

On Yellowface and a way forward for Diverse Audiences



By Phil Chan

Arts consultant and author of Final Bow for Yellowface: Dancing Between Intention and Impact.

My work on the issue of cultural representation in dance began in earnest when then-Artistic Director of New York City Ballet, Peter Martins, invited me to advise them on updating George Balanchine's *The Nutcracker*. On one hand, he didn't feel comfortable changing work that wasn't his own but equally couldn't ignore the growing tide of letters from audience members and patrons asking the company to better represent people of colour.

What began as a conversation about how to tone down some bobbing and shuffling and embarrassing make-up for a Christmas classic, has grown into a larger conversation about how to truly include non-white people. At the heart of my work with *Final Bow for Yellowface* is questioning: from whose point of view we are restoring our classical repertory – and for whom?

Most of the ballets we think of as 'the classics' originated in Russia in the 19th century, and are synonymous with the French choreographer, Marius Petipa. His audience were his patrons, the imperial elite of Russia. With international travel being expensive, long, and dangerous, the theatre was often the best place to see the world. There was also limited information about authentic dances or peoples from these exotic foreign lands. In fact, many orientalist ballets were set outside of Europe in order to convey ideas taboo in Western society at the time, like sexuality, magic, and other politically inconvenient ideas.

But what happens when these ballets, and the important dance tradition contained in them, collide with a diverse audience in the 21st century? How do we not just say, well, some of our repertory is 'racist,' and it has to go? I think our success is due in large part to the space we occupy in the conversation. We are not advocating eliminating ballets that don't fit in with the current times, we are instead advocating for our field to be a bit more creative in how we interpret them for our audiences today.

With *Final Bow*, we are just as much about focusing on solutions as we are with the problems. To that end, I have been collaborating with the brilliant dance scholar Doug Fullington on new American versions of the ballets *La Bayadere* and *Le Corsaire* that retain and even restore Petipa's choreography but that make the stories about US instead of THEM. This isn't so different to the approach by Dance Theatre of Harlem's *Creole Giselle*, which is set in Louisiana instead of Austria, or Royal Danish Ballet's *Napoli*, which is now set in the 1950s. Our *Bayadere* takes place in 1930s Hollywood and mirrors the plot of *Singin' In the Rain*. Imagine Nikiya as Debbie Reynolds, Gene Kelly as Solor, and the dramatic Lina Lamont as our Gamzatti. Our version is complete with a Busby Berkeley Kingdom of the Shades fantasy.

Instead of dancing Bayaderes at an Indian temple, we have dancing Cowgirls on the set of a Hollywood picture. Same choreography, different setting.

Our Corsaire is sort of like the plot of Ocean's Eleven, taking place at the Miss Ocean's Beauty Pageant hosted at the Pirate's Cove Casino at Atlantis Beach. There are scheming showgirls, gunslinging beauty queens, and a Pasha who thinks you can just grab women – if you're famous enough. And it's all still Petipa and follows the original librettos quite closely.

For those of us trying to build new and diverse audiences for ballet today, isn't this a better way to tell a story?



Ballet West's Kyle Davis in Lew Christensen's *The Nutcracker*

“With a largely homogeneous audience being the audience when ballet’s ‘classics’ were created, it is no wonder that depictions of other cultures didn’t have to be authentic or have any cultural integrity.”

Purchase *Final Bow for Yellowface: Dancing Between Intention and Impact* is available in paperback. Purchase the book and find more information at yellowface.org.

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