

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

BRITISH EAST ASIAN ACTORS

Of interest to editors and journalists covering: Arts, Theatre, Entertainment, Culture, Ethnic Minorities, Cultural Issues

BRITISH EAST ASIAN ACTORS CALL FOR PUBLIC FORUM OVER RSC CASTING CONTROVERSY

British East Asian actors have challenged the Royal Shakespeare Company over the casting in its upcoming production of the classic Chinese play, *The Orphan of Zhao* by Ji Junxiang. Support for the British East Asian actors has spread globally with statements flooding in from Asian actors' groups in America, Australia, Canada and other countries; as well as messages of support from theatregoers and the public on the RSC's Facebook site.

Only three actors of East Asian heritage have been cast out of 17 and none have leading roles in any of plays in the World season trilogy of which *The Orphan of Zhao* is one. The RSC has only cast an estimated four East Asian actors in the last 20 years.

Actor Daniel York said: "*This exclusion has been going on for far too long within the British stage and film industries. Colour-blind casting is a wonderful concept, unfortunately, it's all one-way traffic. Something has to change. We are asking for fairness and a level playing field.*"

British East Asian Actors have released the following statement in response.

London, UK - For more than three weeks, we have protested to the RSC and the Arts Council England about the Royal Shakespeare Company's production of the Chinese classic *The Orphan of Zhao*.

Our concern is that there are only three actors of East Asian descent in a cast which consists mainly of Caucasians but no other Asians. This does not, in our opinion, represent "multi-cultural casting" as the RSC insists it is.

We have identified the following issues:

1) The RSC states that "*It's certainly not the case that we've not employed any Chinese or East Asian actors*". However, we have only been able to ascertain two actors of East Asian descent employed as part of regular seasons in the past 20 years, as well as two others in standalone productions - a clear shortfall. It also appears that, as far as we can gather, none of the three RSC Winter Season directors has any noticeable track record of employing East Asian actors and, in fact, only Gregory Doran appears to have done so, once, in the last ten years.

2) Of particular concern to us is the under-representation of East Asian actors in what is often described as "the Chinese Hamlet". Unfortunately, this is reflective of the entire UK theatre industry. The RSC assures us that the three East Asian actors (who we wish well) are playing "key" roles. Whilst we value and support all actors and would hope that all roles in a play are "key", none of the three East Asians in this particular production appears to be playing what can be described as a "leading" or "protagonist" role: a character who is central to the action and who drives the play. It is also clear that all three are roughly in the same age demographic and this belies the diversity and experience that exists among British East Asian actors.

3) British East Asian actors wish to participate in their own culture but this is being denied us. We are too often excluded from roles which are not East Asian-specific, yet when roles arise that are, we are also excluded. We applaud colour-blind casting, but colour-blind casting was created as a mechanism to afford more opportunities for all minority actors, not to give additional opportunities to Caucasian actors. At present, colour-blind casting fails British East Asians.

4) The RSC has cited the need to cast actors across three different plays as one reason for the low number of East Asians in the cast. It appears they were unable, for whatever reason, to countenance the idea of British East Asians playing leading roles in works by Ji, Pushkin and Brecht. It appears that white (and in some cases black) actors are able to play Chinese roles but not vice versa.

5) The RSC states that they met "lots and lots" of East Asian actors, yet we have only been able to ascertain eight. Aside from the three who were cast we only know of one who met more than one of the season's directors.

6) The RSC insist they cast "the best actor for the roles available" yet the visibility and quality of work available for the actors chosen to be leading players in the Company simply isn't attainable for actors of East Asian descent. There is no level playing field.

It is clear to us that there is an industry-wide problem regarding the opportunities available for East Asian actors. Too often, actors from our background can only access auditions for poorly-written and stereotyped roles on television that require a heavy emphasis on being "foreign" as opposed to being integrated and three-dimensional members of British society. In the theatre, with the occasional rare exception, we are shut out completely from all but community and children's theatre, with opportunities to appear in classical and mainstream drama extremely rare.

