

So, in order to be able to transport people away to exotic India, dancers would paint their skins dark. How else could you believe they were Indian people? It was not *meant* to be malicious, and the ballet doesn't *make fun* of Indian people—quite the opposite: it humanizes people from other cultures, he argued. So why did presenters make the Bolshoi *not* paint the skin when they toured in London?

Hoo boy, I thought.

We talked about blackface and its history as a theatrical device in America, but also abroad. What the impact is on how we think about Black people. What it reinforces. Who it excludes.

After listening, Alexei did say he would take out “the fingers.” He said that the gesture suggesting “Chinese people” could be something else. Great. But I knew that a few seconds of “Sleeping Beauty” chinoiserie was the least of my worries. “Nutcracker” season, just around the corner, was much more problematic. Addressing the racial caricatures in that wouldn't be like talking about one production of *Sleeping Beauty* in my backyard. The conversation would have to be much bigger: to this day, *The Nutcracker* is the biggest thing in ballet.

The Need for Yellowface Activism

Whether we're people of color or not, once we become sensitized to how offensive racial caricatures and stereotypes can be, we're torn away from the magical experience of watching great dance, jarred by something sour in the midst of what's supposed to be the land of the sweets. However, understanding that and finding ways to do better, are almost the *easy* part of conversations about Asian (or any non White group) representation in dance. More difficult to communicate is the impact such portrayals have in terms of “othering,” and thus why they are actually harmful (to living persons and to the American project) and not merely “offensive”—the target of “political correctness.”

We all want to belong: when this group is always royalty and that group is always the coolie, the slave, or the butt of the joke—or even the exotic (oriental) other—we internalize the embedded messages about belonging or not. We see confirmation of our place in the world, who has power to decide who belongs, and what we can and can't aspire to. It's especially painful to realize that classic works such as *The Nutcracker* are served up every December to the impressionable minds of children: are we happy about caricatured racial slurs they're absorbing, in the guise of sweet confectionary? I'm not, and growing numbers are agreeing.

Ballets are not presented in a vacuum, and as much as creators need to be knowledgeable about the dance history and tradition their works will be embedded within, we must also realize that everything presented happens within the context of a place and time. The history of experiencing life as a member of a minority group in America will shape audience responses to artistic presentations today, and creators cannot afford to be ignorant of these dynamics.

Some participants can simply enjoy fantasy portrayals of “other” cultures and revel in the feeling of ballet history being reenacted in front of their eyes. But the usual caricatured portrayals suggest to minority audience members that ballet isn't *for* them, though it sometimes pretends to be *about* them. Some of us don't have the *privilege of ignoring how we as a people are seen in this society*: we can never forget that ethnicity matters in this country and we're (apparently) not the most valued group.

I've observed that conversations accusing (White) people of operating under the influence of *privilege* often go awry. The word suggests that someone automatically has it made because they're White. It's difficult to accept that label because very few of us believe we've had it easy or been free of being bullied, and most of us have felt disadvantaged at some point because of something about us (race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, health condition, or how much money we have). Very few of us can accept the notion that our lives have been “privileged,” because if it's not race, it's something else that's been difficult.

However, anyone who identifies as White or is seen as White in the US today can acknowledge that being White has allowed them not to have to

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think much about racial dynamics or to worry about their safety because of racial biases. Most have never had an experience like mine of being told to “go back to your country.” Never been on a bus late at night with a drunk couple screaming in your face, calling you a Dirty Chink—standing up, pointing fingers. This really happened to me, and the scariest part during that incident was that no one on the bus did anything. No one said anything. Not even the driver. It was the most scared I’ve ever felt—trapped in a small moving vehicle with people who were antagonistic and indifferent. The indifference from people who said and did nothing scared me more. If you’re White in America you don’t go through this, right? Believe me, it is a privilege.

It made sense that Peter Martins would approach me to talk about Chinese caricature in *The Nutcracker*, not just because I’m surnamed Chan (Hong Kong Chinese father and American White mother) but because of my many years of involvement in dance, as dancer, producer, administrator, and educator. Advocacy has also been an integral part of my experience in the dance community, not necessarily because I wanted to be an activist but because I almost had to be, given the problems everyone can see.

