



Yellow Face

by David Henry Hwang
Directed by Leigh Silverman

May 10–July 1, 2007
Mark Taper Forum

Yellowface? In this day and age?—DHH in *Yellow Face* (2007)



Share your thoughts on *Yellow Face*
and its themes at our website:
PLAY.CenterTheatreGroup.org/forums

How to Use this Discovery Guide

Yellow Face by David Henry Hwang is a sly comedy about race relations in America. The play asks provocative questions about racial identity and, on another level, examines the social biases, both casual and institutionalized, that target Asian-Americans and, indeed, any outsider to mainstream American culture. Due to the autobiographical yet fictional nature of the play, it is tricky to distinguish between fact and fantasy, but there's no mistaking the tough questions that Hwang asks his audience. This Discovery Guide will provide some historical context for the events and perspectives shared in the play, as well as charting effective means to support the playwright's dialogue beyond the perimeters of the play-going experience.

Vocabulary words are in **bold** type. Definitions are within each section.

OBJECTIVES OF THIS DISCOVERY GUIDE

Examine the social and cultural dynamics of contemporary Asian-America

Spark discussion and appreciation of the way playwrights inhabit their plays

Explore your own racial identity and its relation to your community

Understand political satire and documentary drama

Study the roles of truth and fiction in theatre

DISCOVERY GUIDE CREDITS

Doug Cooney, Discovery Guide Writer, is a playwright and novelist for young people. His play *The Final Tour* was developed at Sundance Institute Theatre Labs. His youth musical *Nobody's Perfect*, adapted from his novel and co-written with actress Marlee Matlin, premieres at the Kennedy Center in October 2007. *Battledrum*, a youth musical about Civil War drummer boys, premieres at Eckerd Theatre Company in Florida in July 2007.

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The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line—the relation of the dark to the lighter races of men in Asia and Africa, in America and the islands of the sea.

—W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903)

Where Are You *Really* From?

EVERYONE IN AMERICA is aware of race. Race informs our families and communities: where we live, how we live, who we live with and even what we eat. Race sets our educational goals, shapes our career paths and marks our ambitions. It influences everything from the privileges we take for granted, to the treatment we receive from police officers, to the ready insults we hurl at other drivers in a traffic jam.

Since race is experienced at a personal level, each individual approaches the subject with **entrenched** wisdom. We hold beliefs about race with such certainty that they might as well be written on our bones. Because it is difficult to challenge and release these convictions, it is important to respect and honor such closely-held beliefs, especially as we attempt to gain new insights into the impact of racism in our world.

As an interactive tribal people, we tend to band together in groups that feel safe and supportive. But what makes us belong to one particular group or another? One might look at **genetic** origins and track bloodlines back to African, Arab, Asian, East Indian, Scandinavian, Hispanic, Native American or Persian roots, among the many races identified by geneticists in their study of the human species. One might identify with a father's racial identity over a mother's, or vice versa. Our choice can depend on many things, but the factors that weigh into the decision depend on a matter of priorities. Some people identify more strongly with a faith community or an ethnic group; others draw lines around gender or sexual orientation.

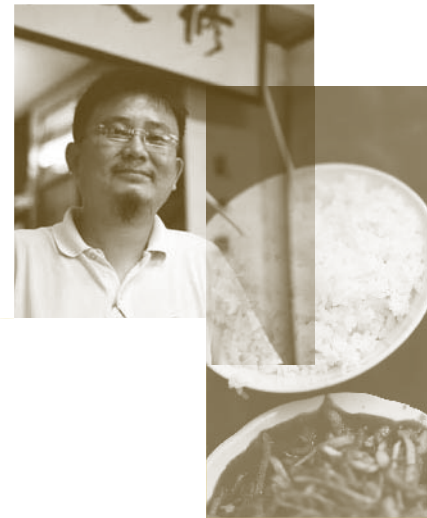
Race theorists believe that at the root of all these issues is power. We choose to belong to groups that empower us; they make us feel safe and powerful. We view other groups with prejudices or **biases** that reinforce our own group. In addition, an individual choice of racial or ethnic identity is largely determined by visibility. One might choose a group because it heightens his or her visibility in the world or, conversely, one might choose a group because it allows a person to vanish within the pack, to be absorbed inside a community and essentially to become invisible. Arguably, a group identity might allow an individual to be both visible and *invisible* at the same time.

