

Cultural Daily

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Knowing What It's Cut With: An Addict's Guide to Entertainment

Kathleen Antonia Tarr · Wednesday, May 18th, 2016

When Nate Harper (not his real name) stormed out of the room and then the building – without a word of “goodbye” – we were instantaneously aware that something racist awaited our *Lion King* auditions. Hoping for the role of Shenzi, the hyena made famous by Whoopi Goldberg’s voice-over in the movie version, we suddenly realized “we are all Black” along with everything that status bears in the modern casting process. As ominously as that door closed behind Nate, the other opened to us, one by one. We each exited that audition room with stories of being told variations of “be more ethnic,” “sass it up,” and “can you...?” with a head roll added for definition. I was directed toward the latter, and my noncompliance further sealed my (non)casting fate when it followed, “Because there are so many ghetto hyenas in Africa?”

It certainly wasn’t the first or last time I would be directed to act a stereotype with such unsophisticated language. After performing in *Menopause, the Musical* (“MTM”) for more than six months, director Kathryn Conte instructed me to “be Blacker.” Although she had also directed me early on that my character was “a Condoleeza Rice type,” the amount of Blackness I brought to the role was deemed insufficient, and following my perceived deficiencies and producer Jeannie Linders’s email to staff that “This is happening because [Kathleen] refuses to act more ‘black,’” Linders fired me the day before Thanksgiving 2005.

I remain incredulous, distressed, and enraged to the point of flipping the bird to the words “Menopause The Musical” on a presentation screen while a stranger shared the outings her support group arranged. I flipped multiple birds to posters for MTM in Harrah’s, Las Vegas, where I accidentally booked a last minute get away clearly without enough information about what entertainment Harrah’s supports. These primal reactions are tame by comparison to an urge I won’t share when I saw Linders’s doppelganger strolling near the edge of a very deep pool at a resort in Cancún.

Of course, MTM audiences who could be the wiser are not, laughing at a character who they in reflection might realize is a loud, bug-eyed, tokenized, and ignorant trope, and although Goldberg’s original Shenzi was all Whoopi, I doubt many audiences have watched the musical and wondered why the hell a hyena would sound like a stereotype of Compton (I emphasize stereotype in large part because one of my good friends from Compton used to walk to school wearing a kimono and chopsticks in her hair because she was in love with Bruce Lee ... yes, a kimono is Japanese; she was eight. Also, I’ve never heard anyone from Compton sound like those damned *Lion King* hyenas).

That audiences “could be the wiser” is part of the problem. They’re not. They crave, clamor for, and mainline entertainment media without much concern over what these drugs are cut with. The

U.S. judiciary also seems willfully ignorant, offering little by way of regulating the industry's discriminatory business practices which most gatekeepers simply justify as necessary to maximize profits. Can't every U.S. business claim commercial interests justify discriminatory hiring practices? We are quite the bigoted nation after all.

Director Ridley Scott said of the White-centric casting of *Exodus: Gods and Kings* that he couldn't do otherwise. "I'm just not going to get it financed," an understanding underscored by studios that denied Mario Van Peebles funding because he wouldn't star a Tom Cruise type in his story of the Black Panthers and financiers that denied funding for Danny Glover's film about Toussaint L'Ouverture, leader of the Haitian independence movement during the French Revolution, with a swift, "It's a nice project, a great project ... where are the white heroes?"

Race discrimination in employment is never justified under U.S. law, and consumer preference can't erase that prohibition, but you wouldn't know it by the way the courts treat the matter. When two African American men sued ABC for discriminatory casting of *The Bachelor* and *The Bachelorette* in 2011, the court rejected their complaint in order to protect casting decisions ... and audiences launch those shows high in the ratings without ever reflecting upon how racist the foundations are or the red herring First Amendment concerns.

Even a show like *Fresh Off The Boat* emphasizes that the goal is entertainment, not (racial) message. Writer Ali Wong said at a recent talk at Stanford University – *Seeing Yellow: A Night With The 'Fresh Off The Boat' Family* – that she and producer/writer Nahnatchka Khan share the philosophy that FOB is not trying to make a statement. It's not that some art isn't working hard to send a specific message to its audiences. Also at Stanford last week was the staged reading of Mary Kathryn Nagle's *Sliver of a Full Moon* which focuses on the Violence Against Women Act and the impact on Native American communities. "My hope is that *Sliver of a Full Moon* will inspire America's future lawyers and leaders to question the strands of colonialism that continue to flow thru the Supreme Court's federal Indian law jurisprudence. I hope the play will inspire everyone to work to erase them," says Nagle about the work. Nevertheless, even in Nagle's important script in which heritage is crucial, the *worker* cannot be discriminated against because of racial difference from the *character*, even though that race may be germane to the story. Similarly, limiting gendered roles to cis applicants/auditioners is not *necessary* as U.S. law only permits.

