

# Sierra Madre Playhouse's *Yellow Face*

## Live Post-show Talkback Questions and Answers

July 9, 2020

# Yellow Face

by David Henry Hwang



Featured Panelists: Sierra Madre Playhouse Artistic Director Christian Lebano (CL), Director Drew Barr (DB), actors Victor Chi (VC); who played DHH, Adam Lebowitz-Lockard (AL); who played Marcus G. Dahlman, and Gloria Tsai (GT); who played Leah Anne Cho and others.

Moderated by Sierra Madre Playhouse Marketing Coordinator Berrie Tsang and Production Stage Manager Jeanne Marie Valleroy.

Questions were submitted by attendees via the live chat.

**An opening note from CL:** We've talked about making *Yellow Face* an off-night production, so actually producing it when we come back to the theater! As you know, it's a very flexible piece and I think it could work on any of the sets we might have and also it would tour pretty easily. So, I think *Yellow Face* would have a life beyond the work we've already done on it.



**Q: Why the stapler and hand sanitizer, etc. as props for phones?**

GT and VC: A lot of people asked us this question!

DB: As with so much of this process, it was a pretty spontaneous choice. The fact is, we are all working from separate locations. The play is set in a time period where people actually had phones and faxes and answering machines, so it seemed like a textual thing to deal with the fact that people were communicating by phones in a way that was different from our smartphones today. And suddenly there just became this question of "what did people have on their desk

in front of them?" We decided to go for this thing of "what's on your desk?" to try and raise the humorous incongruity of some objects being used as phones. Gloria pulled out this great sunscreen bottle and that was a perfect antidote to the other things we were seeing.

CL: This is something that happens a lot in rehearsals. A seemingly spontaneous idea can influence the entire production. What I loved about it when I watched it was that it did lend humor and it created a sense of spontaneity about the reading -- it didn't feel terribly considered. And the truth is we only have two rotary phones in stock, so we would not have been able to provide rotary phones to everyone.

DB: Because everybody is in separate locations, Jeanne didn't have access to the idea that we have two rotary phones in stock. So, this idea of the phones literally came out of this question of "hm, we have these phone calls," and literally every single character in the play has to up pick a phone at some point. And as we were talking about this idea of how fun it is in Zoom to do the passing off of something and the consistency of those props, then there was this question of "oh, phones have to be dealt with," and there was a kind of thought like "what you have in front of you." One of the things we're used to in rehearsal is "I'm on the phone" (*phone hand gesture*). But it's interesting where our ideas come from and in what point of process they get dealt with or embraced.



**Q: This play drew upon a lot of true events. HYH and his bank were really part of the Chinese community in SoCal. How much of the play was fiction?**

CL: The character DHH talks about at the end of the play why he wrote the play, and there's a really interesting forward to the play that was written by the drama critic Fred Rich, who also appears in the play. And in some ways it is a docudrama, a little more heavily on the drama, because the stuff that's true in the play is all the persecution of the Chinese Americans. Those all

actually happened. What happened to David's father really happened. The interaction he had with the reporter really happened. And the whole letter to Equity that David Henry Hwang wrote about Jonathan Pryce actually happened. The rest is Mr. Hwang's putting that all together and then thinking further about the place that Chinese Americans have in American society and how often yellowface still exists even today -- and he wrote the play 15 years ago -- and how often it is still an issue.

**Q: Was there a real play called *Face Value*? Also, even though a Marcus Gee was a made-up character, was there a real incident where DHH accidentally cast a white actor in an Asian role?**

GT: I have no idea! I didn't even check to see if *Face Value* was a real play as part of my research for the table reading. BUT I did research and find out that Marcus G. Dahlman was a character.

CL: No, *Face Value* doesn't exist. Hwang mixed fiction and fact to create his drama and to amplify the themes and ideas he was considering.

