gilbert and Sullivan's work allowed Americans to fetishize, profit-off of, and take advantage of Asian aesthetics while abusing the people who created that culture. Because Asian-American people have had agency ripped away through governmental actions like the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and the internment of Japanese-Americans, profiting off of exotifying works of theatre like *The Mikado* is problematic and racist.

South Pacific: Rodgers and Hammerstein Part 1

In 1949, Rodgers and Hammerstein tackled their first of three musicals about East Asian characters/locales. *South Pacific* details the experience of Nellie Forbush, a white American nurse, and her love interest Emille de Becque, a French plantation owner with mixed-race children. In the B-plot, the American Lieutenant Cable wrestles with his attraction to Liat, a Tonkinese girl offered up by her mother Bloody Mary as a wife for the young, white lieutenant.

The original production was lauded as a staunchly anti-racist work that provided a mirror to American Broadway audiences. "You've Got to be Carefully Taught" with the lyrics,

"You've got to be taught to be afraid

Of people whose eyes are oddly made,

And people whose skin is a different shade" (Hammerstein),

is an overt example of how *South Pacific* is intended to be an anti-racist parable. In 1949, President Truman had just integrated the military a year prior, but school desegregation would still flourish for another five years until *Brown v. Board of Education* was decided in 1954. This staunch anti-racist call to the American people made audiences directly confront the idea that

their biases, like Lieutenant Cable's anti-Asian biases in the musical, had to be instilled in them from a young age,

“You’ve got to be taught before it’s too late,

Before you are six or seven or eight” (Hammerstein).

However, in the midst of advocating against hate, Hammerstein references and bolsters the othering of East-Asian people by writing that our eyes are “oddly shaped” instead of ‘almond’ or any other non-judgemental adjective.

In the worldview of 1949, even just discussing the internalized racism of white Americans in an expensive commercial venture like a Broadway musical was a massively risky and brave move by Rodgers, Hammerstein, and their investors. As America reckoned with the Japanese internment during World War II, a critically and socially acclaimed musical fighting against Asian hate was a strong step in favor of Asian celebration on the Great White Way; if only they actually cast AAPI (Asian American Pacific Islander) actors in the AAPI roles, it could have meant a truly seismic shift.

I want to preface this section dealing with casting by stating I do not believe (especially during the time period discussed) that this is an issue created by any actor of color. Auditioning/accepting roles for which there is a racial discrepancy is a nuanced conversation and I believe most of the onus is on the producers/creatives who are responsible for releasing offers. While the white characters were cast with white actors, most of the Tonkinese characters were not cast in a racially consistent manner. Bloody Mary was originated by Juanita Hall, winning the Tony for Best Supporting Actress for the role and becoming the first Black Tony Award winner. Hall went on to have a massively successful theatre and concert career and originated another Rodgers and Hammerstein Asian role: Madam Liang in *Flower Drum Song*. While Hall

broke many boundaries, she does not have any AAPI heritage (Bradley-Holliday). Liat, as an example of the highly damaging lotus flower stereotype, was played originally by the former Louise in *Carousel* Betta St. John, another non-AAPI actor. While these two integral characters were not cast with proper representation, the three children who originated Ngana and Jerome, Emile's mixed race children, were played by Barbara Luna, a mixed-race Filipino actress, and Michael and Noel de Leon (both sharing the role of Jerome) whose race is not known however their name and appearance indicate AAPI ancestry (Thomas).

Casting these characters authentically is made even more important as the major plot conflicts their characters are connected to are based solely around their identity. "The Tonkinese women and the mixed-race children act more as catalysts on the American characters, Joe Cable and Nellie Forbush, as opposed to being developed characters in their own right" (Ponti 111). Nellie cannot commit to Emile until she reckons with the existence of his mixed-race children; Ngana and Jerome are in most every aspect dutiful, kind, and welcoming children so the only 'issue' (as Nellie initially views it) is that they are half Tonkinese. The only conflict they create is their existence as Asian people. Similarly, Liat is everything Lieutenant Cable could want - except white. She plays the role of the submissive, caring lover to show Lieutenant Cable she would be the 'perfect' (in a highly toxically masculine/patriarchal way) wife. The only conflict created by Liat is due to her race. Casting a white woman for the role actively cancels her usefulness as a plot device within the musical. Bloody Mary's main goal within the piece is to provide her daughter with a better life by sending her to America as a military bride. Her desperation for a better life for her child is a common theme for many East Asian parent characters and is paralleled within *Miss Saigon* - the most popular contemporary Asian-centered musical.

An Aside on Casting: Why does casting actors authentically to the racial/gender/sexual orientation of the character matter?

We are luckily living through an era when most projects are being cast with sensitivity to the characters' lived experiences. However, why does this matter? Aren't we as actors supposed to be able to put ourselves into the shoes of any character? In my personal opinion, that is an awesome idea in theory. As actors we're asked to play monsters, animals, people much older than us or much younger than us, so why do those same principles not apply to issues of race/gender and sexual orientation? Unfortunately, there is a historical bias that allows cisgender, straight, white actors to play many parts regardless of their own race while non-white, trans and gender nonconforming, and queer actors have often been relegated to the sides. Even in 2023, we see straight actors like Cate Blanchett lauded for her performance as a queer woman in *Tar* and Brendan Fraser winning the Oscar for Best Actor for his role as a gay man in *The Whale*, while Stephanie Hsu became the first openly queer person since 1999 to be nominated for an Oscar for playing a queer character (Russeell). Too often, people of majority communities are given opportunities to 'flex their acting muscles' in roles that have them tackle queer stories (like Blanchett and Fraser), trans stories (i.e. Eddie Redmayne in *The Danish Girl*), and stories about people of color (Emma Stone in *Aloha*, Scarlett Johansson in *Ghost in the Shell*). Opposite opportunities, i.e. allowing non-white people to play traditional white roles, are rarely afforded to people from minoritized communities. *Hamilton* had such a massive impact by reimagining white historical figures as people of color. The 2023 Diane Paulus production of *1776* employed a racially diverse cast of all women and gender non-conforming actors to play the founding fathers and their wives. While these were exciting developments, they also received a lot of buzz because the casting still felt like a gimmick. It is not standardized for people of color to play