My foray into Asian activism began in earnest when I served on the awards panel for the Asian American Arts Alliance, set up to recognize an emerging Asian choreographer, in honor of the trailblazing dance pioneer Jadin Wong. A modest prize, it highlighted to me the lack of resources afforded to Asian American artists in the dance community who haven’t been able to break through via the traditional ballet track. It made me consider that perhaps I could be doing more to support my fellow Asian Americans in dance. Once on the panel, I thought of another advocate who should join, and reached out to my dear friend Georgina (“Gina”) Pazcoguin, a soloist with the New York City Ballet, who is biracial of Filipino and Italian descent, and who was the first Asian American to be promoted to the company’s upper ranks.

In many ways, Gina doesn’t fit in at New York City Ballet. She’s a really good actress and singer, and probably the best character dancer in the company, and so is often relegated to those supporting roles, as opposed to the ballerina roles, which she is equally good in. She does a killer “Anita” from

FINAL BOW FOR YELLOWFACE

West Side Story, and is probably the best dancer of Jerome Robbins work in the company right now. She took a leave from City Ballet to star in *On the Town* as Ivy Smith (a role originated by Sono Osato, another biracial ballerina, but of Japanese heritage, who performed at the height of anti-Japanese hysteria in the 40s) as well as Victoria, the White Cat, in *Cats*.

Gina is a fighter, which is evidenced by the various charities she has volunteered for and promoted, tackling issues like sex trafficking to poverty to dance education. “I can’t meet next week, I’m teaching dance in the favelas outside of Rio,” is not something unusual to hear from Gina. She has branded herself “the Rogue Ballerina.”

I’d often be on the dance floor at an event, innocently enjoying myself, when I’d lock eyes with Gina—three tequilas in and flying mid-air towards me—with the full expectation that I would catch her. And I always do (with one notable exception: the Parsons Dance Gala in 2014). Yet she isn’t sloppy or careless as a person. She’s one of the most responsible, organized, and professional dancers I’ve ever encountered. As a friend, she’s a good listener, remembers birthdays, keeps secrets, and calls bullshit when she has to.

As we enter the 21st century in earnest, there are many new social issues that have permeated the dance world we’ve called our personal and professional home for most of our lives that were not issues for previous generations. As a new generation takes the reins at performing arts institutions around the world, we need to ask ourselves what are we repeating on stage and why?

In this new era of “political correctness,” some beloved dance classics that have been preserved “as is” may be deemed unacceptable to many audience members. Sarah Kaufman of *The Washington Post* recently said of the visiting Mariinsky Ballet presenting *Le Corsaire*, an orientalist work by Marius Petipa from 1856:

If the glitzy depiction of human trafficking doesn’t make you cringe, how about its parade of deplorable ethnic stereotypes, starting with turbaned Turks ogling female captives at a slave market? Popular for its flamboyance and passionate love duets,

Le Corsaire hasn't aged well in terms of its plot points, and its 19th-century conventions feel crass to a contemporary perspective.²

But what about the dance heritage that's contained in the ballet itself? Is it possible to separate the artistic merit of Petipa's choreography from the outdated representations of Arab culture? When encountering problematic portrayals of race in the classical Western canon, how do we not throw the baby out with the bathwater? Are there any works that cannot be redeemed, that should no longer be performed? How do we determine that?

With a greater awareness among our audiences and critics, the pressure is growing to address these questions. My fear is that performing arts organizations are not equipped to approach beloved classic works that feature outdated representations of race, and yet contain so much of our shared dance culture that they're worth saving. How we preserve them and how we revive them lies at the heart of this book.

Hopefully, what emerges is a set of best practices any arts organization can adopt when staging these works—finding a line between honoring history and tradition, while looking toward the future, and in the process, staging creative, engaging, and living art that impacts people positively today. This will help ensure that the intentions of artists who just hadn't previously had to think about the impacts of their work on Americans of color are not misunderstood and that their works are not mistaken for racism. I'm also hoping that providing language and stories of activism in action gives audience members, dancers, and everyone involved in dance a sense of power and confidence to speak up about the impacts of what is being presented and to advocate for what they'd like to see, knowing why it's important.