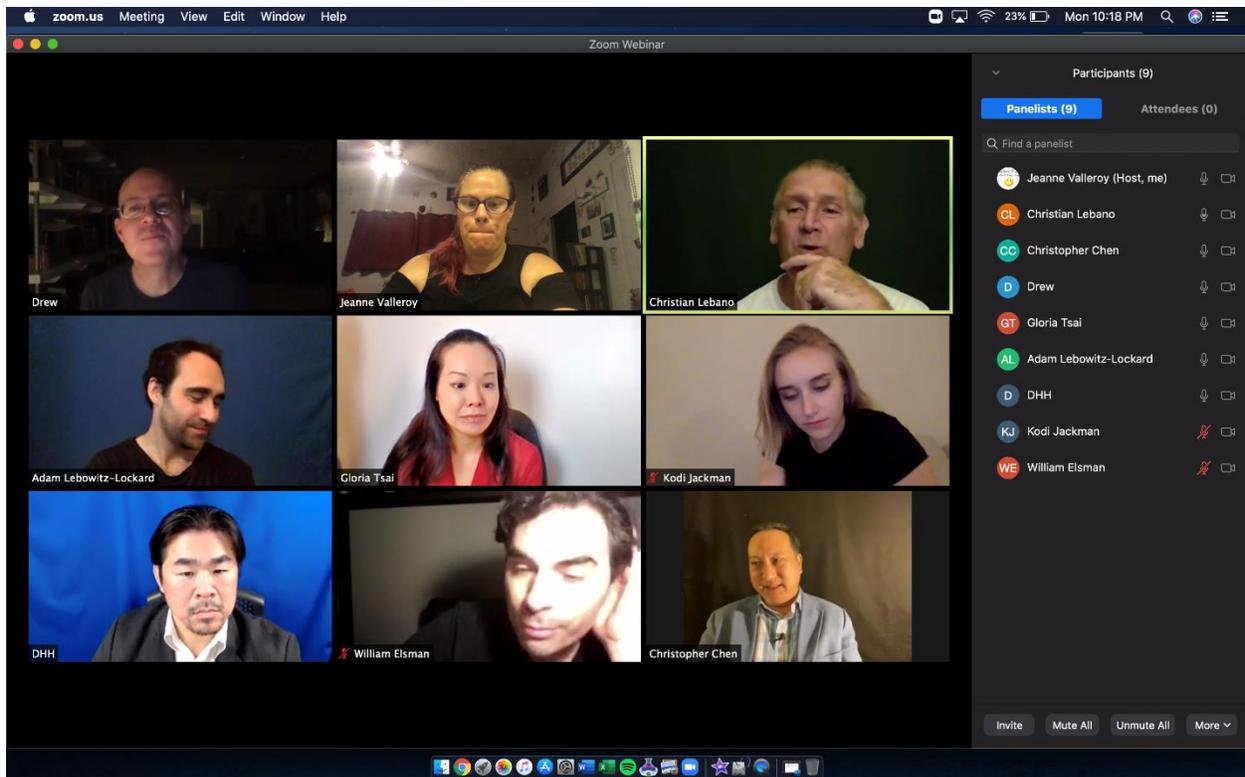
**Q: Does anyone know the name of the anonymous reporter?**

CL: The Name Withheld is a recreation of a conversation that David Henry Hwang had with this New York Times reporter, and from what I've read he said that it's pretty verbatim, as much as he can recall. And I'm sure he took some license with it. But although he doesn't name the reporter, he does give us clues as to who it is. And I will admit I did not bother to look those up, but he was the reporter that broke whitewater, he was the reporter that did all of the columns about Wen Ho Lee. So, I think with a little research you could figure out who that character was.

**Q: What did David Henry Hwang specify for the set in the original production?**

DB: He specifies very little. His aesthetic tends to really embrace fluidity and quote on quote "theatricality" – meaning his plays tend to invite the designers and the actors and the directors to embrace the idea that they are part of a play that is representing life rather than a naturalistic play. I didn't get to see the original production of the play but the images that I've seen from it seem to show that was staged on an empty stage. So really what he specifies is he moves very fluidly and quickly from place to place. That facilitates the fact that actors are constantly changing their roles, their identities, their face. As directors and actors I think you just have to embrace this idea that it's through your imagination and you're trying to help the audience see the world around these characters in their mind's eye, though the stage might not represent much of that. This media is kind of fantastically conducive to the play in terms of its nonspecific reality. It would be fun to explore that more.





**Q: Explain a little about the editing process. Does each actor do their part separately and you put it together or something else?**

DB: I want to give a shout-out to Jeanne Valleroy, our editor extraordinaire. Because we had one shot with this to record one Zoom read-through in speaker view and gallery view. And then really, because of time pressure, one pass-through to choose takes from speaker and gallery and to bring them together in iMovie, which Jeanne did an amazing job with. We did not get to partake in certain technologies of actors filming themselves on their own cameras and then editing all those together, so we were all learning a way of making theater on Zoom together with this. We really are so indebted to Jeanne's quick fingers and quick thinking.

