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Paper:

Rogers, A. (2014). Asian Mutations: Yellowface from More Light to the Royal Shakespeare Company's The Orphan of Zhao. *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 24(4), 452-466.

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**Asian Mutations: Yellowface from *More Light* to the Royal Shakespeare Company's
*The Orphan of Zhao***

Amanda Rogers

Abstract

*In this article I examine the contention that the Royal Shakespeare Company's (RSC's) *The Orphan of Zhao* used yellowface. By comparing *The Orphan of Zhao* to a recent production of Bryony Lavery's (1997) play, *More Light*, I argue that yellowface is a highly mutable practice. In particular, I suggest that in the period between these two productions, contemporary British understandings of yellowface shifted from ideas around racial impersonation using prosthetics and make-up to the casting of white actors in Asian roles in general. This latter conceptualisation of yellowface draws attention to the inequalities, exclusions, but also the possibilities of the casting in *The Orphan of Zhao*. The article offers a nuanced account of yellowface in the RSC production by attending to how racial-ethnic minorities are represented in theatre.*

I'm Yellowface
Gonna eat your soul
I'm Yellowface
I'm Yellowface
Gonna swallow you whole
I'm Yellowface
Make you scabble like a mole in a hole
For every little part, any little role
Make you thank me for the things I stole
I'm Yellowface.¹

¹ Anna Chen, 'Yellowface,' In *Reaching for My Gnu: Poetry by Anna Chen* (Ipswich: AAAARGH! Press, 2012), p.49. Reproduced by permission of Anna Chen.

Responding to this issue's focus on the practice of casting, this article examines the performance of white actors in East Asian roles. Conventionally termed 'yellowface', this mode of cross-racial casting is highly contentious as it deploys, and rests upon, power to embody and represent otherness. Historically, yellowface is associated with the stereotypical impersonation of Asian, particularly Chinese, identities, encompassing a repertoire of practices whose 'signs and meanings [...] convey "Asian-ness."' ² Although yellowface can involve the use of make-up and prosthetics, such as taping back eyes to create a slant, darkened skin, a queue, a jutting jaw or false teeth, it may also encompass a shuffling walk, cod accents or speaking in gibberish 'baby talk.' ³ These practices partly comprise the performance of stereotypes that, like other forms of minstrelsy, reflect anxieties around racial difference in mainstream culture, working to 'mark the Chinese body as inferior and foreign.' ⁴ Yellowface is commonly understood as this mode of stereotypical representation but since the Golden Age of Hollywood, it has also been embedded in a debate around *who* is playing East Asian characters, as well as *how* those characters are represented. As such, yellowface has been at the centre of political debates about casting.

In Classical Hollywood cinema, yellowface, as the practice of performing stereotypical 'Chinese' identities, became justified on the basis that there were not enough qualified Asian actors. Although Asian actors did appear in small or sidekick parts, under the studio star system white actors began to perform all leading Asian roles (using yellowface make-up and prosthetics), including characters that were *not* stereotyped. Yellowface therefore took on a new dimension as it embodied the power of whiteness to control what it meant to look, perform, and be Asian, but it also excluded Asian actors from racially-specific roles – such as Anna May Wong

² Sean Metzger, 'Charles Parsloe's Chinese Fetish: An Example of Yellowface Performance in Nineteenth-Century American Melodrama' *Theatre Journal*, 56: 4 (2004), 627-651 (p. 627).

³ Krystyn R. Moon, *Yellowface: Creating the Chinese in American Popular Music and Performance 1850s-1920s* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2005), p. 42.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

being passed over in favour of Luise Rainer in *The Good Earth*⁵ to Bruce Lee being replaced by David Carradine in *Kung Fu*.⁶ Yellowface was further legitimised by making characters Eurasian (mixed-race), allowing white actors to lay claim to these parts on the basis of racial 'authenticity', such as with Curt Jurgens as Colonel Li Nan in the 1958 film *The Inn of the Sixth Happiness*. As a result, yellowface embodied racial impersonation but also racial discrimination in the domain of employment. The extract from Chen's poem above speaks to this legacy and the cultural degradation, appropriation and invisibility that have resulted for artists of East Asian descent.

This article critically examines the accusation that the Royal Shakespeare Company's (hereafter RSC's) production of *The Orphan of Zhao* used yellowface, analysing the tensions that surround the casting of white actors in Chinese roles. In order to consider how contemporary British theatre understands and practices yellowface, and to bring this to my analysis of *The Orphan of Zhao*, I also discuss another comparatively recent British production that was accused of using yellowface: a 2009 fringe theatre production of Bryony Lavery's (1997) play *More Light*. In so doing, it becomes apparent that the practices of racial impersonation embodied in yellowface are highly mutable, but also that understandings of yellowface had shifted by the time of the RSC production. Rather than racial impersonation *per se*, British understandings of yellowface have come to mirror those in America, symbolising the casting of white actors in Asian roles in general. Nevertheless, I suggest that elements of conventional yellowface persisted in the RSC production and that these drew attention to the problems and possibilities of *The Orphan of Zhao's* colour-blind casting.

Colour-blind casting and Cross-racial 'facing'

⁵ Graham Russell Gao Hodges, *Anna May Wong: From Laundryman's Daughter to Hollywood Legend* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p. 153.

⁶ Meaghan Morris, 'Learning from Bruce Lee: Pedagogy and Political Correctness in Martial Arts Cinema', in *Keyframes: Popular Cinema and Cultural Studies* ed. by Matthew Tinkcom and Amy Villarejo (London: Routledge, 2001), pp. 171-186 (p. 183).