² Sarah L. Kaufman, "An 18-Year-Old New Ballet Star Salvages An Outmoded Tale of Pirates, Slaves and Stereotypes," *Washington Post*, April 10, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/theater_dance/an-18-year-old-new-ballet-star-salvages-an-outmoded-tale-of-pirates-slaves-and-stereotypes/2019/04/10/c1b685cc-5af9-11e9-b8e3-b03311fbbbf_story.html (accessed January 25, 2020).

Yellowface Activism As American Activism

I want to share my story of being inside the eye of the hurricane of change between 2017 and 2019—my many connections in the ballet world had begun to see me as a “go to” person whenever audience criticisms of portrayals of Asians on stage got too loud. During phone calls, cocktails and cafe meetings, and intermission greetings they'd ask my advice, and as a result, I've developed nuanced ways of thinking about the issues of representation and inclusion in dance that I hope others may find useful.

Most artists would be unhappy to find out that their artistic intentions fell short of being achieved or that their work is landing badly with certain members of the audience, and most would want to fix that. What happens next all depends, but I suspect that being able to talk about the issues is more difficult and complicated than it needs to be. Sometimes it's because participants in such conversations borrow assumptions and terminology from larger social justice activism efforts—using words as weapons and losing sight of the shared love of ballet and the intent to help it flourish. The intention of such activism is good, but the impact falls short, and nothing changes.

I've observed that many of us are very good at expressing how offended we are, but are not able to take the next step. It's not as difficult to label a work “racist” or to talk of “cultural appropriation” as it is to find ways to have constructive conversations about why and how to do better. Further complicating things is that often feedback does not sufficiently account for the difference between intention and impact. An artist may be surprised to find that a work offends, as that was far from the intent, so for an audience member to label the work “racist” and walk away is unproductive.

In turn, there are accusations that people calling out offenses are just after “political correctness,” as though that's a goal in itself. To be *politically correct* is to “avoid giving offense.” But using some vague idea of “offense” as a call to make changes doesn't set up a very good dynamic: it seems to imply that if I'm offended, you must be responsible, you bad person, you. The offense is likely to be unintentional, so when you hear the accusation of

racism, you might feel bullied and fairly accused and, thus, less able to listen to *why* something offends—less able to hear what I might tell you about the impact on me. We all start walking on eggshells, and thus, taking artistic risks becomes much less likely. Avoiding giving offense is also not a very powerful artistic motivation—the creation becomes no longer something offered with pleasure but something offered with trepidation, to placate rather than to freely share something beautiful.

My stories describe how I tested ways of talking about fraught issues of racial representation in workshops, talks, and panels, as well as in consulting on specific works. I (painfully) learned a lot under fire and from what didn't work very well as much as from what did. I hope other activists can be the beneficiaries.

Are creators/producers/directors willing and able to listen, even when it's their most beloved projects, perhaps representing years of work, that turn out to be problems for some of their potential audience members? I've been thinking, asking questions, and trying out ways to have productive conversations that inspire creative solutions. What causes us to tune out and what causes us to sign up? Can we become more nuanced in our thinking—beyond “yellowface (or blackface) is bad; don't do it” to knowing when certain choices would and would not be appropriate and why? We define yellowface this way:

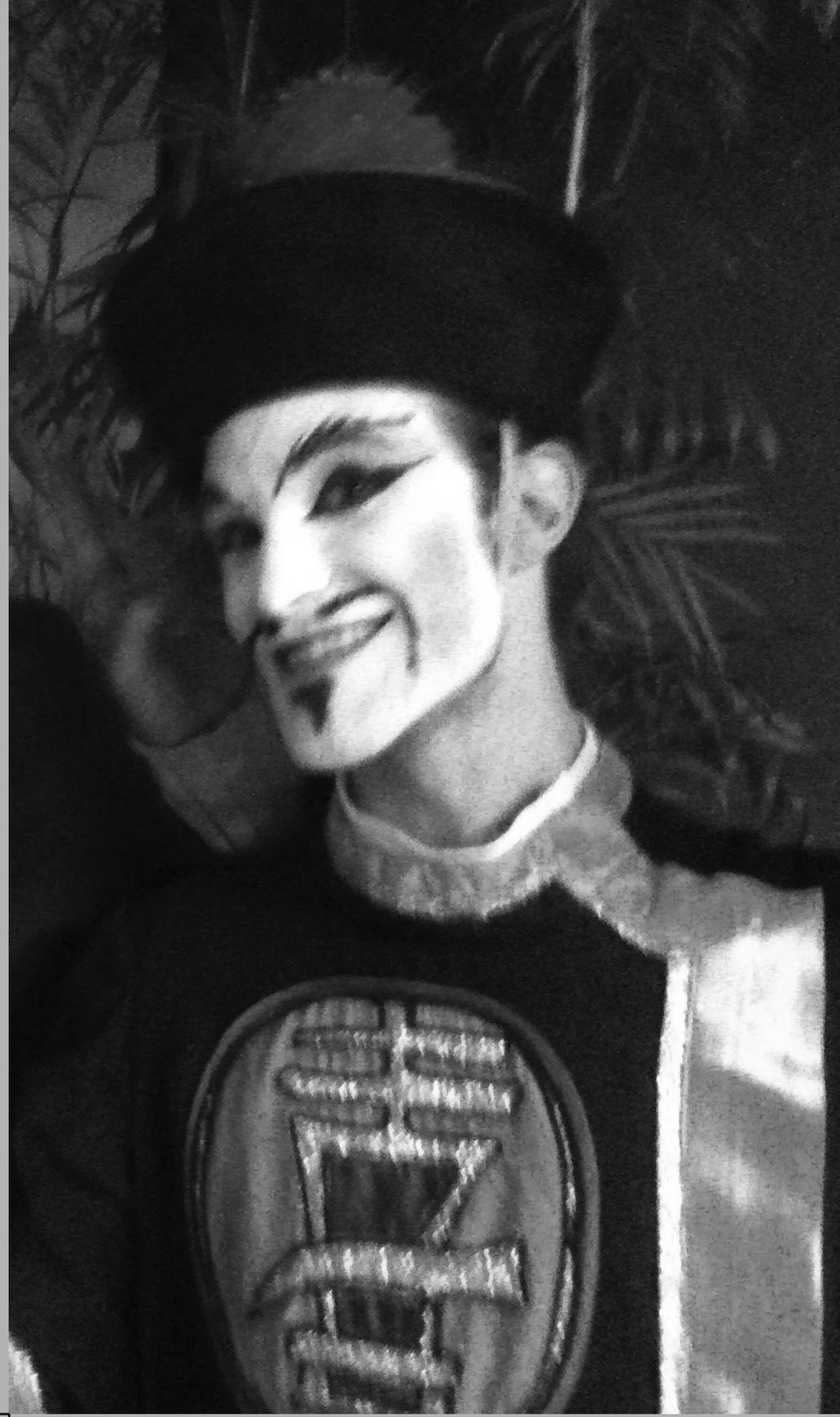
Yellowface is the portrayal of East Asians in entertainment from a dominant Western perspective rather than authentic depictions of East Asian cultures and people. Yellowface relies on stereotypes or caricatures of East Asians, and is usually performed by White actors. Like Black actors appearing in blackface, Asian performers have also historically appeared in yellowface.

Why is it a problem? Usually yellowface or blackface features a member of the powerful group caricaturing being a member of a less powerful group. *The problem with yellowface isn't the makeup but the caricature.* A Chinese person can get so tired of people pulling the outer corners of their eyes back and pretending to be buck toothed! I was taught to tell the difference between joking and bullying by who's laughing. The experience of being seen as Asian in America isn't always a happy thing: must we be yanked back to the playground during a happy Christmastime ballet?

The consequence of yellowface in ballet in America, today, is that an under story is thereby created whenever the same old tired caricatures pop up on stage: the slant eyes, the “chinky” mannerisms, the shuffling and bowing. In the case of *The Nutcracker*, we've been under the spell of the dancing, tasting candy in our mouths, and deliciously worrying about the sinister rats (the over story), when the bobble head clowns shuffle out to music made familiar by Disney's *Fantasia*. Suddenly an enchanting ballet has become a morality play: will we go along, or speak up, or leave the room? We're uncomfortable, not enchanted. It's not only members of the groups being caricatured that are being asked to choose between participating in their humiliation by sitting there silently or by leaving the theater (and taking the money they would pay for tickets with them).

