

Unscripted - A Blog for Actors - Backstage

Fighting a Men-tality

Recently, an older Caucasian man asked me, "So what kind of Chinese are you?" Yes, those were his exact words.

Having just visited his son who lives in Hong Kong, he felt he could help me *clear the air* on my own lineage.

I could feel him looking at me as if I were a glass figurine sitting on a shelf in an Oriental antique shop.

And I could feel myself fighting the feelings that come when I know I am being objectified.

I am actually a mix of Korean, possibly Thai, Vietnamese and Chinese, etc. Most of us are, but in short, my family is dominantly Northern Chinese.

"No you're not. You don't have northern features. You're southern," the man persisted, even though he didn't know *anything* about me. True story.

But I suppose having a son who started living in Hong Kong, (which was taken over by the British empire centuries ago, making it the whitest place in China) he must know better.

My response? "Wow," I replied in front of his friends, "I just love it when white people think they know more about my own ethnicity than I do."

Yeah, that pretty much shut him up in the moment.

I didn't bother to tell him that my maternal grandfather was a key general who fought against the Communists in the 1940s.

Or how my father's side of the family traces back to the horsemen of the Ming Dynasty. Or how *everyone* in my family, including both grandmothers, is college educated; mostly Ph.D.

None of that would have meant anything to this man. He just wanted to prove how much more he knew of me than I did. Why?

Did he find it fascinating? Like a story he would tell at a dinner party so his friends could marvel at how close he came to being exotic himself?

It's not a story, it's my life. *My life*; as in *my* story to own and distinguish. Not *his*.

The audacity in a person that makes him feel entitled to proclaim stronger ownership or knowingness over another ethnicity/culture, other than his own, is downright disrespectful, arrogant, and need I say it, ignorant.

Last I heard *humility, gratitude and respect* were the hip characteristics of today's modern new age.

But moments like this happen all the time, on larger scales with greater consequences to the identity of a people who have been around a lot longer than most others.





Wasn't it less than six months ago that an ESPN reporter thought it okay to use a racist Asian slur while reporting on basketball star Jeremy Lin?

For some reason, some people still think it's okay to *'think'* that way about us; just like this man did about me. And it is **not**.

What kind of mentality justifies robbing another country/culture of its own heritage and stories by

replacing the tellers of that story with participants from their own ethnic background; thereby reclaiming the story, the *history*, as their own and completely disrespecting and disowning it from those who it rightfully belongs to?

When you displace a person's identity, you rob them of the greatest right a person has; the right to be and represent themselves. Everyone is entitled to their own identity.

Now as far as the entertainment industry goes, this isn't a case of say, the legendary Meryl Streep playing Australian or Irish, or all the different colors under the white rainbow.

This is the case of a misrepresented minority consistently being misrepresented, as if it was a non-issue.

You would never see non-traditionally cast productions of *Roots*, *A Raisin in the Sun*, or *The Help*. Are you kidding me?! Civil injustices aren't limited to seats on a bus, they extend to how a culture is seen and treated in the telling of its own stories.

And it is this *mentality*, not men, but this *men-tality*, that the Asian American/Asian cultures are fighting in the arts and entertainment, and in life.



To be seen for your humanity first, before your ethnicity, is the goal; not to mention basic manners.

And to respect another culture's rights to represent themselves in the telling of its own stories, is the foundation to any civilized society.

What the storyteller reflects to the audience, is learned and in turn reflected back. Therefore, the seat of the storyteller is a powerful one.

Be mindful as to who is put in that seat, because you are retelling Life.

(photos courtesy of yours truly and Alexey Slidenko)

Yours truly -- Ann Hu

In Addendum:

Recently a group of Asian panelists protested the casting choices of La Jolla Playhouse's new musical *Nightingale*, set in China. There are only two Asians in the cast and the *Emperor of China* is played by a white male.

I am extremely proud of the Asian community I belong to that expressed so intelligently their beliefs and protests,



and who stood up for themselves with dignity and self-respect.

This is my response and my views which reflect mine alone, not the entirety of Backstage magazine.

We, as Asian- Americans in the entertainment and theatrical communities, are not just fighting casting choices.

We are fighting an even more invisible toxic enemy. We are fighting an entire mentality.

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Great read. Glad someone finally spoke up and shame on LaJolla Playhouse. I didnt get to go down there for the panel discussion but a bunch of friends did represent!

Posted by: DC | [July 26, 2012 at 11:25 PM](#)



This is crazy. I was reading up on the La Jolla casting. Yes to speaking up! I hope it happens more often.

Posted by: Dominique | [July 27, 2012 at 06:55 PM](#)



Couldn't agree with you more! You pointed out the heart of the issue. Great article!

Posted by: Florence | [July 29, 2012 at 10:19 AM](#)

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