Non-traditional casting is politically contentious as it works to promote 'social action and [...] artistic exploration' through the belief that by being inclusive, the interpretative possibilities of performance are multiplied and the historical conventions of casting are exposed.⁷ In suggesting that an actor's race, ethnicity, gender or ability should not limit their access to roles, non-traditional casting becomes a terrain where theatrical traditions are challenged, identities reinforced and reconstructed, artistic freedom questioned, and social, institutional and economic power relations writ large on individual bodies. Part of this broader project is the practice of colour-blind casting where race is disregarded and seen to have 'no semiotic value onstage', making all characters open for anyone to perform on an equal playing field.⁸ In principle, colour-blind casting is a 'universal theory' but in practice such ideas are motivated by the desire to provide opportunities to racial and ethnic minority actors based on the recognition that these groups are often excluded from mainstream theatrical representation.⁹ As Ayanna Thompson has argued, colour-blind casting relies upon the visual apprehension of racial difference in order for it to be negated, meaning that race 'is always there; it is always present' and it always impacts on how performances acquire meaning.¹⁰ Debates around the universality of colour-blind casting and its political potential are contested because in order for this practice to gain critical force, race must be seen and recognised. The debate in *American Theatre Magazine* in the mid 1990s between August Wilson and Robert Brustein centred on this tension between 'sociological' and 'aesthetic' criteria in colour-blind casting and the concomitant false opposition between equal opportunities and talent (or the universal argument of 'the best actor for the role'). Wilson famously attacked the idea of casting irrespective of race as he read the inclusion of historically oppressed black bodies in the performance of mainstream

⁷ Angela Pao, *No Safe Spaces: Re-casting Race, Ethnicity and Nationality in American Theater* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010), p. 2.

⁸ Ayanna Thompson, *Passing Strange: Shakespeare, Race and Contemporary America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 77.

⁹ William H. Sun, 'Power and Problems of Performance Across Ethnic Lines: An Alternative Approach to Nontraditional Casting', *TDR*, 44: 4 (2000), 86-95 (p. 87).

¹⁰ Thompson, *Passing Strange*, p. 3; see also Angela Pao, *No Safe Spaces*, p. 6.

'white' texts as a form of assimilation and erasure, one that rendered minorities as 'mimics' rather than attending to different cultural, racial and historical positions.¹¹

Colour-blind casting therefore contains a subversive potential that can challenge existing racial hierarchies and social orders by highlighting that whiteness is an 'unmarked privileged location of social belonging.'¹² Much of the critical work on colour-blind casting focuses on the creative politics of non-white actors playing traditionally white roles, particularly in Shakespeare, drawing attention to the complex practices of racial manipulation and deconstruction operating in performance. Here colour-blind casting also includes 'various colour conscious strategies' that may reserve certain parts for ethnic minority actors (such as Othello or Aaron the Moor) or use cross-racial performance tactics.¹³ Indeed, Thompson's tripartite definition of colour-blind casting encompasses the conventional understanding of racial 'invisibility' outlined above but also the protection of racially-specific roles for racial-ethnic minority actors and the use of colour-conscious casting where the racial identity of the actor or character is explicitly used to make a political statement.¹⁴ Whether it is Patrick Stewart as Othello alongside an all-black cast (1997, The Shakespeare Theater, Washington D.C.), or black actors in whiteface in Rufus Norris's production of Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* (2009, National Theatre, London) such practices critically comment upon racial identity. As such, colour-blind casting contains the subversive edge of its non-traditional counterpart by creating socio-political commentary.¹⁵

¹¹ August Wilson, *The Ground on Which I Stand* (London: Nick Hern Books, 1996), p. 30; compare with Robert Brustein, 'Unity From Diversity', *The New Republic* (19-26 July 1993), p. 71.

¹² Francesca T. Royster, 'The Chicago Shakespeare Theatre's *Rose Rage*: Whiteness, Terror and the Fleshwork of a Theatre in a Post-Colorblind Age' in *Colorblind Shakespeare: New Perspectives on Race and Performance*, ed. by Ayanna Thompson (London: Routledge, 2006), pp. 221-240 (p. 221).

¹³ Pao, *No Safe Spaces*, p. 3.

¹⁴ Thompson, *Colorblind Shakespeare*, pp. 6-7

¹⁵ Ayanna Thompson, 'Practising a Theory/Theorizing a Practice: An Introduction to Shakespearean Colorblind Casting' in *Colorblind Shakespeare*, ed. by Ayanna Thompson (London: Routledge, 2006), pp. 1-24 (p.7).

However, the logic behind colour-blind casting can create an uncomfortable flip-slide. Colour-blind casting allows any actor to play any role, enabling cross-racial performance to operate in any direction, but arguments for equal opportunity, access and representation can also be deployed to justify white actors playing non-white roles. This reasoning fails to recognise the impact of social and institutional power structures that create marginalization and prevent equal employment opportunities, dynamics that colour-blind casting should ameliorate. As Karen Shimakawa argues, there is a difference between Lawrence Olivier playing Othello and Morgan Freeman playing Petruchio; there are power disparities that make true colour-blindness, and its associated dynamics of equality and democracy, a state that is yet to be achieved.¹⁶ Nevertheless, arguments for the white portrayal of non-white characters is a potentially 'explosive' issue that has received comparatively little academic attention regarding East Asian characters, particularly outside their most famous instance when Jonathan Pryce was cast as the Engineer in *Miss Saigon*.¹⁷ The controversy surrounding Pryce's yellowface highlighted the exclusion of Asian American actors both from non-racially specific roles and from roles linked to their racial background, and thus revolved around issues of rights and ownership, the types of roles being fought for, artistic freedom and the economic power of theatre producers.¹⁸

The RSC's colour-blind casting of *The Orphan of Zhao* similarly raised these issues. Although debates flared around a number of themes, such as the number of British East Asian (hereafter BEA) actors auditioned and the RSC's track record on diversity, it was *The Orphan of Zhao's* repertory context with *Life of Galileo* and *Boris Godunov* that became a point of contention. Director (and newly appointed Artistic Director) Gregory Doran stated that there was 'no way I was going to do this with an

¹⁶ Karen Shimakawa, *National Abjection: The Asian American Body Onstage* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), p. 51.

¹⁷ Sun, 'Power and Problems', p. 87.

