

On July 9, Seattle Opera hosted “Asian Arts Leaders Respond to *Madame Butterfly*: A Community Forum and Panel Discussion” at SIFF.

The panel discussion opened with a dance performance by Angel Alviar-Langley, also known as Moonyeka. She danced to a poem read by Kehlani, and the song “Ache” by FKA Twigs.

What follows is an edited transcript of the panel discussion.

## **FRANK ABE**

Thank you. That was Angel Alviar-Langley, also known as Moonyeka. She describes herself as a queer Filipina American street-styles dancer who utilizes art creation and organizing to realize a more inclusive and intersectional world for the communities she comes from. Her current projects include the “WHAT'S POPPIN' LADIEZ?!” and ethnographic music project and community events series focusing on the female popping experience. Welcome. Thank you all for coming today. I am Frank Abe. I'm your moderator for this panel. Evan Bennett [Seattle Opera's Learning and Engagement Manager], I'm glad you got a panel, and I'm glad you got a bigger room for the event.

I want to welcome everyone here today. Thank you all for coming. We're here today to talk about *Madame Butterfly*, an opera coming up at Seattle Opera in August. I suspect a number of you are subscribers and are well aware of that. We are here to talk about *Madame Butterfly*, the classic opera and also the centuries old stereotype of that opera. A couple things we're not here to do today. We're not here to focus only on casting, and we're not going to try and fix this production. We're here to talk about the wider issues that can surround the heart of opera, including in this case, yellowface and cultural appropriation. These terms may be new to you. They are defined in the program in front of you, so check that out.

In this discussion we have two distinct audiences as I can see; opera subscribers for whom these issues may be new and for whom this will be a lot to take in; we also have some community members who probably will feel we won't go far enough in the discussion. When I was asked to be the moderator, my first question was, “Jeez, why does Seattle Opera even have to do *Madame Butterfly* in this day and age?” For our discussion, the answer for me was helpful. I learned that due to the size and

scope and scale of opera productions, seasons must be planned many years in advance (as was this production) to rent the sets, costumes, and cast the singers. So that's a given, and since that's given, I think those here on the stage and panel appreciate the chance to share our views about the opera.

We have in this audience today Seattle Opera Board members who came to listen and learn, and I uphold the organization for staging this panel and being willing to acknowledge changes happening around racial equity and the need to adapt and become more inclusive. My sense is Seattle Opera is trying to be part of a larger solution for the international world of opera, which is struggling with the same issues of race, gender, misogyny.

So to our panelists, I encourage you to look on this as a chance to help influence that change. We'll take questions after everyone has a chance to speak. I'm sure there are lots of questions. We'll have a set of shared agreements for this discussion; those are up on the screen. Common sense, you know be nice, be present, embrace discomfort and risk, respect and use confidentiality. Recognize that each person is speaking from their own truth and reject the good bad binary (which means what people say is not all bad, not all good). So, common sense stuff.

We'll take questions here, of course, and by text. So let me introduce the panel. Karl Reyes is a familiar face for you Seattle Opera subscribers. He has been performing regularly with the chorus since 1994. He made his mainstage debut in *Pagliacci* and also performed in *Amelia*, *Aida*, and several other productions.

Dr. LeiLani Nishime is an Associate Professor of Communications at UW. Her 2014 book is called *Undercover Asian: Multiracial Asian Americans in Visual Culture*. She examines the visual representation of multicultural people in mass media and race in science fiction and fashion.

Next, we welcome Jenny Ku. She is a Seattle-based artist who explores body politics, race, and gender under the name The Shanghai Pearl. Her work has been featured at the Seattle Art Museum, Cornish, UW, and many other places.

Angel Alviar-Langley, a.k.a. Moonyeka, is a queer Filipina American street-styles dancer. Let's have another hand for her performance.

Next, Kathy Hsieh works by day at the Seattle Office of Arts & Culture and the city's race and social justice initiative. In her spare time she is an award-winning actor, writer, and director. She leads her own SIS Productions and produces work that creates opportunities for artists of color.

Matthew Ozawa is an opera director (and opera lover) for shows worldwide including Canadian Opera Company, Lyric Opera of Chicago, San Francisco Opera, Santa Fe Opera, Opera Siam, and Macau International Festival. He is founder and Artistic Director of Mozawa, a Chicago-based incubator of collaborative art and artists.

And at the end, Roger Tang has been called the "Godfather of Asian American theatre." He is a Seattle playwright, author of *The Jade Con*, *Shadowed Intent*, and many others. He leads the Consortium of Asian American Theaters and Artists, SIS Productions, Pork Filled Productions, and Asian American Theatre Revue.

So that's our panel. Let me just start and jump right in and break down the *Madame Butterfly* stereotypes and stuff. I want to turn to Jenny, The Shanghai Pearl, and others please jump in. *Madame Butterfly*, western culture, centuries old, means one thing to fans of the art form, but, Jenny, what does *Madame Butterfly* mean to you?

## **JENNY KU**

Good afternoon, everyone. Is anyone unfamiliar with the story of *Madame Butterfly*? You can find a really good synopsis on Wikipedia, but I'll give a quickie. So what it means to me is it is a story of a young Japanese woman (actually she is a child in canon) who has been lied to and coerced by an American soldier. Her entire story arc is based on this man, this white man, this soldier. Her story is painted as a very tragic and heroic thing, and she sacrifices herself at the end and gives her child to this man and his American wife, his real wife, to raise. So to me it actually is just a very for-white-people-by-white-people story. Who wants this story? Who needs more of this story? Those are the kinds of things that go on in my mind. So to me there are layers upon layers of problems with this story. It's a confusing thing for me to know that people love and want to see this story.

## **ABE**

Dr. Nishime, in a wider sense, what does the *Madame Butterfly* image stereotype mean to you?