traditionally white roles and for trans and gender non-conforming people to play traditionally cisgender characters. When the casting of *Hamilton* and Paulus' *1776* are no longer seen as gimmicky and are seen as regular casting decisions, then I would argue that actors will have the freedom to play whatever characters fulfill them as artists, regardless of the character's lived experiences. However, until the time comes when minority visibility is synonymous with majority visibility, it is a necessity for minoritized people to see ourselves represented on screen and stage as accurately as possible.

In 2008, Bartlett Sher staged a lush revival of *South Pacific* at Lincoln Center. Starring Kelli O'Hara and Paul Szot, the revival felt like "a vintage photograph [...] restored not with fuzzy, hand-colored prettiness but with you-are-there clarity" (Brantley, NY Times). The idea of a 'jewel box' revival is not new at all with contemporary examples like 2022's *The Music Man* and 2017's *Hello Dolly* being prime examples of revivals that aim to recapture the glory and beauty of golden age musicals in their prime. However, *South Pacific* is very specifically a product of its time and it only works as a revolutionary piece within the time it originally was presented. Within a modern context, the themes of tolerance and learned biases fall flat in the face of the racist stereotypes the musical uses to perpetuate the white characters' growth. While the piece was revolutionary for its time, we can now see that "South Pacific is a textbook example of Orientalism, that western mania for dominating the lives and dismissing the souls of those who are not white" (Ayers). *South Pacific* devolves into a dangerous piece of anti-Asian theatre because of the "Orientalist narrative, [...] the strange, exotic, 'other' character of people who are not-white-Americans" (Ayers). The character of Liat, as seen in the world where anti-Asian hate crimes specifically towards Asian women have only been occurring more and more frequently, actively continues to teach audiences that Asian women are meant as sexually

conquerable, submissive playthings rather than as the empowered, independent women they are. As is discussed in the Implications of Stereotypes section, Liat follows the Lotus Blossom stereotype, “objects of desire, but ones which are disposable. They’re lusted after only as long as they continue to project traits like obedience, subservience, and a baby-like lack of agency or individuality” (thetake.com). *South Pacific* deserves to be studied and explored for its discussions of racism in 1949, however, the piece no longer fulfills its original goal and instead damages the very concepts it was created to bolster.

The King and I: Rodgers and Hammerstein: Part 2

The King and I is a 1951 musical based on the 1944 Margaret Landon novel *Anna and the King of Siam*. The musical, loosely based on the real British governess of the Siamese court Anna Leonowens, follows Anna, a British school teacher, as she moves to Siam to be the new governess for the King’s many, many children. The musical attempts to tackle culture clash. The tension between tradition and international growth is primarily personified through the relationship between the staunchly conservative King of Siam and the independent Anna. *The King and I* was an instant classic when it premiered and ran for an initial 1,246 Broadway performances after winning Tony Awards for Best Musical, Best Actress (for Gertrude Lawrence) and Best Featured Actor (for Yul Brynner). The musical has, since, been revived four times on Broadway with the most recent 2015 revival following the 2008 *South Pacific*’s path with a lush Bartlett Sher directed production at Lincoln Center. *The King and I* provides an example of how Richard Rodgers, as the composer, shows the conflict between his white and Asian characters through a musical lens as well as through the words and plot.

When asked how he created the sonic quality of *The King and I* Rodgers explained, “[I] followed my usual custom of writing the best music I could for the characters and situations without slavishly trying to imitate the music of the locale in which the story was set...Western audiences are not attuned to the sounds of tinkling bells, high nasal strings, and percussive gongs, and would not find this kind of music attractive” (Rodgers, americantheatre.org). Rodgers’ main goal with *The King and I* was to create a beautiful score. While the musical is rooted in a true story, they did not attempt for the show to stay rooted in a realistic musical space. No effort was made to accurately portray traditional Thai music - even in sections like “The March of the Siamese Children” and “The Small House of Uncle Thomas” which are meant to show the Thai characters in their own environment.



https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z9L_lilJKQQ

While Rodgers changes the music to match his characters, he utilizes, “a score full of open fifths and non-key chords to exotify the sound” (Miller). Rodgers utilizes a unique, as compared

to his other scores, instrumentation to exotify and create an ‘other’ sound for the characters from the Siamese courts. Gongs, oriental drums, xylophones, mandolins, banjos, tom toms, and wood blocks are all used throughout the score to ‘exotify’ the musical themes of all characters besides Anna and her son Louis. “A Puzzlement” and “Song of the King” utilize the Dorian and Phrygian modes respectively; utilizing non-major/minor modes live far outside Rodgers’ usual classical major/minor system and are only used by him when writing for ‘exotic’ locales and characters (Ponti). Rodgers also makes use of the pentatonic scale when writing for the characters of the Siamese court. “My Lord and Master”, Tuptim’s main solo, utilizes a strict pentatonic scale for its intro, “Getting to Know You” utilizes pentatonic scale arpeggios when the wives and children of the Siamese court join Anna’s vocal. Pentatonic scales have traditionally been used to signify an East-Asian tone as they are heavily utilized in traditional Chinese music (hanover.edu).