Vocabulary

Bias: A preconceived opinion or feeling formed without knowledge, either favorable or unfavorable

Entrenched: Firmly and securely established

Geneticist: An expert or specialist in the study of the transmission of characteristics or traits from parents to offspring through the genes



Exercise

Your teacher will show you some pictures. Identify which individual is the police officer, the teacher, the criminal, the banker, the artist and the sales clerk.

Police officer:

Teacher:

Criminal:

Banker:

Artist:

Sales clerk:



Yellow Face Synopsis

IN HIS COMEDY *Yellow Face*, Tony Award-winning playwright David Henry Hwang revisits his own life story and playfully mixes fact with fiction to offer a satiric examination of racial identity in America. In 1990, Hwang leads a group of Asian-Americans to protest the “yellowface” casting of a white British actor as a **Eurasian** character in the musical *Miss Saigon*, headed for Broadway.

Two years later, Hwang uses the *Miss Saigon* casting controversy as the basis for a Broadway-bound farce about race called *Face Value*. Hwang unwittingly casts Marcus Dahlman, a non-Asian actor, as his Asian leading man. As the play struggles in out-of-town tryouts amid bad reviews, Hwang learns that his lead actor is actually 100% white. The playwright finds himself the architect of a charade to make the actor appear Asian to the public, even suggesting “Marcus Gee” as a more Asian-sounding stage name. Ultimately, the actor is replaced before the Broadway run, but the show flops anyway, and Hwang returns to Los Angeles to work as a television writer. He also swallows his pride and accepts his father’s offer to serve on the **board of trustees** for his father’s bank.

In the meantime, much to Hwang’s chagrin, Marcus Gee is increasingly successful in posing or “**passing**” as an Asian actor. When Hwang confronts Gee on the misrepresentation, Gee counters that he has responsibly embraced the function of an Asian-American role model. He insists that he feels more welcome and fulfilled as an Asian actor than he ever did before.

To Hwang’s increasing frustration, he and Gee repeatedly cross paths professionally—most notably when Gee is questioned in an investigation of Asian-American donations to presidential campaign funds and Hwang is implicated in an overseas **money-laundering** scandal related to his father’s bank. These events, coupled with the trial of Wen Ho Lee, an Asian-American scientist wrongfully accused of espionage, generate tremendous media attention, casting a suspicious eye on the Asian-American community, from an arguably racist perspective.

When Hwang himself is approached by a newspaper reporter wanting to “clear the air” on the scandals, the playwright realizes he has the essential elements for a new play—one in which his personal struggle might address greater issues of race in America.

The Legal Side of Race

What’s the big deal? Why can’t David ask Marcus during his audition if he is Asian? Why can’t an employer ask a person about race?

Under Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, every individual in America is protected against employment **discrimination** based on race, color, national origin, sex and religion. The law means that no one can be denied

employment based on race or perceived race, including race-linked characteristics like hair texture or facial features or marriage to or simple association with someone of a particular race. The bottom line is that race cannot weigh into the decision to hire someone.

In the theatre, this restriction poses a thorny problem. If a role calls for a particular race, the casting director may ask the actor about his accent or if he speaks a particular language. Clues can also be found on the actor’s resume:

“Where are you really from?” is a question I really hate answering. ... More than anything else that unites us, everyone with an Asian face who lives in America is afflicted by the perpetual foreigner syndrome. We are figuratively and even literally returned to Asia and rejected from America.

—Frank H. Wu, *Yellow* (2001)

Vocabulary

Affinity: A feeling of closeness, liking or belonging with a person, group or idea

Board of trustees: An appointed or elected body that supervises an organization

Discrimination: Treatment of a person based on the group to which that person belongs rather than on individual merit

Eurasian: Of mixed European and Asian descent

Money-laundering: Concealing the source of illegally obtained money

Passing: The act of permitting oneself to be accepted as a member of a group by denying one’s own ancestry or background

What is his last name? Has he played many traditionally ethnic roles? Has he worked in ethnic theatre companies? But the casting director may not ask the actor’s race. The actor playing Marcus Gee in the Center Theatre Group production of *Yellow Face* was cast in part because he does not look Asian but has an indefinable quality that leaves the *possibility* of Asian-ness open. The CTG casting directors still do not know the actor’s racial or ethnic background.