## **DR. LEILANI NISHIME**

I think a lot of the issues surrounding *Madame Butterfly* have less to do with the actual opera itself or this iteration of it and more to do with the repetition of it. We tell these stories over and over again in all sorts of different forms. On Broadway, they redid it as *Miss Saigon*. And something like *Battlestar Galactica*, which seems so far away, is actually telling that *Madame Butterfly* story again. Someone mentioned that the opera is actually a critique; it's supposed to be a critique of the Americans coming into Japan and the ways that they are treating the people there. I think the problem is that while there is that embedded critique, there is this sense that because we hear this story over and over again, it becomes very naturalized for us. It becomes the only sort of story we can tell. And even though we may say, "Oh, it's so sad that we have to crush Asia in order to save it," it becomes this kind of natural story. This is a familiar story. The danger of these kinds of stories is that they become unconscious to us. In retelling the story there needs to be a way that we can make it alien to ourselves. That we can start thinking about it like: What are the actual implications to this story? And what does it mean to become familiar or comfortable with this story? What does it mean that we don't get alternate stories or alternate narratives to help us rethink our relationship to Asia?

I think that's also part of the issue with the origins of the story and the perpetuation of this story. *Madame Butterfly* was written during a period of American expansionism and American imperialism in Asia, and most of the twentieth century is telling that story again. Right? All the wars we had in Asia—in the Philippines, in Japan, in Korea, in Vietnam—we kept going back to wars in Asia. During that time we were also telling that story to ourselves. So that connection between the ways that we conceptualize Asia and the way that we intervene there militarily are closely intertwined and problematic.

## **KATHY HSIEH**

I want to build on what LeiLani was saying. If you look at *Madame Butterfly* as a critique, you could say, "It can actually be kind of justified." (Especially with the most recent election.) It's a critique of America being—to be honest—the villain, going in and dominating a whole other culture where all they leave behind is tragedy and death. If you look at the relationship that's going on right now, say, between America and North Korea, you could say, "Oh, well that's a political statement." But unfortunately, as LeiLani was saying, we don't look at [the story] in that way. We

look at it as this tragic love story because the music is so beautiful, the artistry is so beautiful, that somehow it washes over us and somehow we don't see the politics of it.

I just finished producing a show with SIS Productions at a Fairytale Festival, and it's the same way with fairy tales. That's when I was really looking at this "*Madame Butterfly* effect," along with how we look at fairy tales. If you look at most fairy tales, all of us teach our kids these fairy tales—*Cinderella*, *Sleeping Beauty*, *Snow White*. They're "Disney-ified" in our movies. What are we really teaching young girls? Especially young girls? We're teaching them that they have to be beautiful, they have to marry the prince to live happily ever after. We're not giving them any agency whatsoever. These are the story frameworks that we're teaching all of our young girls, that we've all been raised with ourselves as women, where we don't have agency in our own lives. When you really look at these story narratives that we keep on passing down from generation to generation, there is something wrong with always focusing on these things from the past when there are so many untold stories that could be told from the perspective of women today.

There is going to be another event following this that Seattle Opera is hosting on July 28, which actually deals with this specific issue of how can we as women define our own agency and story arcs to replace some of these historically problematic ones that exist from the past.

## **ABE**

Thank you, Kathy. That event is Friday, July 28, at the Cornish Playhouse Studio Theatre at 7:30 p.m., and it is called, "Reversing the *Madame Butterfly* Effect: Asian American Women Reinvent Themselves on Stage."

In terms of agency and representing the experiences of marginalized people, Angel, you're a street-styles dancer, but you also study ballet and modern dance. So why do the work that you do and why is important for people of color to see art made and performed by people from their own communities? And how can the traditions of opera and ballet learn from you?

## **ANGEL ALVIAR-LANGLEY**

I'm a street-styles dancer. I actually didn't start training in a studio really until I got to UW. I didn't take a lick of ballet, at all. And it was actually still a strange place for me. I hadn't watched *Madame Butterfly* until I looked it up for this panel discussion

to be honest. I'm real young. I had the same sort of feelings that came up for me when I was learning these classically trained styles in an institution at UW. All these slim, white people. I just felt the same way watching the film. I felt like, "Oh, this is what you think of me, or my community, or my friends?" Which was that I'm delicate or I'm supposed to look like this or I'm subservient. I was going to quit doing stage performance because in Seattle that's what it sort of felt like—I have to be these things.

I ended getting picked up by Au Collective and totally reconsidered. Au Collective is a collective of queer, POC, femme people putting their stories and celebrating their stories on the stage because you don't really see that too often. The first time I saw a Filipino dancer on a stage wasn't too long ago doing modern dance. That was wild.

I think representation and how we're representing each other really matters because I see a lot of people either re-appropriating the cultures or I don't see enough of myself in the spaces. I continued to do stage performance simply because I was teaching these young brown girls in Seattle Public Schools and Highline School District, and their reality now is, "Oh, this is totally a possibility for me, to perform. This is totally a possibility for me to share my story." That's their reality now because I get to be a teacher or my friends do, and I also get to perform and then they get to perform with me. So I always ask the question: How are you representing the people you're telling stories about? If you're going to tell a story about them, why don't you just ask them to be a part of the collaborative process? Or why is the process not already collaborative? What space are you making for them because we're so good at making our own space already. We're kind of tired.

When I'm thinking about where I am seeing myself in classical art: I don't. I don't have access to it. Do you know how much an opera is, ya'll? Do you know how much it costs to go see Pacific Northwest Ballet *Nutcracker*? Oh my gosh. So much money! Okay? Do you know how much it is to take a dance class for ballet? It's a lot. So you have to think about: Are you really being inclusive? Or are you just saying that? Yeah? Okay. That's it. Sorry, I went on about it.

**ABE**

You mentioned cultural re-appropriation, what does that mean to you? How does that all work?

## **ALVIAR-LANGLEY**

Well for me, honestly, if you're going to appreciate a culture, you're going to have to put money in it. You can't exploit it, right? If you really appreciate the culture, you'd just bring those bodies in. I think for me cultural appreciation looks a lot like people sitting back who are, for example, I'd be sitting back for... who do I sit back for? Nobody... It's a lot of practice and understanding your agency, so if you have the power to spotlight someone, I would say go ahead and spotlight that culture that you want to bring to stage. You have that power. If you have that privilege, bring them on stage. Reappropriation is when you simply say, "Oh, I assume this all the time."