A single dominant cultural lens through which everything in the world is seen and evaluated is characteristic of Old World cultures, held together by shared racial, religious, or geographic heritage. In some places this Old World glue continues to hold cultures together, and art is created, performed, experienced, and evaluated within those cultural milieus. For instance, ballet continues to be popular in Russia, where it's culturally a very good fit, and all the “others” on stage really are other to that culture. In a homogenous society like Russia, little attention is paid to how “other” groups come across.

But ballet is alive as an art form, and one of its homes is in *New World* places such as America, which, while majority White, is majority immigrant, from all over the world. In an ideal sense, we're held together by shared commitment to our values and to the rule of law, applied equally to all (even though we fall far short of living up to those ideals). Not by shared religion,



↑ With a friend in Montreal during the 2011 Nutcracker run. I still didn't have the vocabulary to express my discomfort except to make a caricature of the caricature.

skin color, or Old World country of origin. Ballet, which was established as an art form in Old World countries, cannot continue to thrive in the New World countries, or in societies that are becoming more and more diverse, without some changes in how we do things.

We're at an inflection point: conducting ourselves as an Old World high art isn't working very well in our democracy, where audience support is essential and can't be replaced by funding from donors or patrons, as it might have been in the Old World. The consequence is that no longer can a small number of people be the gatekeepers, able to keep ballet stuck in the past and in the Old World, presented and viewed through the perspective of a single dominant culture. If we continue to keep behaving as though ballet is by and for well off White people—even though we say something different—it could turn into something quaint, fun for history buffs, like having high tea at The Peninsula (or breakfast at Tiffany's).

What if the activism task is not saying "White People, gatekeepers, holders of the dominant culture, knock knock, please let us in," but instead asking the radical question: "*What is our American ballet, given diversity—given no dominant cultural lens to see everything through?*" What replaces a single cultural dominant gaze, and what are the implications for art? For instance, if, say, Russian culture is the default (as in *The Little Humpbacked Horse*) then "exotic other" is obviously someone from another culture. What's "exotic" these days, in our diverse America? Maybe not people from a different culture but from a different time (or "The Land of Oz," or maybe space, "the final frontier")?

These ideas should be seriously and playfully worked out in practice, because for the foreseeable future, we're going to keep presenting the classics. Some of us are going to be tempted to present them as they've "traditionally" been presented, and there's going to continue to be offense—and, again, who is offended is going to keep growing because it's not just people of color who can see the problems.

A note before we get too deep. I use the word "chink" (or some derivative of it) fairly frequently. Unlike comedians who may use the word as a cheap shot against Chinese people, my choice to use it is meant to illustrate the cheapening of my heritage, as well as to express the discomfort of having to face slurs or micro-aggressions on a regular basis, like "Chinese Water Torture," an Italian method so named to give it an ominous aura, where the victim is bound beneath a slow water drip until driven to insanity.

Being Both

What I bring to these discussions is more than just a deep experience in dance and an Asian-ness. My mixed race heritage means I have a sense of having more than one set of lenses through which to view the world. When you're a mixed-race person, sometimes it can seem like you don't belong to anyone, as I experienced growing up in Hong Kong: Chinese people always saw me as White, and White people always saw me as Chinese. All of that made me realize that while "who you are" is important, so is how you're seen, because that will shape a lot about your life. *This insight has helped me understand that ballet in our diverse societies must take into account the lived experiences of any recognizable groups that dance across our stages.*

When you're forming your identity as a young person, you want to belong to a group to provide a foundation for understanding who you are in relation so you can develop your own individuality. Having more than one strong culture you belong to at the same time can feel, not like having two legs to stand on, but like not having a place to stand at all. Really hard.

To know you look like your parents but are different from both of them, and will have drastically different experiences because you don't fully belong to either of your parents, your race, or your heritage.