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wUPbWjqYN20>

Throughout the score, Rodgers successfully creates a sound that is exotic to 1950s American's ears. However, in doing so, he creates a musical that is sonically disruptive to true Siamese/traditional Thai music. When we look at the media we consume, what becomes more important? Something exotic yet familiar enough to be palatable to a wide, primarily white, audience, or something that actually pays respect to the cultures the story is based in?

When Bartlett Sher was reimagining *The King and I* for the highly decorated 2015 production, he claimed, "I think one of the problems of Rodgers and Hammerstein is the 60 years of performance history that followed, which watered down and eliminated and exoticized the East in a way that's beyond anyone's reasoning" (Tran). He wanted to, "strip it of its really ornate quality. So I have a very spare set, and I have a very stripped-down world. I was always very careful of it seeming like the exotic East"(Tran). The goal was to, "create a world in which you're dealing with change and struggle, who the outsiders are and who the insiders are, and to let that be the real question" (Tran).



As seen in the above picture (credit to Johnathan Mandell), the 2015 revival still utilized a visually resplendent set and costume plot to create the world of the Siamese court. While the goalsymbol of healthy representation. While the sheer fact that the musical is steeped in a faux-exotic score, *The King and I* ultimately fails as an anti-racist piece of theatre because of the emotional toll it exacts on East-Asian theatre goers. When I listen to, the absolutely incredible, Ashley Park lead “The Small House of Uncle Thomas”, I am immediately thrown off and uncomfortable. There is this pit in my stomach that begins when I hear,

“Your Majesty and honorable guests,

I beg to put before you

‘Small House of Uncle Thomas.’” (Hammerstein).

The use of a generic Asian accent alongside the vocalisms that add an extra layer of exoticism create a feeling that, while the characters in the musical are putting on a show for the King and Anna, the Asian actors are also being forced to put on a show of orientalism. The musical forces Asian actors to put aside their own cultural heritage and instead live within a world that is based on multiple white men’s (Rodgers, Hammerstein, Sher) ideas of 1860s Siam and not what that culture truly is. Whenever you’re creating a story from the outside in, the result will never feel authentic. Without authenticity, it is extremely difficult for respect to also exist.

Pacific Overtures

The issue of white creatives exploiting Asian cultures to tell white-centric stories extends through to much more contemporary theatre. *Pacific Overtures* by Stephen Sondheim attempts to be seen as a Japanese playwright’s musical about the westernization of Japan beginning with the

1853 arrival of American Commodore Perry in Japan. The musical, created with an all-white creative team, cast an all-Asian group of actors to portray this musical in the Kabuki style.

Pacific Overtures mainly used the Kabuki elements of an all-male cast (even to play women's roles) and visible set changes. The primary issue with the musical begins with its conception.

Sondheim attempts for his writing to be seen as a genuine Japanese playwright's version of an American musical. Why attempt to be a Japanese playwright when you could hire a bona fide Japanese playwright who completely understands the style and history of the Japanese theatrical tradition? Sondheim's non-Japanese heritage is explicitly understood through his lyrics. The opening number, "Advantages of Floating in the Middle of the Sea", aims to introduce a white audience to a pre-World War 2 Japan through a self-introductory model. Basically, Sondheim is writing as if 'we' are the Japanese and the audience is American, "Here we paint screens, Plant the rice, Arrange the flowers, View the moon, Exchange the gifts, Plant the rice, Arrange tomorrow like today to float, Slide the screens, Exchange the poems, Stir the tea, Exchange the bows, Plant the rice, Arrange tomorrow to be like today, To float" (Sondheim). This description of Japan emphasizes their isolation from the rest of the world and creates a sense that Japanese life is pristine and perfect - like a piece of art on a wall that always shows the same scene.

Japanese life is made to seem so exotic and different from the life Americans live. The line "Arrange tomorrow to be like today" also shows that Japan is trapped in the same time period and will never progress, at least until the Americans arrive. The Americans are then seen as an important force to create change and save the Japanese from their isolation. Lyrically, the finale of the show "Next" presented its own set of challenges. When the musical ends in the Meiji period (1868-1912), the show skips to an economically thriving 'present' Japan and disregards the struggles of World War 2 on Japan and Japanese-Americans. The show makes no mention of

the destruction of Japan after the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The lyrics, “Roads are turning, Journey with them. A little learning Next!” attempt to show how Japan is ‘learning’ now because of the westernization created by Commodore Perry’s arrival. The lyric, ‘civilizes’, in the following section also shows a white-washed and racist view of Japan by insinuating Japan was not a civilized country prior to its westernization: “Motor rumbles, Civilizes. More surprises Next!” (Sondheim). These references to the negative view of the pre-westernized Japan and the positive connotations associated with this new, westernized Japan continue with, “Old is boring, New is thrilling, Keep exploring” (Sondheim). These lyrics show Sondheim’s internal biases against Asian people and make *Pacific Overtures* into another example of the racist issues that are created when a white creative team attempts to tell a non-white story.

While *Pacific Overtures* proved, again, that white creatives exploiting Asian aesthetics and people for their own gain creates racist theatre, it did provide spaces for Asian performers to be seen in less stereotypical and caricature-esque roles. Without a central love story, the dangerous depiction of Asian women as submissive sexualized beings was not present. Asian actors played historically white characters such as Jonathan Goble, Commodore Perry, and numerous European admirals. The two main characters Kayama and Manjiro are able to be played as deep, real people without racial stereotypes dictating their thoughts and actions. Even through a racially-insensitive libretto and a racist conception, the musical provided an important step in increasing Asian representation on a Broadway stage and provided them vulnerable roles with which to do so.