I see a lot of hip hop or black culture being re-appropriated all of the time. I think about this even as a hip hop dance teacher. If you're a hip hop dance teacher, how are you giving back? You're making money off a culture. I'm a non-black person of color and so I would think about okay, I'm making money off this culture that wasn't originally mine. What am I going to do to give back? Because it has given me so much. What are you doing to give back? Especially if you're sort of at least financially benefiting off of a culture. I see a lot of stylistic things happening and not enough reciprocation, not enough money coming back. I see all the time; there is such a long list. I just want to frame that question. Why are we asking what is cultural appreciation versus appropriation? I would ask: What are you doing to give back? What are you doing spotlight the cultures you want to spotlight and how are you doing it in a way that isn't harmful?

## **KU**

I just want to add to that. What space are you taking and how are you benefitting? Sometimes it's not just money. There is cultural capital. There are a lot of different ways folks are benefiting from cherry picking other people's cultures. If you Google cultural appropriation and cultural appreciation, there are literally comic strips about it. There are so many ways people have put energy into reframing this and explaining this that we probably don't need to spend a ton of time talking about it, but there are really so many different ways that this has been put out into the world for different brains to grasp it. How are you benefiting? Who is benefitting? Whose stories are being told and by whom? Who is at that table making that decision, and think about, how did that table look that way?

## **HSIEH**

I think there is also something about the replacement of bodies that goes on with cultural appropriation. There was a thing they did at the Boston Museum where they had “Kimono Thursdays.” There was this painting of a woman who was dressed in a kimono, and they invited other people to come in and wear the same kimono and take a picture with the painting. I thought it was fascinating: the protests they lodged for it was they just had Asian American people from the community come and stand there while people were taking these pictures. It made it so uncomfortable for the people trying on the kimonos that they didn’t want to do it anymore. There is something about having those bodies there, having people who this is part of their culture actually standing there, which made it very uncomfortable to be in that sort of fantasy space where you can put on that kimono, put on that culture for that hour and then take it off again.

## **ABE**

It’s not just something you put on and take off. I think we will come back to this subject as we discuss. Angel, you mentioned not seeing yourself in the classics. Karl Reyes, you’re in the classical opera, you sing, there are so few roles for Asians in the opera. What in your experience has been a barrier or an opportunity?

## **KARL REYES**

Yes. It’s a double-edged sword for me. Every single time I’ve come out and auditioned for roles, I try to keep an open mind about what they’re offering that season. Almost always they think of me as a person that would be great in *Butterfly*. And almost always I will be cast as Goro in the production of *Butterfly*. I will call that the black edge of the sword. The lighter edge of the sword—once I get a chance to work with a company, they see what my potential is and what I am able to do. So that opens the door for me to do other things. Starting off as a character tenor and then exploring what else I can offer—that has been my experience.

## **ABE**

Roger Tang, there are so few roles for Asians in the opera but also in film and TV. You’re keeping count. You monitor representation of Asians on the stage and in film and TV. What are the numbers?

## **ROGER TANG**

Basically, there are a number of organizations across the country who are looking at the roles of Asians in mass media like TV, film and all that. There is a study for film that shows that Asian Americans make up less than 5 percent of speaking roles. We're not talking about if you have a line. Only 5 percent go to Asians. That may not seem odd to you but when you consider that half of the Hollywood box office comes from the world, not just the U.S., and more than half the world is Asian, that number seems a bit low. On the stage, in particular, folks like the Asian American Performers Action Coalition did an extensive study in New York, and they showed that for roles on Asian American stages in New York one in three to five percent go to Asian Americans, five percent if you have *King and I* on Broadway.

This may seem again not too surprising, but the thing is the population of Asians in New York and in New York City area is 15 to 20 percent. Similarly, in Seattle, I did a look at a study of roles done here on Seattle stages. Two to four percent of the roles are done by Asians, and the surrounding population is around 15 to 16 percent—18 percent if you include APIs. And of those four percent, half of those are from Asian American theater companies who make it their point to put Asian American faces on stage. So you see the representation on stage and in film has yet to catch up to where the numbers are in reality. Let's not talk about TV, because we'll get into *Hawaii Five-O*, and I don't think we have the time for that right now.

**ABE**

Maybe later, later Roger. We'll get into that later. Okay.

**HSIEH**

I'd like to add my favorite statistic. More white women playing Asian women have won Academy Awards than Asian women have won Academy Awards.

**KU**

I also want to add something to what you said, Karl. Isn't it interesting that we have to wear the tools of our oppressors to get entry into that room to prove we can do x, y, or z. I think that's something to point out, that we have to make white people comfortable and be that colonized POC to get to that table or to show those people that, "Oh we can do the thing." That's just something to chew on.

**TANG**

I was going to add, let me see, there is a joke that goes along with the one play line you said, there are more TV shows that feature cartoon characters than Asian

Americans. That same Apex study in New York found that of the roles that Asian actors got, 95 percent were for roles that specifically called for Asian actors. So basically your Asian actors are never the best actor in the room unless the script calls for it.

## **HSIEH**

Related to what Roger just said, of the Top 50 grossing films in the United States that had female protagonists, they are all cartoon characters except for Whoopi Goldberg in the *Sister Act*. These are for women of color. Right. So women of color are only represented by cartoons in the top grossing films featuring women of color.

## **ABE**

Thank you, so I want to bring in Matthew Ozawa now. Matthew is unique because he is a big opera fan who has also made this art form his career. Matthew, you are Japanese American and now living in Chicago, and you have actually directed a production of *Madame Butterfly* for the Arizona Opera, so I am eager, very eager to hear, Matthew, how on earth does a Japanese American director stage *Madame Butterfly* with integrity?

## **MATTHEW OZAWA**

I know. Good question. First off, it's a pleasure to be here. It's a real honor to get to be a part of this panel and to be a part of this discussion, which actually is not really happening at very many other opera companies in the U.S., so for me this is a huge deal. I am fourth generation Japanese. I am a musician, theater lover, and opera lover, and yes, one of my three careers is opera directing. I have been in it now for 14 years, and I am working my way up from mopping and sweeping the floors to stage managing to assistant directing and now directing. I have to say that it's only in the past two years that I have been able to be a little vocal about my experience or about my feelings on these pieces. I think that for many years I was afraid to lose a job or to not be listened to or afraid I wouldn't be hired back. So I remained silent. I have to say that hearing everyone—the panel is so incredible.