It's taken me a while to feel complete in my cultural identity as a biracial person. I only recently rejected the idea of being "Half." Why am I "half" Chinese, when my cousins, who were also brought to the US around puberty—who are "full" Chinese—don't speak the language, don't celebrate the holidays, don't cook the food, and are otherwise 100% American? So I've started claiming I'm *Both*. As with the optical illusion of the old woman and the young woman: the image itself hasn't changed; just how you are looking at it changes. Being biracial, and in my case, bicultural, has allowed me to question what aspects of both of my cultures do I actually own. Can cultures be owned? I can think about the meanings of "cultural appropriation," inclusion, and diversity in the arts, in America, in interesting ways that I hope to share.

Being mixed-race gives me an opportunity to think about these issues from perspectives that are a bit different from the way things are thought about by people who identify as only White or Black, Brown or Yellow—as just one race. It gives me the ability to convincingly speak to people of color as well as to White people because I've experienced life both as a White person (how I was seen growing up in Hong Kong) and as a Chinese person (how I'm seen in America).

You might get some understanding of how it feels to be "Both" if you've ever had the experience of traveling abroad during some big news happening and you read the English language newspaper in the country you're visiting. Isn't it strange how that same big news story is told, from another point of view, tied to a different place and people? Or you live with your spouse for awhile and keep having these surprising conversations about how to do basic things together in day-to-day life. Perhaps you used to (unknowingly) believe that your family's ways are how everyone does things. This kind of experience is what it's like to be mixed-race all the time. You intrinsically understand that there is not just one, fixed, default point of view or outlook holding the world together. It's insecure, and it's freeing. One of the ways it's

freeing is that I'm not really able to think of myself as or be used as "the voice of Asians" or of Chinese (were such a thing even possible).

It's also germane to know that I'm the son of a Chinese American immigrant and a White woman who can trace her ancestry back to *the Mayflower*. I was born outside the US and lived my first ten years in a different country. (You say "a foreign country" but to me it's not "foreign," and I wasn't "living abroad," though I am also a White American.) I was born at the Matilda Hospital on the peak of Hong Kong in the final decade of British colonial rule. My mother was born and raised in working class Ohio. My father was born and raised in Hong Kong, one of nine siblings living in a cramped two-bedroom flat. Through an international student scholarship program, he made it to a small university in rural Ohio, where my mother was also enrolled. They fell in love, got married, and moved to Hong Kong, where they had me.

In 1995, right before the handover of Hong Kong back to China, ending British colonial rule, my family decided to move to California. Having been treated as a White person in the minority my entire life, you can imagine my surprise when, upon arriving to America, I was suddenly labeled a Fresh Off the Boat Chinese minority! It was also the first time I really noticed more than an East/West binary when looking at racial and cultural differences. Berkeley, California was a mix of peoples from all over, and more identity labels than I could keep up with: Hapa. Mixed. Biracial. Gay. Queer. Immigrant. Tall.

Growing up dancing, I made my way to New York City after college. It has become my home as an adult, in part, because I have fallen deeply in love with dance, and New York is a (if not, *the*) dance capital of the world. New York is where I first studied the Horton technique at the Ailey school, the beat of the drums matching the beating in my chest. New York is where I stood behind Wendy Whelan at *Steps on Broadway*, both of us working furiously to practice the perfect tendu. New York is where I saw everything I could from the Balanchine and Robbins catalogue at New York City Ballet, and where I used my student ID as long as I could to get cheap tickets to see the story ballets at American Ballet Theatre.

Unlike living on the West Coast, where I felt the burden of identity boxes, being a New Yorker means that I'm just another asshole trying to get



↑ My mother changing my shirt in Beijing's Summer Palace in the 1980s, surrounded by curious onlookers who had never seen a White woman with a Chinese toddler!

through the world, just like the next New Yorker. In that same spirit, it's time for ballet in America to do a better job of carrying ballet from its Old World foundations into the New World of diverse societies in the 21st Century. This means so much more than just including dancers of every color, as essential as that is.

Inviting Everyone In

This book describes a New World way of approaching an Old World art form, as told by an insider to the ballet world who has, nevertheless, sometimes been made to feel like an outsider within this microcosm of the greater culture. I hope that my story illustrates how to make the arts a vehicle for seeing each other better and for finding ways to inspire and borrow from each other in the name of affirming a larger shared human spirit.