**Q: The play was done so well. How much time was spent in rehearsal?**

GT: I know everyone's rehearsal time was different. But I had the initial rehearsal with the entire cast... which I could only listen into since I was traveling by car. Then I had a couple of hours for a rehearsal on Sunday before we recorded. And then we had the rehearsal with everyone on Monday before the taping. So all in all, not a lot of rehearsal time.

CL: We produced the reading live at SMP in September of 2019 and the same cast came back to perform it again on Zoom. Our director, Drew Barr, had us read the play through once as we figured out the basics of translating it to Zoom and then we worked the scenes in small rehearsals with only one or two actors called. Probably a total of 10 hours - but most of the actors rehearsed 6 hours.

**Q: Were you all off-book? I honestly couldn't tell.**

CL: No, we weren't all off-book! Although, Adam, I don't know how you did it because you seemed to be able to keep your eyes on the camera. I don't know where your script was, but it was amazing.

AL: Script placement is key!

**Q: How many changes were made in the original play to change the play for Zoom?**

GT: I don't think we made that many changes... compared to when we did the staged reading last fall, there wasn't much different other than coming on for the Zoom.

CL: We made no changes to the script - the only thing that couldn't happen was the feeling of grouping the actors and watching them enter and leave the scene.

**Q: For Drew and Christian - As a Caucasian director and producer what spoke to you about the *Yellow Face* script? What issues and ideas drew you to the piece?**

CL: I read this play a while ago. SMP is committed to equity-diversity inclusion, both in the shows that we produce and in the casts that we have in our shows. Our mission is exploring the American experience and for me that means the American experience in the broadest sense. It's not just a white American's experience but as broadly as we can consider it. I was really truly moved by this play. I think it really speaks to so many issues that I'm going to throw to Gloria and Victor to weigh in on. Our place in society told through the perspective of an American who happens to have a Chinese heritage. It speaks to a systemic racism that I think cannot be uplifted enough. But beyond some of the polemic ideas and questions in the play, I was drawn to its humor. I think that David Henry Hwang made himself incredibly vulnerable and exposed himself in this play. He doesn't always come off very well. I think of when Name Withheld says "I've done my research on you, what I know about you is that you care what people think about you." And he says some really negative things about himself, that he hasn't written a play in a while. So all of that together, when I think about the audience that we want to have in our theater, ideas that we want to have in our theater, and opportunities for people of color in our theater – this play just hit on all cylinders for me.

DB: What drew me to the play partly was a kind of selfishness that draws me to all plays. But also, I remember seeing the Broadway production of *M. Butterfly* back when I was an acting student in New York and being blown away! I'd never seen a play that embraced that kind of epic storytelling and also incredibly challenging emotion. It was a really profound experience for me in the theater. I didn't know *Yellow Face* when Christian and I first started talking about it, and then I read it and I just found it really funny and smart. The thing that's really amazing about the play is that it gets deeper and deeper as you read it. The selfishness of it came from the fact that this was something I haven't truthfully had much chance to really explore. It's so funny because DHH accuses Marcus of being an ethnic tourist, and we as a cast and as a creative team have had so little time with this play that the real joy of working in terms of getting to find out what the play means through work with actors and conversations around the table and actually rehearsing the play hasn't really happened for us yet. The fact that there's so much more about this play

that I feel I am dying to learn through working with actors who can tell me what this play really means is one of the things that drew me to working on the play, what the play means as a group of people working on it together. The fact is in a staged reading, and certainly in a Zoom reading, so much of the work you do is about “you stand there, and you move here” and we’re all trying to problem solve to how to get this thing off the page to this one date that the real work of rehearsal still leaves so much left to be done.

CL: For those in the audience wondering why I, a white man, would choose a white man to direct this: because of the nature of reading there is a short time to put up a reading, even the staged one we did at SMP. I knew this play, given the complexities of people jumping in and out of character, how do you tell the story? I’d always wanted Drew to come and work with us at SMP and given what I know about Drew as a director, I thought he could negotiate those things very quickly. If this had been a play like *The Joy Luck Club*, which was so steeped in traditions of the “old” country, of the immigrant experience, I would never have thought of a white director. And that’s why Time Dang directed *The Joy Luck Club*: I thought it was important that a director who had a Chinese heritage work on that play. But this one has more white characters in it than it does Asian characters, and the skill level is why I asked Drew to do this one.