There are many, many issues, obviously. The content of the works themselves transcends beyond just *Butterfly*. There's *Pearl Fishers*, there is *Turandot*, *Abduction from the Seraglio*. There are a bunch of operas that take other cultures

and are viewed through a western lens. Beyond the content of these pieces, for me as a director, I keep asking how are these pieces being interpreted and who are they being interpreted by?

For the most part the tradition of *Butterfly* in America and in Europe and operas [in general] are a Western art form that is interpreted by Caucasian artists, design teams, and directors, and for a very long time, primarily Caucasian casts. I think the interpretation has caused the tradition of the piece to, as mentioned, to be seen in a very special light. In my version of *Butterfly* no one—the Japanese and Americans—is seen in a very good light. But our tradition of it is to show the Americans, through Kate Pinkerton, as the savior. Kate Pinkerton is usually the angelic woman who comes in and saves the day and takes the child away and wants the child. When clearly that is a very, very problematic interpretation of Kate Pinkerton. So there is the issues of the interpretation and how the piece is portrayed and whether people are in yellowface and kimonos and how the whole thing looks. Then there is also the issue of casting. Obviously.

It's a very hefty role. Certain singers are usually hired. There is obviously the issue of colorblind casting. I usually think of color conscious casting. You know, how much effort is a company putting into the hiring of these teams and the artists that are going to portray these characters and bring these stories to life for a modern audience?

What is so interesting is that for most of my career no one has asked me to do any of the Asian opera rep. I primarily do a lot of new opera and unusual pieces and then recently, two years ago, Arizona Opera asked me, "Hey, would you want to direct *Butterfly*?" I said, "Want? I don't know if I want to direct *Butterfly*." Because as many people pointed out, yes, for me, for someone who has grown up with opera and loved it, I never saw myself in *Butterfly*. Yes, the music was beautiful, but I always felt kind of alien to the piece. I felt really frustrated by how directors were portraying it and how this sort of servile and submissive woman was viewed by the audience at the end as, "Oh well, she should have known that he was a jerk and planning to leave her." Or "Oh well, her poor suicide; that's Asian culture to commit suicide if something goes wrong." That is super problematic.

So for years, I just never ever saw myself in it, and it always made me angry every time I either worked in a company that was presenting it or worked on it as an

assistant director hearing directors or teams say, “When I went to Japan and went to the tea ceremony, this was how they kneeled; this was how they used the fan.” And I’m like that’s crazy! You don’t know anything about a culture by going to a tea ceremony! When many companies put on *Butterfly*, they bring in people who know things about kimono or let’s bring in a Taiko ensemble or a tea ceremony to show the community that we, the opera company, care. That is also very problematic because that is glossing over the bigger issues.

So, Arizona said, please direct *Butterfly*. I initially was going to say no, but I decided to take the challenge. Part of the challenge was they wanted me to do a traditional version of the piece. So you can do new staging, but they wanted it to look traditional, so they offered an existing set and costumes. Again I sat with it forever because what does this mean if I’m now directing this piece as one of the only Asian American directors in opera at the moment? I decided to take the challenge, and as it turned out, Arizona Opera cast a very, very, very, very multiracial cast. So we had an African American Suzuki, we had a Latina *Butterfly*, we had a Latino Pinkerton, not a Caucasian, white Pinkerton. It was very mixed and double cast. Seattle Opera double casts everything too. And every single cast was mixed race. So in approaching the piece, I had a lot of issues with the piece itself, but for me, what was so beautiful about it was questioning it. Was it the piece itself, some of the content? Yes, some of the content is problematic. But it was really how it has been interpreted.

I just started to challenge it. Why does *Butterfly* have to be servile and submissive? It doesn’t show that in Act Two. Why is Kate Pinkerton the angelic woman who saves the day and is super apologetic when she only has four lines? Most of the lines are not very nice except for the one to *Butterfly*. What is the truth around her character? A woman who has been on a ship for months and doesn’t probably know that her husband has been cheating on her and has another wife, a Japanese wife? You know, this is a woman who is bringing a half-Japanese half-Caucasian kid back to America. We really think she’s going to take care of this half kid in a society where she is surrounded by other white people? No! No! I questioned all of that. Why do we always see *Butterfly* kneeling in Act Two? Really? She wants to be western. She wants to be American. She denies her culture, and in the end she’s left in neither. She’s neither western nor eastern. She’s rejected by all. She’s totally ostracized, and every single person in that opera is really accountable, a part of what happens to

her and how she's treated as the other. I think there are aspects I try to bring to light in the piece that I feel are relevant to modern society without changing the piece.

I know Heartbeat Opera recently changed the ending of it and recomposed it—you can read the *New York Times* or the *New Yorker* article about it. I think Butterfly takes Trouble and leaves Japan. She does not commit suicide at all. So yes, I'm hoping to direct the piece again, actually. I'm hoping to one day have my own production, a totally new production from a completely Asian American perspective. Recently a lot of companies have been asking me to do *Pearl Fishers*, *Turandot*, and many of them say we want you to do a yellowface / orangeface production, and I have to turn it down because it is very problematic. But the fact that we're all here discussing this and listening to one another and having a dialogue, I applaud Seattle Opera. This is really quite remarkable.

## **ABE**

Well, Matthew, I'd like to follow up real quickly on the Victorian dress of the production. Did you make changes to her house and the furniture and the clothing?

## **OZAWA**

I did, actually. The tradition usually is that once Pinkerton arrives back, Butterfly returns to her more submissive and servile self and is kneeling on the floor. When she's waiting for the boat, she's kneeling on the floor. I decided to have her house filled with western furniture. She'd have gone to the mission quite frequently, and it would make sense that upon Pinkerton's arrival she'd want to be as western as possible. So I had her sitting in a chair, and I had her in a sort of Victorian dress. When she meets Kate Pinkerton in the production that I did, I had Butterfly and Kate actually looking almost identical except for their skin color. They are facing each other in the same clothes, almost the same clothes, but they are different races.

## **ABE**

And how did that, trying to be western, affect her suicide?