Where We're Going

Allegiance

Allegiance broke ground on Broadway with its all-Asian creative team. Jay Kuo's score finally allowed an Asian-American story to be told respectfully and give Asian actors a show that allowed them to play deeply vulnerable, fully-formed characters without the racist stereotypes they were often forced to play. Japanese-Americans especially felt an emotional connection to this work as it provided a space for the shameful history of the Japanese Internment to be shared in a highly respected space. Taron K. Murakami, a board member for the non-profit Asian Americans Advancing Justice, delivers the direct importance of this piece, "seeing the show was a truly emotional experience. The story and the characters felt so personal and real. In the Kimuras, the family played by Takei, Lea Salonga and Telly Leung, I saw my own family and my own community" (Murakami). *Allegiance* succeeds as a non-racist piece of Asian theatre because Asian-Americans have the power in the creative space. By allowing Asian-Americans to tell their own story, they have the agency to create a piece that allows them to be real people, not pawns for a white person's piece on their own culture's experience. The Japanese cultural elements included in the piece of theatre are there because they are true and integral to the people represented, not just as aesthetic tools to make the audience feel the 'exotic' nature of the piece. *Allegiance*, even through all of its benefits to the Asian-American theatrical canon, utilizes some historical inaccuracies that some Japanese scholars find insulting. Frank Abe, the producer and director of the documentary *Conscience and the Constitution* about the uprisings at Heart Mountain Internment camp, critiques *Allegiance* for these historical inaccuracies. While the musical never intentionally sells itself as a history lesson (and in the tagline bills itself as "A

New Musical Inspired by a True Story”), reviews like the one from the New York Times with the headline “‘Allegiance,’ a Musical History Lesson About Interned Japanese-Americans” (Isherwood) spread the perception that *Allegiance* is more historical than historical fiction. Abe’s article details how the musical “conflate[s] Heart Mountain with the worst of the segregation center at Tule Lake and invent military rule at Heart Mountain” (Abe). Abe then goes on to explain that elements of the musical: campus wide loudspeakers that demand a night time curfew, Military shoving Nisei, internees stripped to their underwear and separated on arrival by gender, and internees handcuffed for answering no-no the loyalty oath, all are used to “stir emotion at the expense of fact” (Abe). While these inaccuracies all contribute to a heightened emotional state, the murder of white nurse Hannah completely disregards all semblance of fact according to Abe. The murder of a white woman by a white military police officer at this time would have been a complete shock for the country and, had it happened, it would have “rocked the course of history” (Abe). Abe is especially frustrated by this inaccuracy because of the general public’s lack of knowledge about the Japanese Internment. Even with a creative team dedicated to doing right by the long ignored Asian theatre community, problematic issues arise. While *Allegiance* is not perfect, the strides it took in allowing Asian creatives agency over their own story. To reemphasize Desdemona Chiang’s words in her article, “It matters who has the power to make the story—notice I said ‘make,’ not ‘tell.’ It matters whose story is being made” - *Allegiance* breaks boundaries due to the deeply Japanese-American story it is able to make.

KPOP

On October 3rd, 2022, history was made at Circle in the Square on Broadway as *KPOP* the musical began previews. For the first time in Broadway history, K-pop, the massively popular music genre, was being sung on a Broadway stage by a mostly Korean cast with several of the show's stars coming straight from their own massively successful K-pop careers. The musical began its journey in 2017 with a critically acclaimed immersive production at A.R.T. produced by Ars Nova, Ma-Yi Theatre Company, and the Woodshed Collective. The goal of that original production was to introduce New York theatre goers to K-pop music and show the primarily white audience how this genre could exist within an innovative theatrical context. This off-Broadway production had audiences walk through a K-pop 'factory' complete with plastic surgeons, demanding choreographers, and intense company owners to show western audiences how painful growing a career in K-pop can be. The show was based on the real life trainee systems utilized by massive Korean entertainment companies like YG Entertainment, SM, and JYP to create an endless stream of top performers and groups to launch into the increasingly saturated K-pop market (Bevan). The musical was thoroughly revised on its way to Broadway; Helen Park, the composer, explained in an interview with the LA Times, "back then, we were very conscious of the fact that K-pop as a genre had not crossed over into the United States, and we were very much trying to make sure it was palatable to the white theatergoer. Broadway was the perfect opportunity to be a little bit more bold with embracing our authenticity and to really zone in on what is relatable and human and universal about what these K-pop superstars go through" (Lee). The revised version streamlined the story and made the experience more in-tune with a traditional musical where audiences stay in one seat. The musical focused its story on Mwe, a solo artist, and her relationship with her manager/mother figure Ruby as they attempt to

stage Ruby's company's first US concert. The process is being filmed by the sole white character Director Harry who blatantly disregards Ruby's vision for the concert documentary and instead tries to create an invasive documentary about the relationship dynamics between Mwe, Ruby, and the two other groups performing in the concert, boy band F8 (pronounced fate) and girl group RTMIS (pronounced Artemis). The new musical, in stark contrast to its off-Broadway run, received largely negative reviews and closed after only seventeen post-opening performances. While the musical was critically panned, young fans and Asian theatre community members applauded the show's dedication to authentic storytelling and joyful energy. Jason Kim, *KPOP*'s book writer, attempted to understand the division in the aforementioned interview with the LA Times, "There's the older, predominantly male, white intellectuals on one side who didn't care for the show very much. And then there's a younger, more diverse crowd that cares for the show fervently. And it seems like they're both doing that for the same reason, which is that this show is not necessarily about Asian Suffering, with a capital A and S. It's not about infantilized men or hyper-sexualized women; it's not fetishizing" (Lee). A common theme throughout the previously mentioned musicals is the exotification of the Asian experience. *The King and I*, *South Pacific*, *The Mikado*, and *Pacific Overtures* only work as musicals because of the way that they use the different cultures they are based in as exotic backdrops to the truly white stories they are telling; *The Mikado* and *Pacific Overtures* use the Asian characters as mirrors to western society, and *The King and I* and *South Pacific* use the Asian locales as backdrops for their white characters to learn important lessons about tolerance and self-growth. *KPOP*, in my opinion, succeeded artistically because it allowed for Korean artists to use their own voice to tell their own story - much like *Allegiance* did for Japanese-Americans. While the show was a beautiful example of authenticity and acceptance, the reviews did not follow suit. In a highly controversial