Exercise: Stereotype Yourself

With what group do you feel the closest **affinity**? Identify your own association based on race or ethnicity.

I identify myself as _____

With that identity in mind, rank your responses to the following three questions based on a scale of 1 (lesser) to 10 (greater).

1. How important is this racial or ethnic identity to you?

2. How obvious is this racial or ethnic identity to someone who does not know you?

3. How highly regarded is this racial or ethnic identity by society as a whole?

With that same identity in mind, answer the following three questions.

4. List three ways in which this racial or ethnic identity is viewed positively by society.

- a. _____
- b. _____
- c. _____

5. List three ways in which this racial or ethnic identity is viewed negatively by society.

- a. _____
- b. _____
- c. _____

6. List three aspects of your racial or ethnic identity that the world does not know or appreciate.

- a. _____
- b. _____
- c. _____

Now Squint

A **NON-ASIAN ACTOR** cast in an Asian role wears make-up to “slant” his eyes and change his skin tone, takes on a different manner of gesture and walk, and alters his voice to an “**Oriental**” accent to approximate Asian speech.

The practice is known as “yellowface”—a reference to its cousin, “blackface”—and it has **permeated** the history of performance in western culture. It originated at a time before Asian actors had emigrated to the west to be available for Asian roles. The practice of yellowface, however, continued even after the arrival of talented and skilled Asian performers. One explanation is that theatrical and film producers were more comfortable with a white box-office name than an Asian unknown. Asian actors were relegated to minor roles as servants, laundrymen, cooks or enemy soldiers.

Long after blackface was deemed racist, yellowface roles endured on stage, film and television. Hollywood celebrities who have worn yellowface include Fred Astaire, Ingrid Bergman, Marlon Brando, Katharine Hepburn, Jerry Lewis, Ricardo Montalban and John Wayne, among many others. Mickey Rooney played a notoriously outrageous parody of a Japanese man in the movie *Breakfast at Tiffany's* and Yul Brynner built a career around his portrayal of the Siamese king in the musical *The King and I*.

And yellowface hasn't gone away. John Belushi created a famous Samurai character on *Saturday Night Live*. Eddie Murphy wears yellowface in his current film release, *Norbit*. As these examples suggest, yellowface is used for comic effect. For some reason, people still find yellowface funny, while blackface is perceived as offensive.

Recently, the producers of *Memoirs of a Geisha* came under fire for casting Chinese actors as the lead Japanese characters. Sandra Oh, an actress of Korean-Canadian descent, counters, “Ralph Fiennes can play an English person, a German person, a Polish person, a Jewish person, and no one questions him. I have big problems when people put those limits on me.” Even so, asserts Merry White, a Boston University anthropology professor, “Americans are too often oblivious to distinctions between Asian cultures, and Hollywood should not be encouraging that.”



Katharine Hepburn in *Dragon Seed* (1944).



Marlon Brando in *The Teahouse of the August Moon* (1956).



Mickey Rooney in *Breakfast at Tiffany's* (1961).

Vocabulary

Oriental: Of or pertaining to the Orient or Far East; considered offensive because it is a label imposed by the West

Permeate: To infuse or saturate an object or thing to a complete and thorough degree

The Land of the Sunrise Meets The Land of Opportunity

ASIA IS THE LARGEST and most populated continent on Earth, containing 49 nations and more than 60% of the entire world's human population. As the seat of many early civilizations, Asia is so vast and ancient that it is often viewed as a cultural concept encompassing many traditions, beliefs and peoples. At the same time, Asia must also be appreciated as a society not unlike our own, in which people raise families in cities and towns, hold down jobs, educate their kids in schools, take comfort in religion and enjoy the arts, pop culture and sports.

Like most immigrant populations, Asians were drawn to America as the “land of opportunity,” but they have been consistently excluded from the opportunities and civil rights enjoyed by other Americans. Early Asian immigrants were lured by the Gold Rush of 1849 and by work opportunities on the Transcontinental Railroad of the 1860s. However, the federal legislature intervened with the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, barring the entire Chinese ethnic group from American soil. The rights of Chinese-Americans who remained were severely curtailed until the act was repealed in 1943. These restrictions forced the Chinese-American community to **ghettoize** itself in cities across America – in neighborhoods still identified today as “Chinatown.”