## **OZAWA**

Oh! I mean the suicide is a little problematic. But, you know, everyone dies in opera. It's like a thing. I decided that for me it was really important to not have the suicide be based around the Asian ritualism of formal suicide. I had it be actually a completely spontaneous act right at the last second. I tried to make it as poignant

as possible that this woman doesn't know what she's going to do. Suicide is not necessarily the answer, but she's looking at every direction and there is literally no hope. There is no one who can help her and she's left alone, so I had the suicide be last minute, very whirlwind moment, not the normal you know, like, "Here's my Mikado, ritualism suicide." In Arizona, I kept Act One more traditional, so everyone came back after intermission thinking, "Oh, this is a traditional show." Then they were a little more jolted in Act Two. What I got the most complaints about was the interpretation of Kate Pinkerton. Many people were angry that she wasn't nicer or more angelic. It was fascinating that's what they were so upset by.

**ABE**

What was the general reaction of the audience at the Arizona Opera?

**OZAWA**

I mean people loved it. I tried to keep much of it feeling traditional. It looked traditional—people were in kimonos, people were doing Japanese things—although I really stripped it away. The audience still loved it even though they were a little jolted in Act Two. I think people were seeing something they weren't quite used to seeing, but I think they were OK with it. Which I think says a lot. Except for Kate Pinkerton. They were okay with the rest.

**ABE**

Okay, panelists, reactions?

**HSIEH**

When we are talking about *Madame Butterfly* or *The Mikado* or any one of these classics that people have loved because they were brought up with it and the music is one of their favorites, the biggest question they always ask is, "I just love it because I love the culture and I love the music. Why can't we just enjoy something that has always been classically ours?" I do completely respect and understand that sentiment of appreciating a culture and therefore just wanting to be able to see a traditional production of it so you can enjoy that. The reality is: How much do you really appreciate a culture if you're willing to traumatize the people that that culture is supposedly representative of? And a lot of people go, "Well, but, I don't understand how that could be traumatizing to people."

If you were actually able to bring in people, the marginalized voices, to actually share in a collaboration, just as using a Japanese American director, he can relook at it in a way that at least starts moving toward centralizing the voices of the marginalized people that it's supposed to be about. But when you don't do that, lots of times what you end up with are these assumptions of who these people are. What is worse is when you do it in yellowface and you don't even give the opportunity to the artists to at least bring their own holistic humanity to the roles, to at least try to add in layers that may not be there if it's a white director and an all-white cast representing an Asian culture. Lots of times we're completely white-washed out of our own stories, but these are not our own stories because they were not created by us.

I grew up in Seattle; I went to school from preschool all the way on up; I went to college here and we're supposed to be 18.1 percent of the population here. The trauma comes from growing up in a society, and never seeing myself represented on stage, or when our stories were on stage, never seeing people who look like me playing those roles, never seeing ourselves represented in the mainstream in a general way or even stories that are actually our own stories shared.

That creates an invisibility where we are basically rendered powerless because not only do I not see myself and feel like I have role models to grow up to be, but all the other people that I grew up with don't know how to deal with me. I used to do touring educational shows where the librarian would take one look at me and go running from the room. Later on I found out it was because I was the first Asian person that she ever had physical contact with, and she grew up during the era of World War II, where she was told to hate and despise people who look like me. I was 18 going to a ballet class, and wearing my leotard and tights, and this elderly woman was trying to get on the bus with groceries and she couldn't quite make it because she had a cane. I offered her, "Can I help you?" and she then hit me with her cane and told me to go back where I came from. This is in Seattle.

Those are just two of the many, many experiences that a lot of us Asian Americans have, and that is because of a lot of the only images that people have are very stereotypical, even when they are framed in a model minority myth that a lot of us Asian Americans grew up with. The highest level of suicide for women over the age of 64 are Asian American. You have to wonder like, there are so many expectations, even if it's supposed to be a positive, like self-sacrificing, willing to do anything for

everyone, straight A students. These are expectations placed on our youth that are really, really hard to live up to. So whether it's a positive or negative, they create a lot of trauma because we're not looking at people for the fullness of who we are as human beings. If you really feel like you want to appreciate a culture, start by appreciating and getting to know the people that created that culture.

## **ALVIAR-LANGLEY**

Yeah. All of that. I wanted to throw in a wild thought. Knowing I'm not an operagoer, I'm just a street dancer and I learned ballet and modern in college, but I still don't understand the point of showing this piece unless it was adapted differently. I don't see the relevance, I really don't. I don't understand how, you know, especially if opera is trying to draw in new audiences, like how does this draw me in? Because it does the opposite. I went running and screaming away and heartbroken really. The only way I could see this being shown in a way that is [traditional] is if there is so much disclaimer around it, and we know we're watching this as like a lesson that we shouldn't keep showing this. I personally, I really don't understand any other way. You'd probably have to pay me to go and watch this; that's how I feel about it. I'm not going to pay to go watch this, no.

I'm not going to pay to go watch this. Because even just briefly watching a horrible, video adaptation movie version of this on YouTube (because that's what's accessible to me), I couldn't even get through Act Two. I had to read a synopsis. The imagery of it is still really traumatizing for me. Especially since, my mom emigrated from the Philippines and she married a white man so like, it's very reflective of like, that's kind of like my childhood too, so it's not really doing much for me. I'm wondering why is it still going? Can we shift the narrative? Can we do it differently? Just edit it or have a different cast? I'm thinking of ways I'd come and watch this and there are very few things that I would actually keep. I'd have to drastically change it.

## **ABE**

Roger has an idea how you can do that.

## **TANG**

I think part of it is that people—and in this case I do mean white people—should give up the idea that this story is theirs and theirs alone. It's about a Japanese woman and so it should be informed by Japanese perspectives. I think it's very ingrained, this sort of cultural appropriation that it's worth taking and make it our story for our viewpoint alone. I do remember a time, ten years back when, David Henry Hwang, the playwright, was doing a revision of the classical musical, *Flower Drum Song*,

which is based on a novel by a Chinese American author. The biggest thing I heard from people over and over again, musical fans, was: why didn't they leave it alone? Get his own story? David is Chinese American. Why is it "your" story when he's Chinese American? I never got that through to people. I think if this thing about trying to let go of the story and let go of your own perspective. That had a lot of power and a lot of use for all of us to apply to works of art.

**ABE**

Karl?