**Q from CL: Victor and Gloria, had either of you read or seen the play beforehand? What were your thoughts coming into this particular story?**

GT: I was not familiar with the play. I’m actually not familiar with a lot of Asian American stories, plays, and things like that only because acting is a newish career for me. I made this career change about five years ago and I’m coming from Texas where a lot of Asian American stories are not as prevalent and as available as here in California. Just to have the opportunity though is what was really great and important as I am going into my acting career, to see where are the Asian roles - - and a lot of times there are so few of them. There are some but they’re kind of hard to find in theater and production like this, so having the opportunity was really great. Very excited to be a part of it.

VC: I knew the play and had also seen a production at the Beverly Hills Playhouse. I had friends in that, it’s a wonderful play. When Christian asked me, it was kind of a no-brainer -- and I get to play DHH. An opportunity came and I jumped at it, and I got to work on something that’s a great piece. It’s something you could really get in there. And when DHH in the play says “you know, we got to find someone, we can make the new star” -- you can only name two of them [two Asian American stars]! Opportunities like this, just to work on something like this with such a great character, someone my type, I thank Christian for giving me the opportunity.

**Q: As directors, have you ever had to yellow face, brown face, red face, cast a WHITE actor because no ethnic actors showed up?**

GT: Well, this question is NOT for me. However, I will say that I came from a market that had little diversity (Austin is not very diverse when it comes to the acting scene). But filmmakers were still able to get diversity for their projects. All they had to do was look for talent in DFW or Houston or San Antonio. Actors in the state of TX are willing to travel to book gigs. So, I feel like those

filmmakers made an effort to make their projects diverse. (I can't speak in regards to theater though, since I was not involved in theater there.)

CL: No! I would never do that. I am committed to having as diverse casts as possible so I have cast roles that may have originally been played by a white actor with a person of color - AND have cast women in roles that might have been meant for a male.

**Q: Did you find it interesting that the playwright chose a Jewish “white guy” since Jewish people are often viewed as “other?”**

AL: I love that that’s an aspect of this play. There’s a line that Rodney Hatamiya has with DHH, and DHH says “well Jews, it’s like particles and waves, they’re both a wave and a particle.” Because for Jews there’s this thing of if you ask a Jew “what is Judaism?” If you ask ten different Jews that question, you’ll get ten different answers. Because there’s this constant thing of “is Judaism an ethnicity, a nationality, a fate, a culture, a heritage?” No one can really agree on what that is, and so I think that adds to the nets and the complication of identity in this play. And it’s in the same vein that DHH is exploring what the words “Asian American” mean, and what race and nationality mean. There’s so much to be said about being Jewish and American or white and Jewish, because there’s this thing in America now where Jews have the majority. The majority of Jews have assimilated, with white skin. I have assimilated. Which is a strange thing to recognize when I also look at some white people who still want to kill Jews. That’s a really strange dynamic to be part of. I think something that adds a thought and complication to this is at the same time calling Judaism a racial or ethnic identity – that erases Jews of color, at least in the United States. There are still Asian Jews and African Jews and Jews from all over, and so I love the complication. I love the messiness of it. And I love that the play has this thing of being Russian and Siberian, and that kind of counts. Like “sure that works! You can buy that and go with it.” And I think it’s partly for DHH to get himself further into trouble, which is great.

**Q: For Adam - Did playing this role change your view of racism in any way?**

AL: My first thought about that -- I was having a conversation with theater artists last night – there is a perception in the world of theater. And I can absolutely say – and I say this as an actor – there is this idea of scarcity. That there are only so many roles, that there are only so many theaters to work at, that there are only so many jobs. And when the fear of not getting the job or not booking the role really creeps up, I think that’s when you get a lot of situations like in the play where Marcus really doesn’t deny that he’s Asian. And even there, there’s a little bit of naivete and innocence. But then he kinds of comes around to -- and it’s subtle -- of lying by omission to get the role and be okay, “I’ll be safe.” And there’s a danger in that. I’ll say that for myself that is something I am trying to let go of very much, that there’s this idea of scarcity. That if I don’t book that job or if I don’t get this teaching gig, that that’s it and that’s the only one. This is the only thing, this is the only part. And that instead, there’s work to be done towards building coalitions. I always have that image that a rising tide lifts all boats, and “how can I help take part of that?” The thing I’ll say about reading this play right now as opposed to when we read it a year ago is that I’m very much aware that this right now, in our present time, that this is coming in the aftermath of the killings of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, Black Lives Matter becoming a bigger part of our lives and protests. There is more of a magnifying glass on “what are you doing

right now to end racism? Are you complicit, are you taking part or are you not taking part?" I will say this play helped me consider Asian and Asian American points of view in theater that I don't think I've been part of before. I don't think I've been in a show written by an Asian American playwright before. I will say that has been a learning experience for me, as it is sitting and reading the text over and over. So yes, it has changed my view of racism and I don't totally know how or why, but it's something that'll sit and continue to simmer with me because this is such an amazing play.