¹⁸ For an excellent overview of the protests, see Esther K. Lee, 'The *Miss Saigon* Controversy' in Esther K. Lee, *A History of Asian American Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 177-199.

exclusively Chinese cast that would then go through to those other plays.¹⁹ Although BEA artists and their supporters never advocated an all East Asian cast, the incendiary comment reinforced how the rationale behind colour-blind casting can be used to favour majority groups.²⁰ It seemed acceptable for white or mixed-race actors to play Chinese parts but not *vice versa*, highlighting how casting can reinforce, as much as challenge, dominant power relationships. The RSC's production of *The Orphan of Zhao* therefore provides a test-bed for thinking through the complexities and contradictions surrounding colour-blind casting, particularly the issue of white actors playing non-white roles.

However, in considering how these Chinese roles were being played, *The Orphan of Zhao* controversy was unlike the debates around *Miss Saigon*. The controversy surrounding the latter production was framed and initially driven by disgust around the practice of yellowface, with Pryce taping his eyelids and using make-up to darken his skin. In contrast, discussions about *The Orphan of Zhao* on social media were generally couched in the language of 'equal opportunity' through phrases such as 'a level playing field' and 'access to roles.'²¹ This is the language of multicultural politics and diversity, rather than explicit racism. However, accusations and discussions of yellowface did emerge, particularly after Chen posted a video of herself performing the opening poem, engendering responses such as, 'yellowface

¹⁹ Greg Doran, quoted in Matt Trueman 'Royal Shakespeare Company Under Fire for not Casting Enough Asian Actors', *The Guardian Online*, 19 October 2012 <<http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2012/oct/19/royal-shakespeare-company-asian-actors>> [accessed 20 October 2012].

²⁰ As I have examined in detail elsewhere, the protests against the RSC were propelled not only by BEAs, but also by Asian Americans, Asian Australians, Singaporeans, and many other racial-ethnic groups both in the UK and beyond. See Amanda Rogers, *Performing Asian Transnationalisms: Theatre, identity and the geographies of performance* (New York: Routledge, 2014).

²¹ See Paul Chan, RSC Facebook Page, 22 October 2012 <<https://www.facebook.com/thersc/posts/10151107942763235>> [accessed: 23 October 2012]; see Daniel York RSC Facebook Page, 20 October 2012 <<https://www.facebook.com/thersc/posts/10151107942763235>> [accessed: 21 October 2012].

doesn't happen so much now... ouch huh?'²² This suggests that it is the act of casting (the who) rather than the performance of identity (the how) that produces yellowface. In thinking about the elisions that can occur through colour-blind casting, this article considers a series of related questions: When does colour-blind casting slide into yellowface? What does yellowface mean in this context? Is any non-Chinese actor playing a Chinese part automatically playing it in yellowface? What are the problems of 'authentically' casting Chinese roles?

Yellowface is under-examined compared to its black- and white- face counterparts. Cross-racial 'facing' in performance is often viewed as subversive, with much of the critical work on black- and white- face analysing the performative strategies through which racial representation can be manipulated to challenge social expectations.²³ Such practices may provide possibilities for new forms of identity enactment even as they also contain the potential to legitimise stereotypes. This manipulation of the performing body's authenticity conventionally differentiates blackface or yellowface from colour-blind casting, with discussions highlighting the practice of racial impersonation.²⁴ Impersonation suggests that cross-racial 'facing' is not an attempt to pass as other, but 'an act that makes apparent, in particular contexts, its own origins and confounds the issues of betrayal associated with imposture.'²⁵ In her discussion of acting in relation to embodiment, Erika Fischer-Lichte identifies the tension between 'the phenomenal body of the actor, of their bodily being-in-the-world and their representation of the dramatic character', between 'being a body' and 'having a body' as central to the experience

²² Melody Brown, RSC Facebook Page, 19 October 2012
<<https://www.facebook.com/thersc/posts/10151107942763235>> [accessed: 20 October 2012].

²³ See Camille F. Forbes, 'Dancing with "Racial Feet": Bert Williams and the Performance of Blackness', *Theatre Journal* 56 (2004), 603-625; Catherine M. Cole and Tracy C. Davis, 'Routes of Blackface', *TDR* 57: 2 (2013), 7-12.

²⁴ See Aoife Monks, ' "Genuine Negroes and Real Bloodhounds": Cross-Dressing, Eugene O'Neill, the Wooster Group, and *The Emperor Jones*', *Modern Drama*, 48: 3 (2005) 540-564.

²⁵ Tina Yih-Ting Chen, *Double Agency: Acts of Impersonation in Asian American Literature and Culture*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), p. xix.

of generating corporeality in performance.²⁶ All colour-blind performances grapple with this cleavage, but cross-racial performances of ‘face’ play with it in a heightened way in order to make the artificiality of race apparent. Here, I suggest that in *The Orphan of Zhao* this divide opened so far that it drew attention to the phenomenal bodies of the actors to highlight the problems that emerge when yellowface is passed off as colour-blind casting.

Yellowface and *More Light*

Before analysing *The Orphan of Zhao*, I briefly discuss a production that became linked to the controversy as it helps illuminate understandings of yellowface in British theatre. In addition, much of the literature on yellowface is historically focussed and there is a risk that such a perspective confines this practice to ‘the past’, to a repertoire of actions that become fixed, rather than considering how yellowface might persist and mutate. Prior to *The Orphan of Zhao*, BEA practitioners last questioned practices of representation and casting in a 2009 production of Bryony Lavery’s (1997) play *More Light*²⁷ at the Arcola theatre in London’s fringe, again accusing the performance of using yellowface.²⁸ During the RSC controversy, Asian minority theatre practitioners from across the world, particularly Asian Americans, found the comment threads related to *More Light* on *The Guardian* website and on the blog of *The West End Whingers*. In my own Facebook and Twitter feeds, I saw these pages reposted with the strapline ‘yellowface is alive and well in British theatre’ as part of a broader concern around yellowface in *The Orphan of Zhao*. It is therefore worth taking a closer look at exactly what understandings and practices of yellowface were being deployed in this production, before turning to *The Orphan of Zhao* itself.

²⁶ Erika Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics*, trans. by Saskya Iris Jain, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2008) p. 76.

²⁷ Bryony Lavery, *More Light* (London: Faber and Faber, 2001).

