

## Yellowface Must Take Its Final Bow

“I love ballet as an art form, and acknowledge that to achieve a diversity amongst our artists, audiences, donors, students, volunteers, and staff, I am committed to eliminating outdated and offensive stereotypes of Asians (Yellowface) on our stages.” (Yellowface.org) With this pledge, Phil Chan and Georgina Pazcoguin co-founded Final Bow for Yellowface in 2017, an organization working to eliminate Yellowface, wearing makeup and imitating the appearance of a person of East Asian descent, and other harmful stereotypes of Asians in classical ballet and opera. Yellowface is prevalent in many famous performances and degrades Asians. Reducing people to a demeaning caricature doesn't represent today's diverse dancers nor audiences. Chan, a Hong Kong native, dancer, and arts activist is the author of *Final Bow for Yellowface: Dancing Between Intention and Impact*, an autobiography documenting his experience modifying the Chinese Tea dance in *The Nutcracker* and portrayals of Asians in ballet. Pazcoguin is the first Asian American dancer to be promoted to the upper ranks at New York City Ballet. She's the author of *Swan Dive: The Making of a Rogue Ballerina*, a memoir about the untold truths of the world of ballet. Chan and Pazcoguin believe Yellowface is as degrading towards Asians as Blackface is towards African Americans. They strive to preserve the relevance of the ballets they love by advocating for change. If a performance offends its audience, that will be the death of ballet and of opera. According to Chan, “Inclusion is the antidote to appropriation.” (Chan, personal interview)

The 2015 restaging of *The Sleeping Beauty* by Alexei Ratmansky for American Ballet Theatre (ABT) is the catalyst for Chan's work. The third act of the restored ballet contained a “Chinese” trio that didn't dance and only shuffled on stage. The choreography left Chan confused, so he reached out to Ratmansky who agreed to eliminate the racist gestures the trio

performed. (Chan 4-6) Final Bow for Yellowface is best known for its advocacy to eliminate harmful caricatures of Asians from the Chinese Tea dance in *The Nutcracker*. The original choreography included index finger gestures designed to make the dance recognizable as “Chinese,” shuffling steps originating from Chinese women binding their feet, and excessive head bobbing derived from bowing as a form of greeting and showing respect. The original costumes for the Chinese Tea dance included westernized versions of *hanfus*, *qipaos*, and Tang suits, as well as Fu Manchu mustaches and *hanfu* hats with a long black braid attached. Elongated, slanted eyeliner and heavy, pale foundation made the dancers appear more Chinese. (Yellowface.org)

Chan and Pazcoguin stood up to the racism in their craft, challenging choreographers and directors to recognize Yellowface dehumanizes Asians. They advocated for the incorporation of Asian culture in ballets and operas without the inclusion of outdated stereotypes. Yellowface changes viewers' perceptions of people of Asian descent, ultimately othering Asians and reinforcing stereotypes. They proposed creative modifications to caricatures of Asians in productions such as altering costumes to be historically accurate or inspired by traditional foods or culturally significant animals. Pacific Northwest Ballet replaced the lead Chinese Tea dancer with the Green Tea Cricket in 2021. (Chan, personal interview) Working closely with Adam Sklute at Ballet West, Chan helped alter their version of *The Nutcracker* and Balanchine's *Le Chant du Rossignol*. (Chan 225)

Chan believes artists must stand up to racism otherwise performances will become irrelevant rituals. If the only representation of Asians in ballets and operas are shuffling, bobbing caricatures of Asians from times past, audience members will stop attending shows because they won't feel welcome or safe. (Chan, personal interview) Talented dancers of Asian heritage will

not pursue performing arts careers because they won't see a space for them in the arts world, and they will lose the opportunity for self-expression. This loss of artistic expression harms everyone. It's a great responsibility for artists to use their platforms to advocate for inclusion and social justice.

Minoru Yasui stood up to various forms of racism throughout his life, beginning in the 1940s. Jeopardizing his personal freedom, on March 28th, 1942, Yasui deliberately walked around Portland in defiance of the curfew for people of German, Italian, and Japanese ancestry. Many police officers refused to arrest him, telling him to return home. Finally he was arrested after walking into a police station. In May, 1942, Yasui defied police orders to evacuate Oregon. Finding the orders "unconstitutional, illegal, and unenforceable" he instead relocated to Hood River. On May 12, police arrived at his home and arrested him, taking him to the Portland Assembly Center and eventually sending him to an internment camp. Yasui stood up for the rights of Japanese Americans at great personal cost. He lost his freedom and the ability to practice law. Despite his many sacrifices, he never quit fighting for the civil liberties of Japanese and other minorities. (Varner) Yasui told his daughter Holly, "We are born in this world for a purpose, and that purpose is to make it a better place." (Yasui) Yasui's legacy challenges Americans to never stop standing up against discrimination.

The recent increase in anti-Asian violence during the COVID-19 pandemic is similar to the anti-Asian sentiment in America after Pearl Harbor. Chan and Paszcoquin receive requests for assistance from individuals hoping to find an Asian space for artists seeking to promote social justice. Viewed as key resources for Asian American artists and as advocates with the power to enact social change, they continue to grow their Gold Standard Arts Foundation and are pursuing collaborations with the Asian American Arts Alliance. (Yellowface.org) Chan's and

Pazcoguin's desire to amplify Asian voices in art and their mission to advocate for an end to ethnic stereotypes in ballet follows in the spirit of Yasui's lifelong commitment to stand up against racism. As an aspiring dancer and a proud Chinese-American, I commit to challenging stereotypes and caricatures of Asians, to being brave and never being a bystander, to taking action and striving for inclusion, and to creating new opportunities that provide a place for people of Asian descent in the arts.

## Works Cited

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