CL: Your point, Adam, about scarcity of roles. I think it's a little more insidious than that because as more theaters commit to equity, inclusion, and diversity in their casting, it necessarily diminishes the number of roles that white actors will have. Acting is such a tenuous profession that there is a fear that I have heard from white actors that "if we continue to do that -- let Willy Loman be Chinese American -- that's one more role I won't be cast in." There's an interesting tension there.

**Q: I enjoyed the way the play explores the question of "who are the gatekeepers of legitimacy in our theater?" — without seeming to approach any answer. Do the panelists have any thoughts on the issues raised?**

CL: As one of those gatekeepers, SMP has a commitment to equity, inclusion, and diversity, both onstage and in the plays it chooses. As I mature in my understanding of the realities for people of color working in theater, I have to be aware of that. And we have really acted on our commitment, not only putting on plays by people of color. Particularly, I'm thinking of *The Joy Luck Club*, and how many of the cast of *The Joy Luck Club* talked about how extraordinary it was to be in a cast of thirteen and have twelve Asian actors they could engage with. (There was one white guy, who was an honorary Asian)! As we bring in more people of color into the theater, I think it reverberates and resonates in lots of ways. I also want to say it's also not that we just cast Asians -- and specifically Chinese Americans -- in Chinese American roles. I have tried to expand that. When we did *The Odd Couple*, we cast the Pidgeon Sisters as non-white. We had two fantastically funny Chinese American actresses. I think this gatekeeper really got it when one of the actresses in a talkback said, "this is the first time I've ever played 'the girl.' Not the 'Asian girl,' but just 'the girl.'" Every other role she'd done on stage was one that called particularly for an Asian American actor. That was mind-blowing for me. Because as a white man that's never been part of my thinking. So that's what this gatekeeper has learned this process.



VC: There was a scene in *Yellow Face*, where they talk about being typecast. When they assume Marcus is Asian, they assume “oh yeah, you get typecast as the laundromat guy!” And he goes “no, but I don’t.” And then they say “oh, you mean you don’t get typecast as an Asian.” That scene addresses that issue. When I first started acting, I joked “I hope NCIS has their Chinatown episode, that’s my one shot this season! There’s the sex trafficking episode, or the money laundering triad episode...” That was it, that was your one shot. If you didn’t get it, a friend of yours did. And then you just have to wait for the next Chinatown episode. But it’s gotten better. As an actor when you’re young and starting, you just want to play roles. Through the grind of it all, you realize there is a system in place here, where I do notice “oh, these are the kind of roles I’m pushed towards.” What are you going to do? You just have to embrace and play with the cards you’re dealt.

DB: As an actor turned director and as a teacher, I am in many ways a gatekeeper. As some have already mentioned, I go where I’m more likely to be driven by “what jobs am I being offered?” in many circumstances, more than getting to make choices that I feel are fully expressive or indicative of a worldview or intentional statement of action in the world. That is changing these days. My role as a director and the things I tend to work on are classical texts, and it’s something I find myself thinking about a lot lately because in both my teaching and directing I deal with the fact that the classical texts that I know and teach are entirely or almost entirely white, male, western voices. I have always taken some comfort in the idea that working on those plays allows a great openness in terms of casting. I was an actor and a director in the realm of “color-blind” casting. But it’s an issue that the whole theater needs to deal with now: the texts that we grow to as accepted, default, stage-worthy plays are specifically one slice of civilization. Those gates seemed to have been set long ago, and I have certainly just accepted that these are the established gates and they’re the only gates that I know really. That’s something I’ve been thinking about a lot lately.

**Q: For the cast mainly - How important is authenticity when telling POC stories? How far should we go in making sure that an actor playing a role written for a POC has the character’s lived experience? I’m asking as a POC actor myself that wrestles with this issue.**

VC: When a role is written and it has a character of a certain background... This is when colorblind casting comes in saying: “oh, the best actor should get the role!” But if everyone had the same opportunity, then it wouldn’t be an issue. There has been hoopla with Halle Berry saying she was considering a transgender role, the internet found out and she has apologized for that. Then there’s Scarlett Johansson...she’s probably played more Asian characters with fully fledged backgrounds from Japan than any Japanese American actress here in America! If you are someone who has the privilege of working as an actor and you can pick and choose, and an opportunity comes up where someone who would be right for a role gets the opportunity to play something – especially because they’re not going to be able to play “your” roles -- then defer. How important is it? I can only speak from a selfish actor point of view but let us have the crumbs! Sometimes we get a slice of pie. We don’t get the whole pie -- but let us have the crust! We could go further, but we’re at the point where there are “scraps.” Let the POC play their “scrap” roles!