review, Jesse Green of the New York Times opens his article with, “‘A lot of people come to these things and they don’t even understand the language,’ says Harry, a filmmaker who passes for the villain in the noisy yet skimpy new musical *KPOP*. So what are they watching for? Good question. For the record, the answer provided by Tiny, a member of a Korean pop group called RTMIS, is delivered, unlike a lot of the show, in English: ‘Perfection, Mr. Harry. OK?’. The beginning of the article underscores one of many issues *KPOP* dealt with when trying to break into the majority white Broadway scene: the perceived language barrier. *KPOP*, as is stylistically congruent with K-pop music, utilized a script and score that mixed Korean and English. However, for Green to claim most of the show was in Korean and, thus, not understandable is both a biased opinion that claims that because a piece is in a further language it is difficult to understand (a claim that doesn’t seem to affect western foreign language shows like *The Light in the Piazza* and the critically lauded Yiddish production of *Fiddler on the Roof*) and also is completely inaccurate. Most of the musical was in English - even when it would be perfectly understandable through context clues and the acting of the piece for more of it to be in Korean. As a non-Korean speaker, I never had a single moment where I didn’t understand what was going on. Jesse Green’s article sparked furious debate on social media where several Asian artists and advocates commented and asked the Times, alongside the *KPOP* producers, for an apology. That apology was not given. The Times responded by saying, “This group was in agreement that Jesse’s review was fair. More importantly, we wholly disagree with the argument that Jesse’s criticism is somehow racist” (NY Times). Non-Asian people cannot decide what is or is not racist to an Asian community. In a breakdown of Jesse Green’s review, Howard Ho explains how exactly Green’s review utilizes casual racism. That annotation, featured below, is imperative to understanding the outcry surrounding Green’s review.

The New York Times

Review: In 'KPOP,' Korean Pop and Broadway Meet (Too) Cute

The world-wide sensation and American-style musical theater form an awkward alliance in this instance.



By Jesse Green



States. To do so, they are willing to sacrifice almost anything.

2/6

That theme was given edgy, immersive expression in Teddy Bergman's 2017 staging, produced by the experimental theater incubator *Ars Nova* in association with Ma-Yi Theater Company and Woodshed Collective. It imagined the audience as members of an itinerant focus group who, serving as emissaries of American taste, were led in small packs from space to space and given glimpses of what those sacrifices might mean.

If some seemed silly, others were trenchant; an especially disturbing encounter involved a plastic surgeon. But by the time everyone assembled in one last room for a concert-cum-party, the giddy fun of the bubble-gummy songs (by Helen Park and Max Vernon) felt earned — even if the reversal was dramatically perplexing. Were we now celebrating what the rest of the show had encouraged us to disparage?

That problem remains, with new ones added. To begin with, Bergman, directing again, faced an overwhelming difficulty in the fact that no Broadway theater could accommodate the immersive concept. Gabriel Hainer Evansohn's set provides a partial solution: Instead of the audience moving, a tongue-shaped stage does, sliding back and forth bearing performers. And video screens mounted everywhere (Peter Nigrini is the projection designer) allow us to eavesdrop on the backstage action captured when Harry the filmmaker (Aubie Merrylees) goes rogue.

The critic describes the Off-Broadway KPOP in a way that suggests he may have preferred it due in part to the white frame around that show. As "emissaries of American taste," the mainstream white audience was allowed to feel centered in the narrative. The entire Off-Broadway show seemed much more geared to explain and justify KPOP to a white audience. This was understandable in 2017 since, back then, KPOP as a genre of music did not experience the mainstream Billboard chart success it experiences today. Again, the critic seems unaware that his desire for a white frame, implied in his opening line and corroborated here, is itself critiqued by the Broadway show, which chooses to center the lives and perspectives of the AAPI characters.

The critic here seems to exhibit a lack of awareness at how the narrative works. Showing the challenges of creating KPOP, disturbing though it might be, does not preclude someone from enjoying the triumph of KPOP artists succeeding in the end. It would be as if the critic were asking how we could celebrate the dancers at the end of *A Chorus Line* given that we've seen the harsh conditions they faced. Rather, it's because we've seen the characters endure those conditions that the audience cheers them on in the end. While the show may disparage certain industry practices, that does not mean it disparages the characters at the center of the story.

KPOP

The New York Times KPOP Review by Jesse Green ("the critic") annotated.

1/6

"A lot of people come to these things and they don't even understand the language," says Harry, a filmmaker who passes for the villain in the noisy yet skimpy new musical "KPOP." "So what are they watching for?"

Good question.

For the record, the answer provided by Tiny, a member of a Korean pop group called RTMIS, is delivered, unlike a lot of the show, in English: "Perfection, Mr. Harry. OK?"

And it's true that if you enjoy the precision-drilled dancing, meticulous melisma and guttural, tuned sentiments that have turned K-pop into a worldwide sensation over the past 10 years, you are likely to be among those cheering the musical's Broadway incarnation, which opened on Sunday at Circle in the Square.