After the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941, Japanese-Americans were identified as a security risk by the United States government. Consequently, 112,000 Japanese-Americans were confined to “internment camps.” Fifty years later, the U.S. legislature issued an official apology for these actions. These and many other examples illustrate a clear pattern of state-sanctioned discrimination against Asian-Americans, based on the U.S. government's relationship with their country-of-origin.

Currently, the Asian-American population encompasses citizens largely of Chinese and Filipino descent, along with East-Indian, Korean, Vietnamese, Japanese and approximately 20 other national-origin groups. While most immigrant populations in America have experienced blame for unemployment suffered by the mainstream population, the Asian-American experience specifically has been aggravated by the perception that Asian-Americans are “all the same” despite the many different nations and cultures represented. This misconception resulted in the brutal 1982 murder of Victor Chin, a young Chinese-American, outside a Detroit bar by auto workers who believed their factory jobs would be lost to the auto industry in Japan. Chin's death – and the lenient treatment received by his killers in the judicial system – galvanized the Asian-American community to protest its unfair and unjust treatment in America.

Even so, little has changed. In 1996 the Democratic Party was accused of illegally accepting money from Asian countries and businesses trying to buy influence. In the aftermath of this investigation, any political contribution with an Asian name attached was automatically scrutinized for a potentially unlawful purpose. In 1999, Dr. Wen Ho Lee, a research scientist at the Los Alamos Nuclear Laboratory, was arrested and charged with 59 counts of mishandling classified information. Although never charged with actual espionage, Dr. Lee was denied bail, kept in solitary confinement and forced to wear leg shackles and chains for nine months, presumably because of his Asian ethnic identity. Ultimately, the prosecution dropped all but one minor charge against Dr. Lee.

cont'd on next page...



Filipino



Japanese



Korean



Thai

Every time we had a hot war going on in Asia, it was difficult for Asian Americans here.

—George Takei, actor

Despite these setbacks, the Asian-American community remains an active and aggressive participant in the political process. Through campaign contributions and lobbying, in state and federal courts, and with boycotts, petitions, letter-writing campaigns, newspaper editorials and coalitions with non-Asian organizations, the Asian-American community's voice has been heard. Despite internal divisions on political issues, the community can lay claim to several prominent Asian-American politicians including Senator Daniel Inouye of Hawaii, Secretary of Labor Elaine Chao and former Secretary of Transportation Norman Mineta. This perseverance is a great testament to the determination of Asian-Americans to be fully recognized as equal citizens in the American experience.

We've got to remember the Chinese are everywhere ... not only in our labs that make our nuclear weapons and development, but also in the technology to deliver them. They're real. They're here. And probably in some ways, very crafty people. —Senator Richard Shelby, during the investigation of the nuclear weapons spy charges on NBC-TV's *Meet The Press*, March 1999

We have to change our own mind ... We've got to change our own minds about each other. We have to see each other with new eyes. We have to come together with warmth.—Malcolm X

I expect more people from China and Asia to end up in the NBA.
—Kareem Abdul-Jabbar

Vocabulary

Ghettoize: To isolate; to put or collect in a ghetto



Dong "wind and rain bridge." PHOTO BY ARIAL STEINER.

The Dong People

Situated deep inside China, the Dong people is a population of about three million people who live in innumerable small villages among the hilly border regions of three Chinese provinces. The Dong people are renown for their unique architecture, in particular the "wind and rain bridge" and "drum towers."

"Their music sounds so un-Chinese," observes playwright Hwang, "in many ways similar to Eastern European singing." The fusion of cultures that is evident in Dong music suggests that "there is no such thing as cultural 'purity' or 'authenticity.'" The playwright intends that Marcus' acceptance among the Dong people should "convey an imaginative Utopia, a place where we can get beyond issues of race and difference."

The Play's the Thing

DAVID HENRY HWANG'S *Yellow Face* is a wild, free-wheeling mix of playwriting forms. On one level, it works as political satire, mocking social and political institutions for the sake of comedy – in the vein of *Saturday Night Live* or *The Daily Show*. Of course, *Yellow Face* doesn't simply play for laughs. The play also presents a serious "documentary drama," comparable to *The Laramie Project* or David Hare's *Stuff Happens*, chronicling real events with real people's real words. In addition, with a nod to reality television, Hwang playfully inserts himself among the cast of characters, teasing the audience to decipher fact from fiction. Naturally, it is tempting to trust the character of the playwright as a reliable voice in the play, but, in truth, every character speaks on behalf of Hwang – so all bets are off.