**Q: Symphony orchestras audition musicians blind, should the same be done for actors?**

AL: No, I do not believe that actors should not be auditioned "blind" for a role. My hope is that the casting process in the American Theater moves away from color-blindness and towards color-consciousness. I can't speak for music, but the theater is a (mostly) visual medium, and as actors our bodies are used to tell a story. The very idea of colorblind casting implies that there can be a performing body that is race neutral, and that simply does not exist. Even as different theater people advocate for color-blind casting to try and create an equal playing field for all actors of all ethnicities, minority actors are still cast at lower rates than White actors. One of the wonderfully complex aspects of *Yellowface* is that it looks at discrimination from many different sides and shines a light on how easy it is to fall into ignorant and hurtful practices, even when we might be trying to make the best art we can. If we ignore race on stage, where there is a history of discrimination (like Jonathan Pryce in *Miss Saigon*), we wind up repeating mistakes of the past.

GT: No, I don't think this would work for acting... because film/tv/theater is visual. We want to see that an actor looks the part, fits the character. If it's specifically POC casting, like for *Hamilton*, it's still important to see the actors. We not only want to hear what they sound like, but when we see them - do they emote? Do they have a look that could fit the role? It makes sense for symphonies & orchestras because we only care about how they sound. Unfortunately, for acting - it's an entire package kind of situation.

CL: Acting is so much more than vocal - maybe for a purely radio play this would work, but for a stage play where actors interact with each other and where movement and how they hold their bodies and express with their faces often tells the story, I don't think this would be possible.

**Q: Do we need to be more specific when describing "Asians" because technically someone from India or Pakistan is Asian? But when telling a story about Chinese you expect someone from East Asia to be portraying the character.**

CL: We love southeast Asians and south Asians as Asians! I'm looking at a couple of different plays that are more specifically about different cultures within the Asian communities. Also, let me say that I understand the need to not lump all Asians into one category. When Tim Dang and I were casting *The Joy Luck Club* it was really important to us that the cast be ethnically Chinese. The characters they were playing were all ethnically Chinese. Since many of our cast spoke Mandarin, we were able to interpolate that language into the show. I think it made a huge difference. As a white male producer/director/Artistic Director I think it is imperative that I think about being true to the culture of the play and to support its being realized in a way closest to the intentions of the playwright (as far as I can discern them.) For example, we are doing another Chinese American play next summer (COVID willing), and I'm looking for a Chinese American graphic designer to create the poster. I have an idea that I want to incorporate some Chinese iconography and want to be accurate and sensitive.

**Q: What in your opinion is more valuable the background of the actor (the heritage) or the look? Could you accept an ethnically ambiguous actor for the King in *The King and I* vs. an Asian with blond hair and blue eyes?**

GT: I think it depends on the audience. For a smaller market or an area that is less diverse, maybe it is acceptable for them to book whatever might be a better fit for their audience, especially if they can't pull authentic actors of a certain background. Whereas, someplace like LA or NY, where it's super diverse... they should be able to find an actor that looks the part of the King in *The King and I*. Does that make sense?

CL: Hmm. This is a tough one because I think it depends on the role AND the audience. But generally I would say heritage trumps - if a mixed race actor was primarily raised in the culture then that would make a big difference. BUT perception is everything - especially now as we are trying to work towards inclusion, so I might lean towards actors whom audiences would recognize as a particular race if possible.

**Q: Did you (the actors) research or study your character(s)? How did you prepare?**

GT: I did preparation for costuming and look. I researched some of the female characters that I played – and they were all fictional. The only two real people I played were Senator Fred Thompson and activist Frank Chin. I just took upon “what did they sound like?” and “how did they speak?” to prepare for them.