But those who aren't hard-core fans of the genre or don't understand Korean — let alone those who saw the radically different and far superior Off Broadway version in 2017 — will have a harder time enjoying this one. For them, the musical is less an eye-opener than an ear-pounder, assiduously drowning out any ambitions it may once have had to be more.

It can't be lost on the creative team that in adapting their Off Broadway hit for a bigger and more conventional audience they courted the same fate as their fictional counterparts. Both then and now, the book of "KPOP" by Jason Kim, concerns the efforts of a Seoul hit factory to push its stable of custom-groomed

The critic begins by quoting the one white character in the show and agrees with that character's perspective. This appears to demonstrate the critic's lack of understanding that the show is itself a critique of this white-centric perspective. For the record, plenty of non-English speakers love American pop, so the question is not a "good" one as the critic says.

The critic erroneously implies that "a lot of the show" is in Korean, which is flatly untrue. Most of the show's dialogue is in English with Korean lightly used, which can be easily understood via context clues. I will address the lyrics below.

While it's true KPOP is known for a certain auto-tuned sound, the critic could be implying that the show uses auto-tune which is not. The entire cast sings unaided by auto-tune. But this line also raises an issue which will come up later of the critic implying that KPOP is somehow fake or not real music.

Again, reiterating the lie that the show is significantly in Korean. For those who are thinking that the lyrics are often in Korean, I would say that the critic reveals here he preferred the Off Broadway production, which also had those Korean lyrics. That "superior" version apparently didn't require all English lyrics. Also, calling the show "an ear-pounder" as a negative is insubstantial when KPOP music is supposed to be loud and rhythmic. Had the music been toned down and less loud, it may have appealed more to the critic, but it would have been inauthentic to KPOP itself.

The narrative frame was rebuilt less successfully. The audience, no longer a focus group, merely watches as a K-pop impresario named Ruby (Jully Lee) prepares for a concert that will introduce her stable of acts to America. There are three of them: the five-woman RTMIS (pronounced Artemis), the eight-man F8 (pronounced fate) and the solo diva MwE (pronounced mu-WEE) — an orphan Ruby has raised, Mama Rose-style, for stardom.

MwE (played by the actual K-pop star Luna) has been reconfigured entirely. Her problem is no longer that she is aging out of pop credibility but that she wants creative freedom and a normal life with her boyfriend (Jinwoo Jung). Ruby ruthlessly tries to quash those dangerous ideas — love and creativity are not things a K-pop star can afford, she says — even as she complains about MwE's failure to perform from the heart.

This is familiar material, thinly delivered, and so is the dissatisfaction of the members of RTMIS, which is so vague and hastily resolved I barely caught what it was. Only among the members of F8 does the conflict feel fresh and worthy of exploration in song: Its seven longtime members resent the "new kid," Brad, brought in to juice their American rollout. Biracial and Connecticut-raised, Brad (Zachary Noah Piser) is seen by the others as inauthentic: he isn't even fluent in Korean.

The critic here uses the phrase "narrative frame," which suggests the critic is aware of how the narrative frame affects his reaction to the show. If so, then the critic has failed to notice the whiteness inherent in the narrative frame that made the Off Broadway version, in his words, "superior" to the Broadway version.

The critic erroneously paraphrases Ruby. In the show, Ruby actually says that pop music shouldn't be a diary entry and that her branding of the star takes precedence over the star's own songwriting. The character never says a KPOP star can't be creative, probably because KPOP as a genre of music is almost entirely creative by definition. But falsely paraphrasing the character seems to give the critic justification in implying KPOP isn't real music.

The line "he isn't even fluent in Korean" is a fair paraphrase of the show, but given the context of the critic implying the show is largely not in English, this inclusion only serves to reinforce a false view that the show somehow requires knowledge of Korean to understand.

4/6

The songs, unfortunately, do not take up the challenge of investigating that issue, or any other. They are all diegetic — actual numbers performed by the characters — and are thus connected to the story, as in a jukebox musical, by only the feeblest of threads. When Brad tells the filmmaker that he grew up neither Korean enough for some nor American enough for others, and proceeds to sing a song called “Halfway,” we may expect an exploration of those feelings. But no, it’s a love ballad, addressed to a girl: “Can you meet me halfway, baby?”

The same problem details “Korean Man,” a song for F8 that you may think from the setup will express their assertion of national pride. As we learn from the parts of it that are performed in English, though, it’s mostly about having the “baddest swagger” and “bein’ a bad, bad boy.”

With their link to the drama severed, and the drama in any case attenuated, the songs cease to function as they normally do in musical theater and collapse into a concert. That’s true even before the final 20 minutes of the show, when the filmmaker plot is summarily abandoned and, with it, any pretense of plot.

The critic here fails to understand the basics of lyrical songwriting, namely the use of a metaphor. Though on its face, “Halfway” is a love ballad, it is really using the form of a love ballad to express feelings of being biracial and a feeling of not belonging. In other words, the “girl” in this song is a metaphorical stand-in for a feeling of belonging.

The lyrics of “Halfway,” which in the show are entirely performed in English, confirm this metaphor: “I’m always halfway, halfway / Someone tell me what should I say / What can I do to find my place”

It is unclear how the critic knows that “Korean Man” does not assert national pride. This is especially strange given that some of the song’s lyrics are in Korean, which the critic has criticized earlier for being hard for him to understand. Why would the critic not assume the Korean lyrics do indeed assert national pride? The critic has no standing to make any claims about Korean culture but still has the unearned confidence to describe these lyrics as a “problem.”