It is likely easier for audiences to understand the illegality when illustrated in the audition process. A casting agent – trying to ensure a client's preference that no interracial couples *audition* together – postponed a Black woman's taping by sending her out of the audition room after she and a White male entered; the casting agent then asked of waiting auditioners, "Are there any White women here for Humira?" The agent – a likeable guy by all accounts including mine – tried to knead the racial tension out of my shoulders by insisting it wasn't he who demanded such but the client. Still, these atrocities wouldn't happen if there weren't so many people enabling them including an Equal Employment Opportunity Commission agent who casually responded that there was nothing to enforce.

The topic of employment law is frustratingly absent most discussions of Industry hiring practices. Likewise culminating last week: Lily Tung Crystal's exceptional advocacy as part of Ferocious Lotus – a San Francisco based theater company – led to a discussion among arts community members about equitable representation. Another Bay Area theater company, Lamplighters Music Theater, had intended a production of *The Mikado* which seemed to endorse yellowface as well as the evaporation of leading roles for anyone other than White auditioners. The conversation produced a number of good questions about where we might come together as an arts community, but any semblance of strategic planning excluded legal discussion.

Arguably more devastating than exclusions are the on-set sexual harassment and assaults that Amy Pietz of *Caroline in the City* discussed at the 2015 State Bar of California Annual Meeting

including a story of unwelcomed digital penetration of Pietz's colleague while the cameras were rolling. I myself have heard many stylists talk about celebrities groping and grabbing them from their make-up chairs, and, [reportedly](#), women who worked on the television show *Nash Bridges* had to waive any claims of sexual harassment before being allowed to work.

There are websites dedicated to logging the discriminatory saturation including *Shit People Say To Women Directors (& Other Women In Film)*, #MyYellowfaceStory, and articles that add to the landscape like *What It's Really Like to Work in Hollywood* (*If you're not a straight white man.)* and *IT HAPPENED TO ME: An Oscar Winner Bullied Me So Badly That I Quit the Film Industry*, but why isn't there more public concern about how commonplace this behavior is? I personally fell out of the running for a lead character in a promising pilot because I would not join the writer/director in his hot tub, and my lead role in an independent film was recast after I suggested that all things being equal (like talent), my romantic co-star should be Asian if possible to counter desexualizing stereotypes of Asian men. I am told White males frequently aren't confronted with a casting couch and get to offer as much input as they like about their characters without penalty. I've seen White male thespians scream at directors, throw wooden hangers against walls, show up late to rehearsals and shows, never learn their lines, and continue thriving in the business of show. When do we as a society decide enough is enough?

The reason equity in entertainment industry hiring matters so much to me personally is because, yes, I want the law to be followed and enforced, and I want industry workers to be able to get jobs without being dismissed because of immutable characteristics, especially those that have such a long history of oppression like race, gender, age, sexual orientation, and disability. Mostly though, I'm just tired of how humans interact with each other and this planet, and I believe given how much entertainment influences our perceptions of each other, nondiscrimination in hiring might help.

The influence around the world is devastating. My friend, Wii, just returned early from the Peace Corps (Thailand), unable to stand any more of the "jigaboo memes" as she called them and what felt like utter lack of support in-country. "Go wash the Black off," her host family matriarch told her as she also hoped aloud that Wii would get hit by a bus. I can't help but wonder if "White heroes" weren't peddled around the world, would Wii have been treated that way? Skin whitening is a huge industry in Thailand with other volunteers noticing, "Everyone is so white on television." Such societal norms seem an invading species, not natural to Thailand's flora.

The *FOB* episode "The Manchurian Dinner Date" pre-screened at the Stanford event likewise reflected in a meta way the impact of discriminatory media on real world perceptions. Constance Wu's brilliantly portrayed mom character, "Jessica Huang," doesn't want her sons dating non-Chinese girls. There ensue the usual sitcom plot twists, but in the end, Jessica accepts her son Eddie's White girlfriend, Alison. The episode hit too close to home for me. Not only am I painfully aware every time I watch *FOB* that the father character, Randall Park's "Louis Huang," is not remotely sexy in its portrayal, but also I was forced to remember my best bro from college who never introduced me to his mother because I am not Chinese (or simply *am* Black). Our long friendship eventually ended when he realized the bigoted origins of his behavior and chose to deal with it by never speaking to me again.

There are real consequences to these images we self-inject. ... but really, how is one going to lead an intervention for seven billion addicts?

Top image: Shenzi from The Lion King. Courtesy Walt Disney Pictures.

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