VC: When I did the first edition of our reading, when we were all in-person, I scoured for videos on YouTube of DHH, interviews. I tried to capture his voice. I looked up some of the things the play had mentioned, like Wen Ho Lee, to give them context. The second time around, I thought about refreshing the research, but I just trusted that I know it now subconsciously. A lot of actors, when they go through a role, they go “what did my character want? What did your character eat for breakfast?” I never walk around at eight in the evening thinking about what I had for breakfast unless someone specifically asks me! For those things, maybe that’s what’s going on but it’s not something you are consciously always thinking of. So, I just trusted that the history is part of the character that I had previously created, and I came in and didn’t try to voice it at all. I just thought “let me go through the text, find the moments, and just be present this time around.” We also had a much shorter period during this time around than in the first time around in terms of our reading. I approached it and tried to find the truth in the words, tried to lift it up wherever I could. That was my preparation for it.

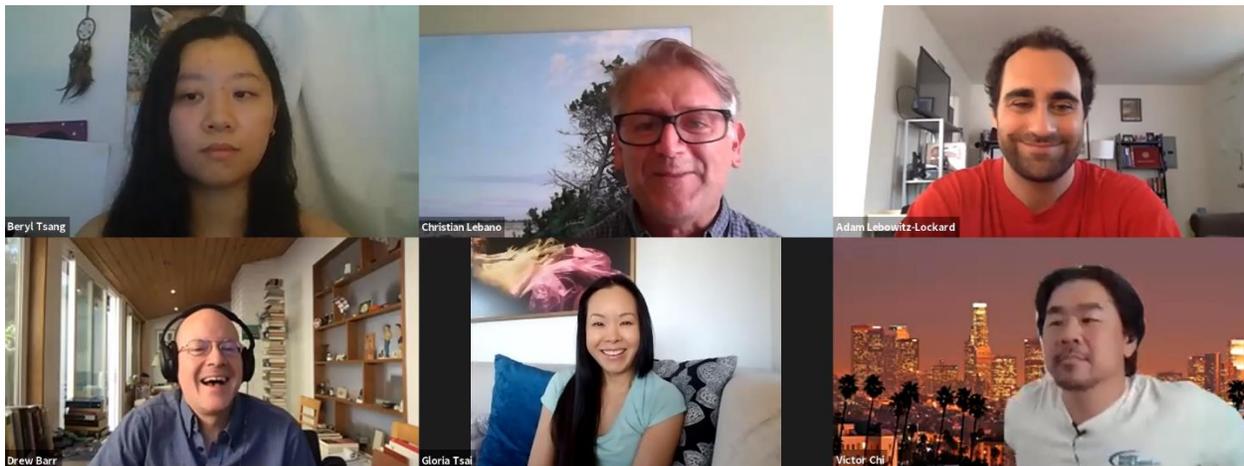
AL: I got to play an imaginary character! I listened to a lot of the music.

**Q: For Victor - What was it like thinking about DHH's changes, such as where he writes the Actor's Equity letter and then backs down and won't continue the advocacy? His character has so many nuances - would be interested in hearing about portraying those.**

VC: He sums it up at the end. He wrote the play because he found the face he could fit in. It’s almost along the same vein as codeswitching. In conversations among the Asian community, I think Ken Jeong has said about *Crazy Rich Asians*: “wow, I didn’t have to talk differently. I could just be myself wholly and completely around the cast and crew.” Because they were all Asian and westernized Asians, and in other productions he was “the one guy.” It is exhausting if you have to put on part of you to fit in. And that’s where you see DHH in the play, when he goes “I’m going to work on network television!” Because to him his career is moving in a certain direction, and you see him kowtowing. When he is talking to Asian females he goes “you can’t date so-and-so!” But to Margaret Cho on the show he goes “Margaret, Margaret, Margaret...” (*whimpers*)! The play is written so well. What you do as an actor is you try to find the place where to play the highs and the lows, it makes it all interesting. It was fun to find DHH’s nuances and where he’s going, and it was a roller coaster of a character to go through because he goes through such change, all while contradicting himself along the way. I can also say I was excited to play the lead in this, but seeing how everyone else had to play a million different characters, that in itself was amazing. And that goes to the writing too, because I remember when I first saw the production, they had the white female actor playing the mom and she would put on this accent and it was kind of jarring at first, but now that I’m involved with this and I’ve done readings of this, it’s like “wow! Everybody’s playing everything!” And this is in its own controlled environment. It’s in a bubble of equality. It’s like how I mentioned “crumbs” earlier: if everybody can play anything, it would be no issue. But that’s not the case, and I feel that is one of the big themes in this play. Here’s an example: you can look past the fact that the Asian guy is Jimmy Stewart, and the white chick is the Asian mom, and everyone is doing their worst Southern and New York accents – and it’s okay! Because in the end the story is the king, and what the message is is clear, the storytelling is clear. But reality doesn’t quite reflect this play, and I feel like that was the point of this play.