Again, the critic seems to lack a basic knowledge of narrative logic. The entire plot of the show is about the making of a KPOP concert. Thus the final 20-minute concert is not an abandonment of the plot. Rather, it is the plot’s logical conclusion, the payoff of the entire plot.

5/6

So that flashback scene in which Ruby tells MwE, at 13, that she’s a “disaster” with “tree trunk legs,” and a choreographer shouts that she’s shaming her parents? Forget about it. Come hear the band. (Actually, there are only three instrumentalists.)

By then, if you are not a fan, you may feel worn out by the aggressive mimicry of the K-pop performance style, not just in the mostly electronic arrangements but also in the minutely detailed choreography by Jennifer Weber, the squint-inducing lighting by Jiyoung Chang and the hundreds of can-you-top-this costumes by Clint Ramos and Sophia Choi. In that environment it’s hard to say whether

Brad’s “Halfway” and MwE’s “Mute Bird” — acoustic songs simply staged and feelingly delivered — are actually lovely or merely a relief.

Again, the critic lacks basic knowledge of story structure. The scene where MwE is rehearsing at age 13 happens near the beginning of the show. Seeing her perform a song later is the payoff to seeing her rehearse.

Also, mentioning the fact that there are “only three instrumentalists” again implies KPOP is not real music because it doesn’t employ a real band. The fact is that KPOP as a genre is highly polished and produced music, which has long been created using computer software instruments, as has long been true of American pop in general as well. The critic appears to be criticizing KPOP for being too, well, authentically KPOP. It would be like complaining a symphony features too many violins, when that is literally a defining feature of the genre. In other words, the critic is making an argument from ignorance.

The critic calling the lighting “squint-inducing” is at best insubstantial. Circle in the Square Theatre is a theatre in the round, and KPOP uses it as a thrust, where it is natural for light to bleed into the audience as the audience surrounds the stage. But at its worst, the “squint-inducing” term is offensive racialized language which is carelessly used in a show featuring a mostly AAPI cast and used to describe the work of an AAPI lighting designer. Given the recent rise of anti-AAPI attacks, this racialized term has no place in this article. The New York Times should at the very least retract this language.

The critic gives a backhanded compliment to the acoustic songs in the show. After having spent so much space being against the non-acoustic songs, the critic cannot even bring himself to say a kind word about the acoustic songs without a snarky comment. It appears that the show simply cannot win with this critic. Additionally, the critic is wrong: “Halfway” is not acoustic, and instead there is another song “Still I Love You” that is acoustic.

6/6

In its remaking for Broadway I wish “KPOP” had preserved more moments like that: moments that allow you to consider what the excitement of K-pop (for those who feel it) and the expressiveness of American musical theater (likewise) can profitably say to each other. Both have their fans and no doubt their glories, as well as their limitations. But it seems to me that in introducing the two, a good place to have met would have been, well, halfway. “KPOP” still has far to go to get there.

KPOP
At Circle in the Square, Manhattan; kpopbroadway.com.
Running time: 2 hours 10 minutes.

Here the critic confirms his failure to understand the basic themes of the show KPOP. He ends by saying the KPOP genre should try to meet American musical theater “halfway,” in a nod to the show’s song mentioned earlier. While that may be the great premise to another show or even the Off-Broadway production, the current Broadway production is telling a very different story. In 2017, the Off-Broadway KPOP had to explain the genre to a mainstream white audience. In the world of 2022, KPOP is already dominating the charts in America, and not just for fans who understand Korean but the mainstream white audience as well. Thus the theme of KPOP on Broadway is no longer about introducing the genre to Americans but about embracing the uniqueness of KPOP. Because of that new theme, the idea that KPOP should’ve met American musical theater “halfway” falls flat because the show itself critiques that idea. KPOP on Broadway wants to represent KPOP the genre as authentically as possible, not to attenuate it for non-KPOP fans. It might be fair to argue that KPOP the show does not achieve its goals, but to do so one first has to understand its goals. Ironically, with all his failures in understanding the show and his unfounded or erroneous critiques, the critic himself did not appear to take his own advice and meet KPOP halfway.

(Screenshots from Howard Ho’s Instagram: @howardwho)

Negative reviews are completely valid. Reviews that allow casual racism to run unchecked are not. *KPOP* was a beacon of hope for the Asian theatre community – proving that a piece for us, about us, and by us could break the Broadway barrier. As Helen Park says in her interview, “The thing that is bothering me is the possibility that, because we’re closing, fellow Asian creatives will think that the only way to survive on Broadway is to compromise authenticity, to cherry

pick what a white audience wants or what the Broadway gatekeepers and critics like. That would make me so sad. Even though this was a short-lived show on Broadway, I hope this is instead the beginning of more bold, honest storytelling by more diverse voices” (Lee). *KPOP* truly is only the beginning.

Here Lies Love

In the wake of *KPOP* on Broadway, *Here Lies Love* is arriving June 17th, 2023 to showcase another Asian story. *Here Lies Love* follows the true tale of the rise and fall of Filipina first lady Imelda Marcos through an immersive nightclub based musical. With music and lyrics by David Byrne and Fatboy Slim, *Here Lies Love* has an impressive team behind it. While the writers and the director Alex Timbers are not Filipino, two of the lead producers Clint Ramos and Jose Antonio Vargas lead a team of Filipino creatives to ensure the musical is told with as much respect to the Filipino community as possible. A wide, online casting call was conducted by Filipino casting director Gail Quintos to find a largely Filipino cast to accurately represent the people at the heart of this true story. *Here Lies Love* has had a ten year long track to Broadway with critically and commercially successful runs at New York’s Public Theatre, Seattle’s Seattle Rep, and London’s National Theatre. While we won’t know for sure until opening if *Here Lies Love* will be the commercial hit *Allegiance* and *KPOP* were not able to be, the sheer existence of two original majority Asian musicals occurring in the same Broadway season is reason to celebrate in and of itself. *Here Lies Love* is an exciting continuation of respectful and authentic Asian storytelling in musical theatre overall and in the commercial musical theatre scene of which Broadway marks the pinnacle.