Hwang suggests that *Yellow Face* could be considered a theatrical spin on the "mockumentary," a fictional tale told in the conventions of a film documentary. Successful examples include the television series *The Office*, Sacha Baron Cohen's *Borat* and Christopher Guest's *This Is Spinal Tap*. However, "in a pure mockumentary," the playwright explains, "the audience knows what they are watching is fictional; in *Yellow Face*, the audience may believe they are watching a stage documentary [but] ... begin to doubt whether the events portrayed actually happened." Hwang's intention is to blur the lines between fact and fiction in the same way that stereotypes blur the truth in matters of race, personal identity and cultural authenticity.

FICTION
FACT
CULTURAL
IDENTITY
RACE
PERSONAL
IDENTITY

Exercise: Find the Playwright

Identify a statement, incident or character trait that Hwang included in the play to make the playwright look *good*. Do you think it really happened? Why or why not?

Identify a statement, incident or character trait that Hwang included to make the playwright look *not so good*. Do you think it really happened? Why or why not?

Exercise: You Can't Handle the Truth

Find something “true” in your autobiography and answer the following questions:

1. Did you shade the truth to make a better story?

2. Did you twist the facts to come off in a better light?

3. Is it really true – or is it an ideal truth – that you hope to reach?

Find something “make-believe” in your autobiography and answer the following questions:

1. Why did you choose to invent those particular details?

2. What image of yourself were you trying to convey in the parts you made up?

3. What purpose does the fabrication serve?

Concluding Remarks

We hope this guide has enhanced your experience of *Yellow Face* by offering context for the dynamics of racial identity and creating a healthy forum to discuss sensitive issues of racial tolerance. Just as theatre provokes powerful dialogues on difficult subjects, we can encourage powerful dialogues in our own lives.

Resources

WEBSITES

www.columbia.edu/cu/english/orals/racial_passing.htm

Everything you ever wanted to know about passing

www.brightlightsfilm.com/18/18_yellow.html

An article on the history of yellowface in Hollywood

www.imdiversity.com/Villages/Asian/history_heritage/2006_year_in_review.asp

A listing of notable achievements and newsworthy events in the Asian-American community in 2006

www.pulseplanet.com/archive/Mayo6/3717.html

Song of the Dong: music by and commentary about the Dong People

www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=1124185

A sampling of Asian-American jazz music

BOOKS

Yellow: Race in America Beyond Black and White by Frank H. Wu (Basic Books, 2002)

An examination of racism directed at Asian-Americans in contemporary America

killing rage: Ending Racism by bell hooks (Henry Holt And Company, 1995)

A collection of essays on race relations in America

Love on Trial: An American Scandal in Black and White by Earl Lewis and

Heidi Ardizzone (W. W. Norton & Company, 2002)

A historical account of the complexities of “passing” in America

POLITICAL SATIRE: *Heckuva Job, Bushiel!: A Doonesbury Book* by G.B. Trudeau

(Andrew McMeel Publishing, 2006) *Public Enemy #2, An All-New Boondocks*

Collection by Aaron Mcgruder (Three Rivers Press, 2005)

DOCUMENTARY DRAMA: *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992* by Anna Deavere Smith

(Dramatists Play Service, 2003) *The Laramie Project* by Moises Kaufman

(Vintage, 2001) Also available on DVD (HBO Home Video, 2002)

FILM & TELEVISION

POLITICAL SATIRE: *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart, Indecision 2004*

(Comedy Central, 2005)

Borat – Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation

of Kazakhstan directed by Larry Charles (20th Century Fox, 2007)

HOLLYWOOD YELLOWFACE: *The Teahouse of the August Moon*

directed by Daniel Mann (MGM, 1956) Marlon Brando wears kimonos

Breakfast at Tiffany's directed by Blake Edwards (Paramount, 1961)

Mickey Rooney's notorious turn as a zany Japanese neighbor

P.L.A.Y.

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