**REYES**

One thing that we as singers do when we dive into a character is we try to learn as much of the culture as we can. We give this sense of authenticity to the production. In my case, when I did this opera in Tacoma, initially, when I was hired there to sing the role of Goro, we actually worked with a coach and so you know, she taught us all the moves and how to walk Japanese and how to dress Japanese and how to put on your kimono the right way, because you know if you don't do it the right way, you're dead. But aside from all that, even getting everything to the T, one thing I forgot is to actually go back to my family history in the Philippines. My aunt was there for opening night, and she said after the performance, "You're grandmother is going to have a really tough time seeing this show." I said, "Why? Didn't I do a great job? I thought I got the movement down." She said, "It's not that. Your grandmother's brothers were killed by Japanese soldiers during the Second World War, and you playing this role..."

I need to preface a little bit. In that one scene I'm actually abducting the child away from Butterfly because it's bad for business. Goro is all about business. So for my grandmother that's what the Japanese did to our family. That created a different level of conflict in how I approach this character that now had to be three-dimensional on top of singing in a different language that I wanted to relate to. There is so much complexity there. By the way, I love the Japanese culture. I don't know if you know the show, *Best in Show*—"How many kimonos can you possibly have?" I am the five kimono guy. So I do have them. But there is something about learning a different culture that you want to portray and having that conflict inside you that this is also a culture that created suffering for your family. I'm still processing that. I thought I'd share.

**ABE**

Wow, great stories, I feel like I want to start hearing from the audience, do we have any texted questions that were sent anonymously? And Molly is going to read the question to the audience.

**SEATTLE OPERA**

We have a few questions in, one that just came in actually is, “What is the race of the person playing *Madame Butterfly* in the Seattle Opera production?”

**BARBARA LYNNE-JAMISON**

I’m Barbara Lynne Jamison, Director of Education and Community Engagement at Seattle Opera, and I can answer that question quickly. As Matthew said, we do double cast so we will have two casts, one is Armenian and one is Japanese.

**SEATTLE OPERA**

That actually leads into a different question I received. “Why and how Seattle Opera chose to present *Madame Butterfly* and how it was cast, and how it’s being staged.” I don’t know, Barbara if you want to speak to that?

**JAMISON**

I don’t cast, I am Director of Education, but it is cast with a voice in mind. We have historically looked at the voices. This is, as Matthew said, a very difficult role to sing and very few singers, very few sopranos, are able to sing it. So primarily we have looked at just the voice and that has been historically the thing that Seattle in the past has been very proud of—what we have called colorblind casting. As color-conscious casting becomes something we understand we need to be more aware of, we are looking throughout the world to find different singers and doing our due diligence to look beyond the people who are able just to come and audition for us. The casting for the chorus is our basic chorus; there are probably 98 percent Caucasian and 2 percent people of color including Asians. This is a New Zealand production; we have taken this production and rented it. This again happens years in advance, this production comes with the set, the stage director, and that creative team. They all come and put that on with our singers at Seattle Opera.

## REYES

Can I add something, on why is it difficult to cast Butterfly? The role of Butterfly is basically comprised of two different types of voices. The Butterfly in the first act needs a lyric sound that is able to go up to the registers and float. Especially in her entrance. The second act Butterfly is much more of a verismo approach because of the size of the orchestration, and that's where the problem lies. You need to have a voice that is versatile enough to meet the demands of that role.

## ABE

So, questions from the audience.

## AUDIENCE MEMBER

Thanks, Frank. Since Matthew is here visiting and we're really lucky to have you here, and we appreciate you being here and also your background. How did you enter the opera field? And why did you choose this? Because I'm sure you were talented in music and theater management.

## OZAWA

I was raised for a good period of time in San Diego, and I sang in a boys' choir that was hired by San Diego Opera to perform in the children's chorus. So my very first foray into opera was in the children's chorus of *Carmen*. I performed in *Carmen* and *Bohème* and *Tosca*. When I was about nine, a bunch of boys were hired for *Werther*, and I was not included with my other friends. My parents were very straightforward, and they said, "You were not chosen to perform in *Werther* because they needed all white boys and you are Asian."

I'm surprised I still stuck with it at nine when I was told that's sort of how it was. So I realized early on that performing was not for me, so I ended up playing the clarinet for fourteen years, and I thought I was going to be an orchestral musician, hidden away, you know, in the pit. Clarinet ended up not being for me because I still was in love with dance and theater and visual art and all these other aspects. So my parents said, "You should try directing."

The reason why opera happened was because I loved music, I loved theater, I could read the music, and so I was hired by opera companies because in some instances I was the only person who could read some really hard scores. So for example, at the Lyric Opera of Chicago, I was the only person who could read all the ballet music for *Doctor Atomic*. I was the only person who could read the music backstage for *Die*

*Frau ohne Schatten*. I kind of went into opera by accident. I have always been really conflicted about it. Because I deeply, deeply, deeply love it, and I do believe in so many of the stories, but at the same time it's a really difficult career path. But I feel really lucky to actually be making it as an Asian American director.

**ABE**

Any other questions?

**AUDIENCE MEMBER**

So I don't know if this is a question, it's more of a statement. If you can't see me, I'm a middle-aged, white woman. When I was young, I was blonde, very blonde. However, as a young adult, I lived 11 years in Japan. I was married to a Japanese. I remember how he would put me through practices of getting down on my knees and practicing bowing so that my butt didn't go up in the air because that was not the correct way to do it. So there is another perspective. I love opera. I grew up with music. I love *Madame Butterfly*. I love Puccini's operas. I know Puccini has written a lot about heroines who have had tragic endings. I also feel more conflict about *Madame Butterfly* than any other opera I see. Part of it is when I see if there is a traditional set and I see a cast member walking into the so called "Japanese house" and they don't take their shoes off, it's like fingers on a black board for me because, I mean, this was drummed into me for 11 years. I still take my shoes off in my house. I insist that all my guests do if they come to my home. I insist they put shoe coverings on or take their shoes off. This is how drummed into me it became, but I feel very conflicted. I mean, I did not grow up with the same issues that people of color did in American society. I'm fortunate I grew up in white privilege, yet I see kind of weird conflicts myself, and that's all I'm going to say, because I think I could just ramble on and on. It's a weird opera, but I do love it.

