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Conscious Casting and Letting Playwrights Lead

Posted February 14, 2018

by David Valdes Greenwood

<http://howlround.com/conscious-casting-and-letting-playwrights-lead>

Can a Japanese family be Mexican? That question was at the heart of an email exchange with a theatre doing one of my plays. It wasn't really a debate; the roles had already been cast. But the director wasn't trying to pull a fast one—in writing my play's character notes, I had sent mixed messages about what I valued and expected. And I know I'm not alone in still learning how to navigate this terrain.

The debates over so-called “color blind” and “color conscious” casting have been heated in recent years, especially when a theatre's decisions do not align with a playwright's wishes. Sometimes, a theatre contravenes the express indications of the author without permission (as happened to Lloyd Suh's **Jesus in India** (<http://www.playbill.com/article/university-cancels-production-of-jesus-in-india-after-playwright-voices-concern-over-casting-of-white-actors-com-371401>)); sometimes (as in the infamous 2017 **Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf** (<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/21/theater/a-black-actor-in-virginia-woolf-not-happening-albee-estate-says.html>)), a theatre makes a choice without permission because it feels that ethnicity is not specified, only to discover otherwise mid-stream.

More often, however, the shoe is on the author foot, so to speak. What should you, as a playwright, do when a theatre **does** ask if they can depart from your character descriptions, leaving you to determine how color- and gender-conscious the play must be? If you're a playwright whose writing is intentionally diverse, how do you decide when to draw firm lines in the sand and when to be open to interpretation?

“ What should you, as a playwright, do when a theatre does ask if they can depart from your character descriptions, leaving you to determine how color- and gender-conscious the play must be?”

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LOG IN WITH**OR SIGN UP WITH DISQUS** Name **gwangung** • 3 days ago

Oh, bravo. What a thoughtful consideration of casting and characters!

It's an issue that a lot of marginalized communities are also discussing (Asian American, etc.), so the answers are not cut and dried, but are evolving and developing. But let's think about them!

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**David Valdes Greenwood** > gwangung • 3 days ago

Thanks, gwangung. I think when we start acknowledging, as you say, that "cut and dried" is going to remain elusive, we allow ourselves more latitude to dive into the thicket and really explore.

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**Patrick Gabridge** • 3 days ago

Great piece, David. Glad to be part of the discussion.

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**Pete Riesenber** • 3 days ago

“Does trans mean trans only, or non-binary or genderqueer as well?”

I was recently faced with this very question concerning the character of transgender woman. It was always my intention that the role be cast with someone who identifies as a woman. Preferably transgender actress, but a cisgender actress would be acceptable.

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