²⁸ Catrina Lear (director), *More Light* by Bryony Lavery, Arcola Theatre, London: Round Pebble Theatre Company, in association with UnderTheBed and Jasper Britton, first performed 12 May 2009.

Bryony Lavery's *More Light* depicts the freedom and self-identity found by the concubines of the first Emperor of China when they are enclosed in his tomb after he has been interred. In order to stay alive, they resort to cannibalism and murder, but the play is ostensibly a meditation of how women are confined by patriarchy. However, *More Light* also explores the difficulties of forging one's own identity within the collective bonds of 'sisterhood', the value of art in cultures dominated by men, and the pleasures and challenges of freedom. Lavery's script adopts a cultural pick-and-mix approach: the idea that the women are buried with their 'master' and his possessions nods to Egyptian funerary rites; the women discuss Christian beliefs and the taking of bread and wine to legitimise their cannibalism; and *More Light* creates delicate Japanese origami paper birds. However, the story unfolds in an explicitly Chinese setting complete with references to the terracotta warriors. Although these different influences potentially heighten the universality of the play, the script (and its production) felt overburdened by its Chinese context.

Initial accusations of yellowface focussed on the make-up and costuming, reinforcing that yellowface involves the impersonation of racial difference. The publicity photographs showed the 'Chinese' women with their hair pinned up with chopsticks, wearing black kimonos with embroidered flowers, holding their red fans open. Their faces were painted white, with heavy eyeliner and rosebud red lips. At first glance this was an all-white cast of women dressing up. Lavery's script calls for the use of make-up, with the opening stage directions stating that: 'All we see is a whitened face, eyes, a red mouth.'²⁹ Although no prosthetics were used, and Lavery is not specific about the *type* of Asianity being represented through make-up, the image created was of Japanese Geishas, particularly when the other costuming accoutrements were taken into account. There was a clear elision, therefore, between Japanese and Chinese cultural signifiers, one supported by the script and performance where the women also all look alike. Narratively, this suggests that the women are not individual and independent characters, they all appear, move and act

²⁹ Lavery, *More Light*, p. 3.

in the same way because they are defined by their relationship to the Emperor, to a man in power. This is reinforced in the script through the repetition of the speeches associated with life at court such as:

I have had a most wonderful life.
I have known only the finest of food.
I have slept on the softest sheets.
I have known only the Emperor.
My garden has been green.³⁰

However, the problem of the play's (and production's) context is that such elisions have historically been used to support the idea that all Asians look alike, a logic that has supported cultural and legal exclusion.³¹

These practices therefore speak to racial impersonation, to yellowface, especially as Lavery's script supports various forms of stereotyping. The women's use of the word 'ayee'³² is a typical form of accented speech traditionally associated with yellowface. The play foregrounds the women's sexuality but their descriptions of having sex with the Emperor also reinforces the stereotype of Asian women as sexually available, as do their names (Love Mouth, Shy Smile, Rapture) even as the play ambivalently suggests that they are now free from this stereotype. The women's acts of cannibalism are repulsive and reinforce stereotypes of Chinese as sub-human, especially as the women relish exploring the cooking and eating of different forms of flesh. However, this is part of the play's exploration of how the concubines relate to their newfound independence. The play therefore traverses the ambivalence often associated with stereotypes, even as it explores how this may be used to discuss freedom.³³

³⁰ Ibid., p. 9.

³¹ See Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996).

³² Lavery, *More Light*, see pp. 25, 26, 30.

³³ Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 1994), p. 95.

In fairness to both play and production, the women remove the make-up by Scene 10 (about a quarter of the way through the text) when the 'ladies' faces are no longer white. The red paint is gone from the mouths.'³⁴ In performance their hair also came loose as they used the chopsticks to eat the Emperor. The production therefore used costume, hair and make-up as devices for expressing the women's increasing release in their search for individual expression, with each woman taking on a role that allowed her to explore her own identity (for instance, *More Light* is the leader, *Many Treasures* cooks, *Love Mouth* paints). These ideas are reinforced by the removal of their foot binding and their subsequent ability to move more freely. However, the problem is that these semiotic representations suggest that Chinese or Asian culture is something to escape, and at a metaphorical level reinforce stereotypes of China as backwards, traditional and repressive. *More Light* can be read as a feminist 'allegory'³⁵ of universal womanhood with the production being 'stylised but non-specific'³⁶, but Rustom Bharucha has illustrated how universalism can mask the appropriation of cultural difference.³⁷ Indeed, some of the comments querying the production referred to cultural 'pillaging' in their discussion of cultural elisions and authenticity in the design.³⁸ The production was not trying to be culturally authentic, hence Gardner's reference to stylisation above, but like the play itself, it glossed over cultural specificities, and seemed unaware of the loaded

³⁴ Lavery, *More Light*, p. 23.

³⁵ Catrina Lear, 27 May 2009 (12.48pm), comment on Lyn Gardner 'At last, theatre is shedding more light on feminism' *The Guardian Theatre Blog*, 24 May 2009 <<http://www.theguardian.com/stage/theatreblog/2009/may/24/theatre-more-light-feminism>> [accessed 3 March 2014].

³⁶ Lyn Gardner, 26 May 2009 (11.56pm), comment on Lyn Gardner 'At last, theatre is shedding more light on feminism' *The Guardian Theatre Blog*, 24 May 2009 <<http://www.theguardian.com/stage/theatreblog/2009/may/24/theatre-more-light-feminism>> [accessed 3 March 2014].

³⁷ Rustom Bharucha, 'Foreign Asia/Foreign Shakespeare: Dissenting Notes on New Asian Interculturality, Postcoloniality, and Recolonization' *Theatre Journal* 56: 1 (2004), 1-28.

³⁸ Enough Rope, 27 May 2009 (1.21pm), comment on Lyn Gardner 'At last, theatre is shedding more light on feminism' *The Guardian Theatre Blog*, 24 May 2009 <<http://www.theguardian.com/stage/theatreblog/2009/may/24/theatre-more-light-feminism>> [accessed 3 March 2014].

histories of yellowface performance where make-up and costume have been used not only as markers of difference, but as mechanisms for domination and exclusion.