**ABE**

Thank you very much. Are there subscribers, opera subscribers who feel conflicted about this, and want to share a thought or a question?

**AUDIENCE MEMBER**

I think my question is more toward the Director of Education. First off I'd like to thank the panel for taking time out of their day and talking to this audience on a beautiful Sunday afternoon. Thank you for sharing your stories. I know it's very hard, especially when you share these stories, especially traumatic ones, over and over again. So I appreciate that emotional labor that you are all doing right now. As a subscriber, I'm looking here and appreciating that Seattle Opera is having this

discussion, but this is a self-selected audience. When people are actually at the performance of *Madame Butterfly*, what are going to be, as one of the panel members said, where are the disclaimers going to be that everyone gets to see before the performance?

## JAMISON

Thank you for that question. So before this, we've been doing some pre-performance exhibits this past year at our operas. Some of you may have seen them. We had a little bit of historical context for *Mary Stuart*; we had a little introduction of the Queens. For this one, we are pairing this piece, if you will, we will be doing a piece we commissioned a few years ago called *An American Dream*, which is a story about the incarceration of Japanese American during World War II here in this part of the country specifically. We commissioned this piece and performed it in 2015. How many of you have probably seen it? We're going to be doing it again in September, and if you were there at *An American Dream*, you saw pre-performance lobby exhibits that depicted the Executive Order 9066, the seventy-fifth anniversary of that is this year. We have photographs of incarcerated, evacuees, heading out from their homes being taken away.

## ABE

The exhibit was immersive. We had to go through guards, who stamped our tag, and we had barracks there, got to lie in a barracks bed. It was totally interactive; it was amazing.

## JAMISON

It was totally interactive; now our audiences were a lot smaller for that. It's a very intimate opera, and it's a much smaller scale, so we had fewer people. So we won't have quite that level [of interaction before *Butterfly*]. People won't be checked in; we did have people checked in just as they were checked in to the camps. We had people go through that experience, and some people showed up who had been through that experience and said no thank you very much I don't need to do that again. We appreciated that and honored that, but we know that we all need to experience a certain level of that to feel empathy for the people that we were going to see on the stage. For *Madame Butterfly* we will have an exhibit that shows this, and what we hope to do is draw the line between the imperialism we're going to see in the theater and the consequences throughout history in our own country and the damage it has done.

## **HSIEH**

I just wanted to add to Barbara's statement. The history and the effects of which are still being felt today.

## **NISHIME**

I also wanted to respond to the comment by the woman... up here on the left. Yeah. It felt so resonant to me. I love popular culture. I work on it, I run on it, I am immersed in it, but so much of it is very troublesome for me. So I love *Breakfast at Tiffany's*. I'm a huge Audrey Hepburn fan, but as most of you know, the Japanese caricature in there is horrific. Yeah, I love this movie. I think there is something powerful in that ambivalence and confronting that and thinking about why is it that we love pieces that in many ways are conflicting with our belief system. In what ways do I think other parts of that movie allow me to be okay with some of the racism in it? So thinking about what's the give and take there and how is it that we actually engage in popular culture? I think asking those questions and sitting with that discomfort, confronting it, not turning away saying I love this movie so I'm not going to care about that part. But allowing yourself to feel that full range of emotions as you are seeing that opera can be really powerful and really transformative.

## **SEATTLE OPERA**

And we have another question texted in. For Angel. Can you speak about your performance piece this afternoon?

## **ABE**

Yeah, Yeah, tell us about that.

## **ALVIAR-LANGLEY**

Yes. Yes. Hello. I chose two different musical pieces. The first one is actually a poem. It is read by Kehlani but it is not by Kehlani, but I will give you that updated information on the Facebook page. I think a lot about how that piece reflects my feelings around being a woman, and how that piece is read by a woman of color, written by a woman of color and I also did another piece to FKA Twigs called "Ache." That was the track. Again this is a woman of color who produced her music, sang it, and wrote it. I resonate with that, and I think often times when I do performance pieces, I try my very best to figure out how do I celebrate my story and how am I being, really true how I am performing it? The song "Ache" really had to do with me being a woman of color in this space, and also celebrating the fact that I'm a street

dancer who is you know, in a lot of different ways, intersected in classical dance. I'm not dancing in a battle right now. I'm dancing for this audience, for this very particular event. So it was kind of a response to how I was feeling about this whole set up.

**ABE**

Angel, tell us about the second annual, WHAT' S POPPIN' LADIEZ?!, convention.

**ALVIAR-LANGLEY**

I can do that. So WHAT' S POPPIN' LADIEZ?! is a street dance style that came from the Bay Area in the late mid-70s. There's not many women that do it. I'm probably the only woman in Seattle who is actively pursuing popping right now besides my little students that I train that are young women. When I was struggling at UW, finding isolation there, I also had to be honest about how I felt isolated in popping as well. So it was like, if I get this grant, I guess I have no excuse but to do an event where I just fly all of my idols into one space. So I did it the first time last year, which was super wild, and it's going to happen again where these women poppers are going to speak their own stories. People think I'm crazy—especially the men in the popping community and the hip hop community, and the men in general think I'm crazy—when I say this gender violence happens even in these dance spaces that are supposed to be this subcultures where you're supposed to feel more safe. But I don't. I have these women come and battle, perform, showcase, and panel for this weekend. The weekend is July 28<sup>th</sup> – 30<sup>th</sup>, and most of the events are free, and you can find the event on Brown Paper Tickets; that like the only event of the series that's ticketed. Otherwise at Washington Hall there is going to be a main event and battle July 29<sup>th</sup> and on the 30<sup>th</sup> at the waterfront there will be a showcase. You can find the event information on WHAT' S POPPIN' LADIEZ?! And I think it's also on *SeattleDances*.

**ABE**

So it's Washington Hall.

**ALVIAR-LANGLEY**

Friday there is Massive Monkeys. If you want to learn, that's where you go, and then after that Theatre off Jackson there will be a documentary screening of last year's WHAT' S POPPIN' LADIEZ?!. It's a documentary by another API woman, and it was crazy good. It's called "Battlegrounds." That's the ticketed event on Brown Paper Tickets, so if you just look up WHAT' S POPPIN' LADIEZ?!, then there will be a panel discussion kind of like this one. And then there will be live performances and a

reception at the Theatre off Jackson and then the 29<sup>th</sup> we have the battle, and the 30<sup>th</sup> you have the showcases. Yes. It's a lot.