Whether on purpose or not, through our artistic choices we're signaling who belongs and who doesn't, and that's why in so-called "New World" settings, such as the United States, we're hearing such passion behind calls to represent the diverse members of our cultures in art that's by and for all of us. We can conserve our rich ballet history and traditions while also doing this generation's work of re-interpreting the classics for this time and place.

The movement behind Final Bow for Yellowface started with a call from Gina: "Hey, I only have a few minutes between rehearsals, but Peter Martins might be calling you for advice on how to change *The Nutcracker*. I gave him your number, gotta run!" Click. Typical Gina. Realizing the need for better Asian representation in her own home base at New York City Ballet, Gina spoke up when Peter mentioned the increasing volume of letters the company received about the "Chinese" dance in George Balanchine's "Nutcracker." She slipped Peter my number in a company diversity committee meeting, part of a diversity mandate from the state in order to continue to receive government funding.

Initially, Peter had wanted to consult an Asian New York City Ballet Board member, but he also wanted to make sure he had a dancer's perspective. Gina had had her own negative experiences around her race at New York City Ballet, and suggested me as an alternative so as to bring some professional distance to the conversation. (During the 2011 premiere of *Oceans Kingdom*, a collaboration between Peter and Sir Paul McCartney, Peter had asked Gina to do her make-up in a way to somehow be "less oriental.") Not being Chinese herself, she felt I might be a better person to share the impact of the work on how it might land with Chinese people.

Shortly after the committee meeting, Peter's assistant called me to see if I would come in and meet with him the following morning. In hindsight, this short meeting would have a tremendous impact in improving Asian representation in ballet globally. It started with the development of *yellowface.org* by Gina and me.

Response to *yellowface.org* has been overwhelming, with most major North American companies, and many from the UK, Australia, and others, represented. We've collectively decided to change how we present our "Nutcrackers," making it a good case study of working out how to preserve the best of our ballet heritage while ensuring its continuation as a living art, responsive to lives and experiences of today's more diverse audiences. The first part of the book focuses on *The Nutcracker* as a touchstone.

Ways of approaching problematic works that I developed while consulting and giving talks about updating *The Nutcracker* are useful for thinking about how we approach representation of non-White cultures in other important works in our ballet canon. One problematic work is Balanchine's lost ballet *Le Chant du Rossignol*, which the second half of this book addresses as another case study, trying to tease out issues related to cultural appropriation.

So much good work is going on, and it will surely continue. Identifying ugly portrayals and committing to replace them doesn't and can't depend on Gina and me as the Political Correctness Police to ride up on our dragons and smoke out yellowface and other offensive caricatures of Asians. The work needs to be done by everyone who loves ballet, and it's wonderful that awareness of the need for change is already so widespread.

My company's "Chinese" variation used to include finger-pointing and head-bobbing that felt really icky, but it took me two years to work up the nerve to say anything. Finally, emboldened by the dismal 2016 election, I decided to come into rehearsal and ask if some modifications could be made because the current version felt disrespectful. The response was, "don't be silly, it's a folk dance. Just like the Spanish dance is inspired by flamenco." I immediately felt stupid because I never imagined my request would be denied and hadn't done my research as to whether those specific movements were truly part of Chinese folk dance traditions, or just why the "Chinese inspiration" seemed so much different than the "Spanish inspiration." It was the most uncomfortable rehearsal and performance period I've ever been through and I was constantly struggling to find a balance between making the variation seem as elegant as possible and performing the actual steps that were being asked of me.

Unfortunately, that year there was a Chinese-American audience member who wrote our company a letter saying she was offended by the portrayal of the Chinese dancer. (I will never know which cast she saw and spent way too much time wondering whether it was me.) This was what it ultimately took to make a change. We now have two lovely versions for either a male or female soloist with more carefully researched and respectful stylized movement.

Thank you for the work you're doing. I'm White and I was terrified to speak up about this, so I can literally only imagine what it's like for Asian, Black, or indigenous people to have to make a case for the respectful portrayal of their own cultures in dance and theater. I really hope that

if enough of us pave the way now no one will have to feel terrified to speak, and that eventually they won't have to!

Anonymous