The image of yellowface in publicity photographs and its practice in performance sparked debate, especially as all the actresses were white. Indeed the removal and smearing of the make-up reinforced that this was cross-racial impersonation. As Fischer-Lichter suggests, such moments prise apart the relationship between the actors' body and the semiotic body of the character to make us more aware of the materiality of the actor.³⁹ As such, audiences knew that it was a white cast 'dressing up' but this was not a homogeneous whiteness. Commentators suggested that there was no impersonation because actresses spoke in their normal voices, distinguishing their Scottish and German accents. Recent analyses of cross-racial 'facing' challenge the idea that 'the performers beneath the mask uphold whiteness'⁴⁰ in a uniform manner, something supported by the differentiation of the cast. Once the make-up was removed the women expressed their individuality as characters, but also (in this instance) as white women. The staging reinforced the idea that Asian women are all alike visually but that whiteness was differentiated through the phenomenal bodies of the actresses, as the production drew attention to racial identity by reinforcing the act of dressing up and dressing down.

It was here that the constitution of yellowface as a strategy of racial impersonation started to dovetail with its formation as a casting practice that excluded East Asian actors. As individuals queried why there were no BEAs in the cast, the production became seen among BEA practitioners as another instance of exclusion on the basis of white impersonation. Theatre critic Ian Shuttleworth dismissed such concerns by writing 'How dare the Arcola engage in colour-blind casting!' on one blog thread, revealing how discourses of colour-blind casting can be

³⁹ Fischer-Lichter, *Transformative Power*, p. 78.

⁴⁰ Emily Roxworthy, 'Blackface Behind Barbed Wire: Gender and Racial Triangulation in the Japanese American Internment Camps', *TDR* 57:2 (2013), 123-142 (p. 138).

invoked in ways that support the status quo.⁴¹ Yet for BEA practitioners, the lack of opportunities intensified the desire for a colour-blind approach that protected racially-specific roles. However, such authenticity in casting may problematically serve Orientalist images and representations. When the director Catrina Lear responded to comments on *The Guardian* blog, she highlighted that she was working with an existing company of actors and could not hold open auditions. She also stated that she had ‘some apologies’ to make regarding the costuming, with her limited budget meaning that she used the cheapest but most decorative costumes she could afford.⁴² The tone of debate shifted at this point. Although BEA artists continued to highlight the production’s problems, they also reluctantly accepted its context and the financial constraints of working in the fringe. In the intervening years of conducting research between *More Light* and *The Orphan of Zhao*, practitioners have informally commented to me that whilst problematic, this was a fringe theatre production and so it was trickier to condemn. As a result, this production offers a counterpoint to Esther Kim Lee’s analysis of yellowface in *Miss Saigon*, where the economics of staging a Broadway musical with advanced ticket sales meant that Pryce’s casting proceeded. On *More Light*, the reverse is the case, with yellowface partly justified on the basis of not having enough money. As a practice of cross-racial impersonation, therefore, yellowface is flexible but is driven by economic forces in contradictory ways.

More Light therefore displayed elements of yellowface practice, of making and dressing up in the service of stereotypes, with the performance also defended on the basis that the script is a metaphorical story about patriarchy that speaks to all women. However, as feminists have long argued, who speaks for whom is important in such claims, as women’s experiences are not directly comparable or easily conflated. Recourse to a sense of universal womanhood elides the power relationships that exist among women; hence the development of feminist

⁴¹ Ian Shuttleworth 27 May 2009 (2.45pm), comment on *The West End Whingers* ‘Review of *More Light*’ 26 May 2009 <<http://westendwhingers.wordpress.com/2009/05/26/review-more-light-arcola-theatre/>> [accessed: 3 March 2014].

⁴² Catrina Lear, comment, 27 May 2009 (12.48pm).

standpoint theory and intersectionality that think through the relationships between identities.⁴³ The relationship between gender and race further reinforces the imbalances of *More Light*, as (however unintentionally) the production suggested white female privilege in representing Chinese women. Yet in debates online, the idea of racial impersonation came to the fore as the most offensive dynamic of the production, no matter whether or not it was used in the service of a 'universal' story. As one BEA commentator wrote: 'If this all-white cast had not tried to "yellow up", less offence might have been caused.'⁴⁴ It was, therefore, ethnic pretence that was at issue, of white actors cast to knowingly and excessively perform Chinese identities. So what happens in a production where there is no make-up? Where there are no 'ayees'? Where there are costumes but no deconstructive, heightened imperative? Is that production, *The Orphan of Zhao*, yellowface?

Yellowface and *The Orphan of Zhao*

As a production, *The Orphan of Zhao* trod a fine line regarding the performance of yellowface, with colour-blind casting co-existing with racial impersonation. However, neither was a complete process, highlighting the elusiveness, and danger, of not considering the implications of race whilst trying to render it redundant. The production's stage design was beautiful, lavish and lush but also replete with 'Chinese' signifiers, encompassing a latticework wooden *yue men* upstage and lanterns, alongside Chinese robes, top knots and headdresses. Indeed, the production's Chinese design and setting helped create the moments of yellowface identified below.

The multicultural company performing *The Orphan of Zhao* potentially complicates the white-Asian binary underpinning conventional accounts of

⁴³ See Leslie McCall, 'The Complexity of Intersectionality', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 30: 3 (2005), 1771-1802.

⁴⁴ Dtk888, 26 May 2009 (8.12pm), comment on Lyn Gardner 'At Last, Theatre is Shedding More Light on Feminism', *The Guardian Theatre Blog*, 24 May 2009 <<http://www.theguardian.com/stage/theatreblog/2009/may/24/theatre-more-light-feminism>> [accessed 3 March 2014].

yellowface. Recent work on cross-racial impersonation has moved beyond such dichotomies, examining racial triangulation and the slippages that occur between racial groups in performance.⁴⁵ Kristin Moon has also illustrated how Chinese American performers enacted stereotypes associated with yellowface representations of Chinese but used their performances to challenge such imagery in attempts to gain control onstage. The power relationships embodied in yellowface therefore need not be automatically associated with whiteness or white mimicry, as performance can both reinforce and unravel the meaning of racial impersonation. However, in this production, yellowface was most apparent in performances by white actors, not only because as Broderick Chow argues in this volume, many of the racial-ethnic minority actors were silenced, but also because the white–Asian binary was reasserted with mixed-race actors. Performing in a Chinese play as Chinese characters allowed certain kinds of cross-racial impersonation to emerge in ways that reduced, or more accurately, assimilated, difference.