## **AUDIENCE MEMBER**

Hello. I just have one question, how is this opera viewed in Japan?

## **ABE**

Anyone? Matthew? No idea? No idea.

## **JESSICA MURPHY MOO**

I can speak to that. My name is Jessica Murphy Moo, and I work with Seattle Opera. I'm the publications editor, writer, and librettist. I can only answer this question because I just last week interviewed Yasko Sato, who is singing Cio-Cio-San and I asked her this question. I said that there is some controversy about this opera and the story in the United States and I'm curious what the conversation is about this piece in Japan. And the translator was speaking with her for a little while and then the translator came back to me with a question: "What's the conversation?" So she was not aware of the American discussion—this is going to be her U.S. debut as well. So this kind of a conversation is not happening there at least as far as her answer was to me. She said it is a very well-loved opera. She did say often times people will look at a set and say that does not look Japanese at all and that in some of her actions the character doesn't seem Japanese to a Japanese audience. What she loves about the role is the character's strength. She talked a lot about how she interprets the character and sees strength in this woman, so I think it will be really interesting to see her interpretation of this character on our stage.

## **ABE**

You did *American Dream* right? Yeah. Well, you see the difference of Japanese and Japan Americans, how the experience of Japanese Japan is completely different than Japanese America.

## **MURPHY MOO**

Yes, we didn't get to get into this in our interview, but of course, when we talk about yellowface and the visceral reaction an American audience would have to that, that is because we are American. Japan doesn't have the same history that we have here in the U.S., so there is very different context.

## AUDIENCE MEMBER

This is a question mostly for Matthew. I'm just curious, to what extent you see in the larger American opera world conversation around decentering the white European canon, whether it is to champion new works or more aggressively reinterpreting the classics. What's your prognosis for things that are happening?

## OZAWA

"My Prognosis"... Since 2008, I have seen a huge shift in the opera community and the industry at large. I know that many companies are losing a lot of subscribers, they are losing audience members, they are not bringing in young audience members to fill the houses, so opera companies are starting to go into two totally different directions. Some companies sit in the middle. But some operas are going more traditional, like we have to do it exactly the way we think it should be done for *Bohème* and *Tosca*, and *Butterfly* and the traditional canon, and primarily bringing those pieces back to life over and over and over again because those are the audience favorites.

Then you have the other companies that are actually going in the totally opposite direction and are championing new works. So I have found I am kind of in this middle zone because I am working for both companies. I am working for companies that want the traditional approach and other companies that want to move into a different direction.

For example, next summer, I'll be directing *An American Soldier*, which is a world premiere of David Henry Hwang and composer Huang Ruo, based on a true story of Danny Chen. Many of us know this story, and we're bringing this to light with an Asian American playwright and composer. I'm directing it for Opera Theatre of Saint Louis. That's an opera company that's saying, "Hey! We actually want to tell this story, and we want to try and do this the best that we can with the people in the industry who may be able to tell this story." And on the flip side, yes, there are many companies to do the traditional rep in orange or yellowface. What's interesting is that many of those companies are willing to have private conversations about the issue, but they don't want to have a public dialogue about it. I think for many companies, yes, it takes a huge effort when these pieces are chosen so many years in advance, when singers who can sing it are fairly limited, and also looking at a broader scope of performers, directors, and design teams. I think some of the big companies are resistant to opening that door. But what's very interesting too is the

communities across the U.S. at large are starting to protest these shows. So I have also gotten a lot of artistic directors and heads of companies writing me saying, "Wait, what happened? The community is coming against our *Turandot*." And I'm like, yeah, I mean, that's good that we're having this conversation behind closed doors, but there is a lot of work to be done with the public. So yes, there are two sides I'm seeing in the industry.

**ABE**

Barbara, do you want to follow up with anything?

**JAMISON**

Sure! We at the Seattle Opera know that we have a lot of work to do. The opera world has a lot of work to do. We feel one of the first steps is to listen and get out of our bubble and hear, and we are grateful you all are no longer silent. Thank you for sharing your voices with us today so we can learn. Our next steps at the Seattle Opera are to continue to listen, and we are doing this with SIS productions on July 28<sup>th</sup>. We hope you'll all be there. We hope you'll come to see our *Madame Butterfly*. We'll have post-performance talks, and we hope you'll share your perspective with us. We'd love for you to see this show and experience it and continue to have a dialogue about this piece that is continuing to play across America. We know that it is different here than other places. We have created race, and race is very specific to where we are because we made it. It's going to be different in Seattle than in Chicago, and it's going to be different in America than it is in Japan. But we need to undo these things that are done, and we all have a role to play in that. We hope that this is the beginning of our role. We're going to have *An American Dream* in September, and it's going to look forward as well and look into the current issues and not just the historic, but what is happening today, post 9/11 and in the Muslim American community. How does that resonate with what happened post Pearl Harbor in the twentieth century? We're going to continue these conversations and dialogue even with the help of some leaders in the community.

Our Board is here; we have representation from our Executive Committee, our President and Chair of the Board. Could I have our Board members who are in attendance please stand? We are grateful for their leadership and their commitment to making Seattle Opera a place where everyone feels at home in the audience and sees themselves represented on stage. We have a significant number of staff and an Equity Committee. Could anyone who is a staff member or leadership or any level of the staff please stand?

So we will be continuing this dialogue and our intention is, later in August once *Madame Butterfly* has closed, to start to come together with some leadership from the community and to absorb what we've heard from all of these forums, starting today and later this month. Then we'll have post-performance talks and decide what we need to do at Seattle Opera in order to make changes. How can we make these changes? And what can we reasonably do and on what kind of timeline? We intend to share that back to the community as a statement of what our intentions are to be more equitable and inclusive and diverse both on the stage and in the audience and in the repertoire that we choose. So thank you so much for all being here and everything you've done.

**ABE**

Thank you, Barbara, thank you audience, thank you to our panelists, and thanks Seattle Opera for a willingness to foster a meaningful dialogue with our community, which will lead to a more equitable and more inclusive performances. Thank you very much for coming.