Conclusion

On March 15, 2018, Center Theatre Group and East West Players co-hosted an event entitled “Orientalism and the Portrayal of Asian Americans in Musicals” to bring together Asian academics and theatre artists to discuss our place within the canon. While many academics brought up the issues historically problematic musicals perpetuated, such as, “a hostile attitude toward people, and not just from the people who are not from that culture—not just white Americans thinking about Asian Americans—but how Asian Americans can think about themselves” (Marie-Reine Velez), Asian performers had nuanced views on their relationships with shows like *The King and I* and *Pacific Overtures*. Esther Chae, an actress and playwright, said, “I’m personally glad that that [Asian stories] canon of musical theatre exists, even with the problems. If we don’t even have those stories or characters, we [Asian Americans] don’t get to work. We don’t get to exist” (Center Theatre Group). We don’t get to exist without the painful representation afforded by these problematic musicals. Luckily that statement has been able to improve a bit since 2018. *KPOP*, *Allegiance*, *Here Lies Love*, *Comfort Women* (an off-Broadway musical about the Korean women forced into sexual slavery by the Japanese during World War II), and David Henry Hwang and Jeanine Tesori’s *Soft Power* (a ‘play with a musical’ imagining how a future Chinese musical would exotify present day America) have all been able to find their paths to the stage. However, we still live in a world where many Asian actors have to decide for ourselves how far we are willing to compromise ourselves to find consistent work in theatre. *The King and I* and *South Pacific* and *Miss Saigon* are not going away any time soon. That struggle was summed by Marie-Reine Velez at Center Theatre Group’s conversation, “They’re [problematic Asian musicals] problematic, but they hire our friends, and they hire our colleagues. I’m so happy that people are getting work and that some folks are also being recognized even,

winning Tonys or other awards for their performances and helping launch careers, but they're also perpetuating stereotypes and just a reduction of who we are as people" (Centre Theatre Group). Personally, I have had to have this conversation with myself many times as I prepare to enter the theatre industry. While I long for a time that I don't have to think about how my racial identity affects my work in theatre, I am also in agreement that I am grateful for any opportunity to continue the work of providing representation. Asians and Asian-Americans are still severely underrepresented in American entertainment. I aspire for more musicals like *KPOP* and *Here Lies Love* to grace stages both on Broadway and across the country. By providing Asian theatre artists nationwide the opportunity to showcase themselves and their communities with accurate and respectful representation, we will create a stronger Western Musical Theatre canon overall.

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ACADEMIC VITA

Jimin Moon

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Education

B.F.A., Musical Theatre, 2023, Pennsylvania State University, State College, PA

Honors and Awards

Member of Mortar Board National College Senior Honor Society

Volunteer Experience

LGBTQ+ Chair, Penn State School of Theatre Student Diversity Committee

Chair of Communications, Broadway of Tomorrow

Professional Experience

THEATRE

REGIONAL THEATRE

West Side Story (Upcoming)	<i>Jet</i>	MUNY dir. Rob Ruggiero, chor. Parker Esse
Kiss Me Kate	<i>Gremio</i>	Sacramento Music Circus chor. John MacInnis, md. Darryl Archibald
Beauty and the Beast (Upcoming)	<i>Ensemble</i>	MUNY dir. John Tartaglia, chor. Patrick O'Neill
Newsies (Original Choreo.)	<i>Henry/Scab</i>	Sacramento Music Circus dir. Michael Heitzman, chor. Andrew Wilson
Sister Act (Upcoming)	<i>Ensemble</i>	MUNY dir. & chor. Denis Jones
Something Rotten (Original Choreo.)	<i>Bard Boy/Ensemble</i>	Sacramento Music Circus dir. Linda Goodrich, chor. John MacInnis
Kinky Boots	<i>Angel</i>	Sacramento Music Circus dir. Glenn Casale, chor. Rickey Tripp
Green Eggs & Hamadeus	<i>Sam I Am</i>	Mondavi Performing Arts Center dir./md. Lara Downes
Carousel	<i>Enoch jr./Ensemble</i>	Sacramento Music Circus

The Secret Garden	<i>William/Ensemble</i>	dir. Nick Corley, chor. Peggy Hickey, Sacramento Music Circus
Cesar and Ruben	<i>Featured Dancer</i>	dir. Glenn Casale, chor. Monica Kapoor Teatro Nagual with Ed Begley Jr.

NEW WORK

Family Album By Joe Iconis	<i>Principal</i>	John Simpkins
In-Gauged By Christian Thompson and Maria Wirries	<i>Jack (Supporting)</i>	54 Below / John Simpkins
A Tale for the Time Being Book and Lyrics by Candice Hatakeyama, Music by Imri Leshed	<i>Ryu (Supporting)</i>	Candice Hatakeyama
Take a Walk in My Shoes	<i>Soloist/Choreographer</i>	Jennifer Delac

FILM/COMMERCIAL

Because of You I...	<i>Soloist/Choreographer</i>	Commercial Penn State Development
"We Are" 101	<i>Ice Cream Boy</i>	Commercial Penn State University
The New Normal (Ep. 1)	<i>Jimin (Lead)</i>	Web Series Jeff Coopwood