The first point to consider when analysing the performance of yellowface is the script itself, as it was here that a new form of stereotypical representation seemed to emerge. When examining the script of *The Orphan of Zhao* the language is extremely stylised, something also evident in the performance. When General Han Jue finds the doctor, Cheng Ying, hiding the baby, he decides to let them go free but Cheng Ying's interrogation is a good example of the language used in *The Orphan of Zhao*:

Han Jue: When I tell you to go, you are off like an arrow from a string. But when I call you back, it's like pulling hair over felt [...] you are hiding something [...] you said you only had bellflower, licorice and peppermint. But I see a little root shaped like a child. I have found ginseng.⁴⁶

The exchange uses a series of metaphors but explicitly describes each action and emotion, such that the script promotes presentational styles of speech and

⁴⁵ See for instance, Roxworthy's 'Behind Barbed Wire', pp. 123-142.

⁴⁶ James Fenton, *The Orphan of Zhao* (London: Faber and Faber 2012), p. 19.

performance, with James Fenton retaining some of the conventions of traditional Chinese drama (characters also introduce themselves and recap their activities at the start of each scene). Fenton was aware of the stylisation of language required for an adaptation of a Chinese play that, in its most popular and recognisable version, also uses songs. In a commentary in British newspaper *The Guardian*, he wrote that:

What immediately struck me was the problem of style. How to create a poetic language that, without sounding like so much hokum, would convey a sense of the early feudal world the play depicts? [...] The play isn't written in verse. But it's written in a poetic style that suggests the feudal psychology of early China. [...] This, I hope, is the imagined language of a fearsome, distant kingdom.⁴⁷

The script, in its emphasis on subservience and individual self-sacrifice in the name of justice and righteousness, also reflects Confucian values. Yet Fenton's description is peculiarly Orientalist in its search to represent an historical theatre form and imagined location in a poetic style. I highlight the text of *The Orphan of Zhao* because in looking at *More Light*, Lavery's play is also poetic; the extract reproduced earlier illustrates that it is, again, written in verse. This link between poetry, performance, and 'ancient China' whilst not creating stereotypical 'flying lice' accents, nevertheless points towards a modern form of Orientalism at the level of the script, one that frames China as a mythic, beautiful, poetic fantasy. My point, however, is that this potentially assists in a more subtle reproduction of yellowface at the level of the voice, as attempts to capture a Chinese aesthetic through speech promotes the performance of otherness through spoken form, especially as it appears artificial to Western audiences.

⁴⁷ James Fenton, 'The Orphan of Zhao at the RSC: A Very Modern Massacre', *The Guardian Online*, 30 October 2012
<<http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2012/oct/30/orphan-of-zhao-rsc>> [accessed 1 November 2012].

More conventional associations of yellowface as racial impersonation also emerged by drawing attention to the racial identities of the actors. In her review of *The Orphan of Zhao* Anna Chen called the production 'Aladdin for middle-class grown-ups'.⁴⁸ The evocation of pantomime is apt, as pantomime is marked by the act of cross-dressing (usually regarding gender) in ways that 'contribute to the reflexivity of the performance.'⁴⁹ Such heightened theatricality, particularly through cross-racial dressing, characterised moments in *The Orphan of Zhao* and sometimes inadvertently created humour. The production's 'costuming', what Monks calls 'an act or event that is centred on the ways in which audiences look at an actor dressed up onstage'⁵⁰ made me acutely aware that these were largely white actors in Chinese robes owing to the sumptuousness of the costumes they wore, both visually and (I imagined) materially. Quite simply, they looked expensive. In scene three, where Zhao Dun, general and counsellor Wei Jiang and counsellor Gongsun Chujiu first appear, I wrote at the time that "when the characters lined up on stage and walked down to the audience, the thing I saw, felt, at once, was a wall of white men."⁵¹ By placing these three advisors upfront in bright green and purple robes, the visual effect of the Chinoiserie emphasised the racial identity of the actors, rendering race more, rather than less, visible. Similarly, there was an Orientalism to the military Chinese-warrior inspired costumes of the guards and generals, which in their detailed design and terracotta warrior imagery again appeared excessively beautiful. The brilliance of the costuming prised open the semiotic relationship between the actor's body and their character's costume to evoke notions of dressing up, and yellowface, in the way that Fischer-Lichte suggests.⁵² The production therefore

⁴⁸ Anna Chen, 'RSC *The Orphan of Zhao* review: Aladdin for middle-class grown-ups', please capitalise title *Morning Star Online*, 15 November 2012.

<<http://www.morningstaronline.co.uk/news/content/view/full/126082>> [accessed: 16 November 2012].

⁴⁹ Millie Taylor, *British Pantomime Performance* (Bristol: Intellect Books, 2007), p. 14.

⁵⁰ Aoife Monks, *The Actor in Costume* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 1.

⁵¹ Amanda Rogers, 'Review: *The Orphan of Zhao*', *Theatrical Geographies*, 6 January 2013 < <http://theatricalgeographies.wordpress.com/2013/01/06/review-the-orphan-of-zhao/>> [accessed 30 June 2014].

⁵² Fischer-Lichte, *Transformative Power*, p. 82.

revealed the “power of costuming to shape bodies and form identities.”⁵³ This disjuncture was further accentuated by creating the impression of covered topknots and facial hair. Although no make-up or prosthetics were used, middle-aged or older men had grown their own beards trimmed into goatees with moustaches. This literal extension of body into costume is ambiguous: it reflects a contemporary fashion for facial hair; it suggests a desire for authenticity that does not necessarily speak to racial impersonation; but it also evokes yellowface imagery, not least in the form of Peter Sellars’ caricatured Fu Manchu. However, the consistent use of facial hair combined with the costuming worked as a further Chinese signifier and reflected attempts to look Chinese.