**Q: Are there plans for putting on plays from Qui Nguyen? Or more plays by Asian playwrights?**

CL: Indeed, we do! This season right now, we were supposed to be in the middle of a run of Lauren Yee's *King of the Yees*. We haven't announced the next season yet, but we are looking to produce it next year. It'll open in June and Tim Dang will direct that. And I hope we'll produce *Yellow Face* next year as a production. There are a couple of other plays going forward about Asian Americans. This is not a one-off from us. Our theater is smack-dab in the San Gabriel Valley, which has the highest concentration of Asians in America. It's important that we represent our audience and that our audience can see themselves on our stage. In addition to Lauren Yee's play, *King of the Yees*, which is this extraordinary, unrivaled comedy about the interesting questions about being Chinese and finding your place in America, I am looking at August Wilson for the following season. We've never done an August Wilson and I'm hoping we'll do one in 2022. There's another play which has a Muslim-American as the lead that I'm hoping we will be able to do. I don't have the rights for either of those plays yet, but that's my thinking: that we continue to broaden the stories that we tell at SMP.



*Thank you to everyone who submitted questions! Some questions and answers have been edited for clarity.*

*Transcription compilation by Berrie Tsang. Yellow Face graphic by Estelle Campbell.*

**Photos:**

Page 1: The *Yellow Face* actors and their various prop “phones.” L-R from top to bottom: Gloria Tsai (Leah Anne Cho and others), Adam Lebowitz-Lockard (Marcus G. Dahlman), Christopher Chen (HYH and others), Victor Chi (DHH), Kodi Jackman (Jane Krakowski, Miles Newman, and others), Sierra Madre Playhouse Artistic Director Christian Lebano (Announcer; Name Withheld on Advice of Counsel), William Elsman (Stuart Ostrow, Rocco Palmieri, and others), Gloria Tsai. Graphic by Christopher Chen.

Page 2: The real playwright David Henry Hwang, writer of *Yellow Face*, and actor Christopher Chen (HYH and others). L-R: David Henry Hwang, Christopher Chen. Photo courtesy of Christopher Chen.

Page 3: The cast and crew of *Yellow Face* after Sierra Madre Playhouse's original live staged reading of the *Yellow Face* on September 23, 2019, which was performed on the set of Sierra Madre Playhouse's 2019 production of *The Joy Luck Club*. L-R: Christian Lebano, Director Drew Barr, Victor Chi, William Elsmann, Christopher Chen, Adam Lebowitz-Lockard, Gloria Tsai, Kodi Jackman. Photo by Berrie Tsang.

Page 4: A look at the Zoom dress rehearsal in preparation for the virtual play reading of *Yellow Face*. L-R from top to bottom: Drew Barr, Production Stage Manager Jeanne Marie Valleroy, Christian Lebano, Adam Lebowitz-Lockard, Gloria Tsai, Kodi Jackman, Victor Chi, William Elsmann, Christopher Chen. Photo courtesy of Jeanne Valleroy.

Page 8 (R): A scene from Sierra Madre Playhouse's 2019 production of *The Joy Luck Club*. L-R: Debbie Fan, Grace Shen\*, April Lam, Christine Liao. Photo by Gina Long.

Page 8 (L): A scene from Sierra Madre Playhouse's 2015 production of *The Odd Couple*. L-R: Brad David Reed\*, Kari Lee\*, Jane Lui, Jack Sundmacher\*. Photo by Gina Long.

Page 11: A look at the talkback from the Sierra Madre Playhouse's original live staged reading of *Yellow Face* on September 23, 2019. L-R: Christian Lebano, Drew Barr, William Elsmann, Kodi Jackman, Victor Chi, Adam Lebowitz-Lockard, Christopher Chen, Gloria Tsai. Photo by Berrie Tsang.

Page 13: A look at this talkback following Sierra Madre Playhouse's Zoom play reading of *Yellow Face*, July 9, 2020. L-R from top to bottom: Sierra Madre Playhouse Marketing Coordinator Berrie Tsang, Christian Lebano, Adam Lebowitz-Lockard, Drew Barr, Gloria Tsai, Victor Chi. Photo courtesy of Berrie Tsang.

\*Member of Actors' Equity, the union of professional actors and stage managers in the U.S.