We welcome a time when actors can play across race, gender, class or disability. However, this can only meaningfully occur on a level playing field to which we must ensure we have fair access.

As a publicly-funded company, the RSC has a responsibility to reflect the make-up of society. In order to tear down the limitation on East Asian actors, it is our heartfelt wish to see far more active outreach to our sector. When the Harry Potter film franchise was casting for an actress to play Cho Chang, applicants queued around the block, disproving the notion that people from East Asian backgrounds have no interest in the performing arts. At present, the message being sent out to young people from East Asian backgrounds is that a career on the stage is not available to them.

We welcome greatly the closing paragraph from the RSC's most recent statement on the subject:

"We acknowledge that there is always more to do and recognise our responsibility in this area. We want to explore the rich seam of Chinese drama further, and engage more often with Chinese and East Asian actors. We want to integrate them more regularly on our stages and hope that this production, and indeed this debate, will be a catalyst for that process."

In order to enable this to happen we request:

1) An apology and acknowledgement for the lack of consideration afforded us as an ethnic group with regard to the casting of *The Orphan of Zhao* and for the way East Asian actors have been marginalised.

2) A public discussion forum to be held in London with Greg Doran and the two directors of the other plays in the trilogy, with speakers of our choosing to represent our case. Similar to that held at La Jolla Playhouse, CA, when comparable controversy occurred with their musical adaptation of *The Nightingale*, the purpose of this is to enable us to work with the RSC in leading the way for the rest of the industry.

3) Ethnic monitoring of auditionees for both race-specific and non-race-specific roles and for that data to be freely available. We would also like to remind all Arts Council England funded theatre companies of *Recommendation 20* from the Eclipse Report which highlighted several recommendations for theatre practice with regard to ethnic minorities including:

"By March 2003, every publicly funded theatre organisation in England will have reviewed its Equal Opportunities policy, ascertained whether its set targets are being achieved and, if not, drawn up a comprehensive Positive Action plan which actively develops opportunities for African Caribbean and Asian practitioners."

For too long East Asians have been left out of "Asia".

4) Further to the above we would like to see a clear measurable target in terms of engaging and developing East Asians actors as you do with a broad range of socio-economic and ethnic minority backgrounds with a view to seeing and casting them in future RSC productions.

5) We feel it is absolutely imperative that there be no "professional reprisals" with regard to any recent comments from within our community. East Asian actors and professionals have shown great courage speaking out about the clear inequality that currently exists within our profession, and we would like that to be respected. Too often, there exists a climate of fear in the arts world and we feel this is detrimental to free speech as well as to fundamental human rights.

We hope very much that we can all move forward together and gain greater understanding for the future. We look forward to working with the RSC, a company for which we all have the fondest love and respect.

British East Asian Actors
30th October 2012

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-ENDS-

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2. The Asian American Performers Action Coalition (AAPAC) statement of support can be found here: <http://madammiaow.blogspot.co.uk/2012/10/american-actors-call-for-action-over.html>
3. The British East Asian Actors Facebook page with links to background articles can be found here: <http://www.facebook.com/pages/British-East-Asian-Actors/480464755326586>
4. The statement from the RSC regarding their casting of The Orphan of Zhao can be found here: <http://www.rsc.org.uk/about-us/updates/the-orphan-of-zhao-casting-statement.aspx>
5. Dr. Amanda Rogers's article on the casting of The Orphan of Zhao can be found here: <http://theatricalgeographies.wordpress.com/2012/10/22/the-orphan-of-zhao-inequality-interculturalism-and-national-abjection-in-casting/>
6. Dr. Broderick Chow's article on the casting of The Orphan of Zhao can be found here: <http://dangerology.wordpress.com/2012/10/19/two-dogs-and-a-maid-theatricality-visibility-and-the-royal-shakespeare-companys-the-orphan-of-zhao/>