There were, therefore, moments in the production where the cast appeared to be dressing up in a manner reminiscent of yellowface, but yellowface performances were historically used to stereotype and ridicule.⁵⁴ In thinking through the pantomime analogy further, especially the idea of the pantomime villain, *The Orphan of Zhao* was contradictory in this regard. Tu’an Gu, the head of the palace guard and the Emperor’s right-hand man, is the real arch-enemy of the play. He is ruthless, violent and manipulative, seeking to ultimately become the Emperor himself. Yet he is not a stereotype. Tu’an Gu orders the Zhao massacre but his thirst for power is mitigated by his love and kindness towards his adopted son, Cheng Bo. However, the Emperor *is* reminiscent of stereotypical performances of the evil ‘heathen Chinee’ with his bright yellow robes, facial hair, covered top knot, portly figure, small walk, and childish gleeful joy in killing his own citizens with a bow and arrow. He is a figure of ridicule (even to Tu’an Gu) as much as one of fear, and with the prising open of the semiotics of race created by the combination of costuming and performance, exposed *The Orphan of Zhao* as at times “constructed, fantastic [...] even as some scenes are played with heightened realism to draw the audience into identification with the story.”⁵⁵ Elsewhere in the staging, four severed heads with worm-like organs dangling from their necks dropped from the ceiling and

⁵³ Monks, *The Actor in Costume*, p. 1.

⁵⁴ Metzger, ‘Charles Parsloe’, p. 631.

⁵⁵ Taylor, *British Pantomime Performance*, p. 14.

elicited laughter in the audience, rather than reflecting the doctor's fear that if he is caught smuggling the orphan, he will be killed. An assassin dressed as a Japanese ninja (all in black, a sword on his back, his face covered) also killed himself by beating his head against a post, again creating murmurs. Leaving the issue of cultural elision aside, these acts all appeared panto-like to audiences and thus made Chinese characters subjects to be laughed *at*.

Such moments therefore drew attention to cross-racial dress up, to racial-ethnic impersonation and therefore displayed elements of yellowface, heightening the 'allure and repulsiveness' that Moon argues coexists in such performances.⁵⁶ Yet they also drew attention to *The Orphan of Zhao's* casting more generally. By heightening the whiteness of many actors performing as Chinese, the performance concomitantly drew greater attention to the role of ethnic minority performers. The sensuousness of white advisors in Chinese costumes meant that in recognising them as white, I also noticed more distinctly the BEA actors carrying spears in the background. In observing the whiteness of the doctor, his wife, and the counsellor Gongsun Chujiu, I saw the subservient posture of ethnic minority actors in comparison. The performance of baby-gurgling sounds by two BEA actors, reminiscent of the yellowface performance of 'baby-talk' identified by Moon, shocked me in its stereotypical infantilisation, as did the BEA actors depicting horses and dogs discussed elsewhere in this issue.⁵⁷ The marginality of some roles, and indeed, their stereotypical connotations, therefore became more apparent because moments of yellowface meant that, as Ashley Thorpe also argues here, colour-blind casting could not negate race. Although, as indicated in the interview with the RSC, the actors disputed the idea that they were performing stereotypes or 'bit parts', as a viewer, the Chinese signifiers meant that I became more attuned to problematic representations.

However, my resulting attention to race also worked to *undermine* these associations as in viewing I became more aware of those times when colour-blind

⁵⁶ Moon, *Yellowface*, p. 6.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

casting operated in more progressive ways. The most publicised image from *The Orphan of Zhao* of the final scene where Graham Turner as the doctor dies in the arms of his ghost son, played by Chris Lew Kum Hoi, took on a greater resonance because the production had attuned me to the racial identities of the actors' bodies. This moment was also the most impressive as Hoi's talent as an actor was finally allowed to become apparent in what theatre critic Michael Billington called a 'haunting belated appearance.'⁵⁸ A perverse logic of racial identification reared its head as I saw that a white actor had an East Asian son and noted this as colour-blind casting in operation. Similarly elsewhere, the white racial identities of Lucy Briggs Owen as The Princess and James Tucker as Zhao Dun contrasted with their son, the titular orphan, played by Jake Fairbrother. Fairbrother is an actor who, as academic Saffron Walking pinpointed, not only resembled Yul Brynner but was 'labelled "ethnically ambiguous" [...] Jake, too, had a face that could represent anywhere.'⁵⁹ This generic sense of otherness and difference, indeed ethnic confusion (which Brynner was famous for playing on) was reinforced in my recognition that as Cheng Bo, Fairbrother appeared racially different compared to his white mother in their touching reconciliation. I was also more aware of Susan Momoko-Hingley's comparative degree of agency in her role as The Maid in helping to save the Orphan's life. These moments lacked overt racial-ethnic pretence; they lacked parody and were colour-blind casting in operation. But I noticed this at considerable cost because racial identity was made visible through yellowface practices that heightened race in the production overall, revealing the iniquities of casting practices that try to be colour-blind without recognising the paradoxes embedded in that blindness. Race must be recognised on some level. Indeed, if yellowface also includes the denial of employment opportunities and the concomitant reinforcement of racial-ethnic inequality, then in this instance, the suite of actions

⁵⁸ Michael Billington, 'The Orphan of Zhao – Review', *The Guardian Online* 9 November 2012 <<http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2012/nov/09/the-orphan-of-zao-review>> [accessed 9 November 2012].

⁵⁹ Saffron Walking, 'A World Elsewhere: The Orphan of Zhao at the RSC Review Part 1.' 23 January 2013 <<http://saffronatstudy.wordpress.com/tag/hamlet/>> [accessed 28 February 2014].

associated with yellowface as a performance could be said to have reinforced yellowface as an exclusionary casting practice.

Shifting Performances of Yellowface

Such insights beg certain questions around yellowface and casting in this production. *More Light* created offence at its explicit racial theatricality, at its use of make-up and dressing up in cross-racial performance. Yet whilst some of these elements were present in *The Orphan of Zhao* they were less the point of contention, arguably because they forced a recognition of the racial identities of the actors. Audience attention was drawn to the costumed surface of the body but in so doing revealed the tension between the costumes and the actors' bodies that lay 'beyond' them.⁶⁰ As a result, the types of roles performed by BEA actors were made more apparent and became contested as a sense of cultural appropriation took hold. This, in turn, was linked to feeling excluded both from a culturally-specific story to which many BEAs could lay claim through their ethnic heritage, and from being centrally represented in a mainstream institution as part of multicultural Britain. Although this did not slide completely into the desire for an all-East Asian cast via claims of cultural authenticity, or for protected roles through the rubric of colour-blind casting, there was a sense that leading roles had slipped away. Indeed, the RSC's position as a mainstream institution receiving public funding created a sense of greater injustice compared to *More Light*. The fact that the company is a global icon of British theatre suggests that it should *reflect* British society to the rest of the world, particularly as it is so well-resourced and is often held up as a leading light in the promotion of colour-blind casting. The moments of yellowface that did occur were therefore more contested, even unforgivable, because BEAs make financial contributions to the company as taxpayers, yet were problematically represented in, and even excluded from, its performances at a national (and international) level. However, through protesting the production, there was also the potential to make an example of the RSC because of its status. Although there is no reason why *More*

⁶⁰ Monks, *Actor in Costume*, p. 1

Light should be forgiven for yellowface any more than *The Orphan of Zhao*, there was a different production of, and understanding about, yellowface regarding the latter production, one that revolved around inequality and exclusion at a theatrical institution representing Britain. As I have argued here, racial impersonation highlighted the exclusion of BEA actors from leading roles and revealed systemic power relations that position these actors in ways that reinforce marginality, particularly by performing stereotypes in ways that lacked critical edge.

Together this points to the shifting emphasis and contextual mutability of yellowface (such as the emergence of a poetic style of speech common to both productions) and the need for constant awareness to prevent the simplistic reproduction of stereotypical imagery. This is an important insight as it enables a better consideration of what battles to pick and what action to take. For instance, in thinking about why *The Orphan of Zhao* created such debate, the idea was often expressed both online and in interviews (including in this volume) that casting one or two BEA actors in lead roles would have prevented the outcry. Yet this should be approached with caution. The unevenness of yellowface impersonation meant that it would be problematic, for instance, to have a BEA actor in the role of the Emperor than in the role of Tu'an Gu as performed in the RSC production. Such casting would further cement popular stereotypes of Chinese as debased and villainous two-dimensional characters; indeed, it would render them seemingly authentic. As Dorinne Kondo argued during the *Miss Saigon* controversy, 'for what kinds of Asian roles are we competing?'⁶¹ How can performance be used to critique problematic imagery? What kinds of strategies could make the Emperor less like a pastiche of 'pantomime'? *The Orphan of Zhao* makes clear that contextual specificities are incredibly important in thinking through any form of colour casting practice. Yet the increased desire for leading roles also signals a watershed moment that marks a growing BEA artistic community clamouring for equal opportunities and representation. When David Henry Hwang's (2007) play *Yellow Face* was staged in London in 2013, shortly after *The Orphan of Zhao* controversy, the terrain of debate

⁶¹ Dorinne Kondo, *About Face: Performing Race in Fashion and Theater* (New York: Routledge, 2007), p. 231.

had shifted.⁶² Hwang's comedic take on the *Miss Saigon* protests addresses racial impersonation by sending up the assumptions made in casting *vis-à-vis* a case of mistaken identity that spirals into false attempts to claim racial-ethnic heritage. The production was exceptionally timely but it also shored up an understanding of yellowface as a denial of equal employment opportunities, as indicated in media reviews:

“The under-representation of east Asian actors on British stages received overdue attention late last year after criticism of the RSC's casting of the Chinese play, *The Orphan of Zhao*. So [...] David Henry Hwang's comic drama from 2007 is particularly timely, raising slippery issues about the portrayal of race.”⁶³

“Even today, British Asian actors remain woefully under-represented on our stages. Only last year, the RSC was forced to defend a largely Caucasian cast performing the Chinese play *The Orphan of Zhao*.”⁶⁴

These quotations explicitly highlight the under-representation of East Asian actors in British theatre, and signal how *The Orphan of Zhao* could be said to have reinforced this situation. Yellowface is therefore not only shifting as a form of impersonation but is also being recognised more widely as a mode of exclusion from employment opportunities for BEAs. As I have argued throughout, it is necessary to take stock of both who is being represented and how.

Many commentators, critics, and creatives claim that neither *More Light* nor *The Orphan of Zhao* used yellowface because yellowface is simply about make-up

⁶² Alex Sims (director), *Yellow Face* by David Henry Hwang, Park Theatre, London: Special Relationship Productions in association with the Park Theatre, first performed 21 May 2013.

⁶³ Lyn Gardner ‘*Yellow Face* – Review’ *The Guardian Online*, 29 May 2013 <<http://www.theguardian.com/music/2013/may/29/yellow-face-review>> [accessed: 1 June 2013].

⁶⁴ Matt Trueman, ‘*Yellow Face*’ *Time Out London Online*, 24 May 2013 <<http://www.timeout.com/london/theatre/yellow-face>> [accessed: 1 June 2013].

and prosthetics, or the use of these strategies in the performance of obscene stereotypes. Even if understood at this level, what I have outlined here are subtle and uneven instances of yellowface, yet they are yellowface nonetheless. Both plays contain moments of apparent cross-racial impersonation, with the semiotic signification of race splitting between the actor and the character to render race more visible to the audience. This in turn highlights the exclusion of ethnic minority actors from mainstream representation, with yellowface revealing its own exclusionary dynamics. The rationales behind yellowface, that there are not enough East Asian actors, that white actors are 'the best actors for the role', or that stories are universal and anyone can perform in them, are persistent ones that may lead colour-blind casting to be implemented in ways that reinforce white superiority. As such, we must be constantly on our guard to watch for complacency and to realise the stakes involved in retaining – and disrupting – the status quo around race.