Ishi cast member reflects on the play and its criticisms

BY IN TAE KIM | SPECIAL TO THE DAILY CAL

I’d like to preface my comments by saying I can’t imagine how hard it must have been to watch our production of “Ishi: The Last of the Yahi” as someone of American Indian descent. I have the utmost respect for those brave and courageous California natives who came out and saw the production and spoke at the performance-related discussions. I’m so sorry that some people were reduced to tears and had to leave.

But I do not apologize for being part of this show.

I’m not as strong as my fellow production-mates who have taken sweeping and seemingly ubiquitous criticisms with dignified silence. Going into the performance talks, I knew some people would be upset. I knew some would say things that would be hard to hear. And, above all, I knew people would not change their minds. But I didn’t expect to be so directly affected — so hurt — by what some of our critics had to say.

It is certainly one thing to react to the creative, artistic liberties taken with Ishi’s story, of which so little is actually known — I don’t feel that questions of artistic license and interpretation have black-and-white answers, so I won’t address them here. But it is quite another thing to lampoon those involved with the production, indicating that we developed this show in a manner deliberately disrespectful toward California natives and/or willfully ignorant of history.

Personally speaking — and I can only speak for myself — I found the insinuation that I didn’t care to research Ishi, the man as he actually existed, particularly egregious. After learning I’d landed the role, I read up on Ishi.watched documentaries, studied pictures, looked at translations of Yahi stories and shared the information I learned with my comrades. As the rehearsal process began, I saw that much of my research didn’t reconcile itself with the artistic direction of the play. Just because I didn’t externalize all that I learned doesn’t mean I hadn’t taken the time to learn it. And who has the right to label me, someone you don’t know in the slightest, willfully ignorant?

For that matter, who has the right to tell me what roles I shouldn’t be able to play because of my ethnic background? There were actors who auditioned who looked more American Indian — more like Ishi — than I do, but I worked my ass off to beat them out for the role. I worked my ass off after I landed the role. I work my ass off still so I can play other roles in the future. But I am attacked for playing Ishi because I am not an American Indian, because I don’t know his pain?

That mentality, repeated several times, hurt me deeply. To say that you know his fear better than I do because your grandparents ran as Ishi did is absurd. You are not your grandparents. I’m not mine. After years of oppression under Japanese rule, my Korean grandfather had to flee as a refugee from what is now North Korea. But I don’t know the terrors he endured just by proxy. Not having lived that life, I couldn’t possibly know what that’s like. You don’t either. You don’t even know what it’s like to be me. How could you? I’ve dealt with depression. I’ve felt loss and loneliness. I’ve witnessed the ephemerality of beauty. As a largely private person, I don’t like to talk about these things, but they all went into my characterization of Ishi. And, as someone who finds it really hard to take pride in his own work, it really pains me that this character I was actually proud of landing and crafting — my first starring role — was the target of so much grief and that this beautiful work of art,
which many wonderful, talented people worked to create, was so disparagingly attacked and nearly canceled.

You saw your friends leave the theater crying and spoke out. But when you spoke out, did you see my friends as they were reduced to tears, as they had to leave? You could walk out of the dialogues without being judged.

But when you got angry at me for leaving before that first talk-back was over, did you see me — sick from landing on stage too hard — swallow back down my vomit so that I could hear the Winnemem Wintu Tribe chief finish her comments before I really had to run outside and throw up? I respect your dedication, your piety and your bravery. I really do. I don’t intend any of my comments to be an attack and apologize if they appear as such. I don’t want to be seen as a lightning rod of criticism and racial bigotry. I have many more plays to do, many more stories to tell that I hope you can appreciate much more than this. But if you don’t, please show me respect, too. Look at the work for what it actually is, and then we can be proactive. We can make art that does what art is intended to do: make people think and progress.

Intae Kim is a sophomore at UC Berkeley and played Ishi in the UC Berkeley department of theater, dance and performance studies' production of "Ishi: The Last of the Yahi."

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http://www.dailykal.org/2012/03/20/ishi-cast-member-reflects-on-the-play-and-its-criticisms/
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In addition, UC Berkeley has thousands of Indian remains in storage that have yet to be

Mrtea77  Paa Tamoy  5 years ago

Most of the California Indians died out under Spanish colonial rule. As the current politics of the day ("Reconquista" whether acknowledged or not) dictates that history begins with the Mexican War, of course there isn’t going to be much time devoted to prior eras.

Your far-left friends have had their way with history for some time now. You might be interested to know: the old California state history text used in 4th grade in the 1950’s had an extensive photographic essay about Ishi and told his story in a straightforward manner. The current text has no photos at all, he reduced to a sidebar with a tiny hand-drawn portrait. The role of Kroeber in documenting Yahi material culture isn’t even mentioned.

The Chinese Communist Party is currently eradicating the culture of 40 million indigenous Uigher people in western China. Similar treatment is meted out by the communist regimes of Viet Nam and Laos towards their indigenous, some of whom have been given refuge in this country (mostly due to the efforts of U.S. military personnel from the Viet Nam war era). You would have more credibility if you cared about other indigenous people in the world today. The weird character of the American Left as it applies to the crimes of communist regimes is both disturbing and instructive. Where does all that Indian gaming money go? Look at Sacbee.com for an interesting aspect of this.

KaylaCarpenter  5 years ago

Hi Intae,

As the only native student to have excused themselves so far in public, I can only assume you mean ‘me’ by ‘you’. I wasn’t scheduled to speak at that time beyond the 3 minute opening statements allotted, but when Glazer requested I stay put with him on stage after that, for what I understood to be time allotted for questions, I honored and stood by that for as long as I could. I am glad others could step in after that.

I want to reiterate words spoken at the talk back that Friday night, my own from last Tuesday, and from others... the American Indian students involved in the response to the play don’t hold the content of the play against the cast... There’s a reason we sought their reviews. Also, a reason for the petition, given the content, potential impact of the play, and expressed wishes of Ishi and his descendants.

I believe I said “we understood”, and that we don’t hold expectations of the cast to speak to the questions people may have about these things, and from the departments statement, I don’t think they do either. It is my opinion that a sophomore shouldn’t shoulder the burden of responsibility for this play, and I think others can understand that, mostly, too.

Intae Kim  KaylaCarpenter  5 years ago

Kayla,

I thought you were one of the bravest people involved in this whole situation, partly because you stayed put at the front of the room for so long. If that’s how the “you” reads, so pointed at you specifically, I would like to apologize directly. As someone who really seemed to want to listen and understand, even with so much emotional burden obviously weighing you down, I can only commend you. And, I think that much of that Friday’s and last Tuesday’s dialogue was really essential in hearing the voices of those hurt by the play. That said, I don’t think that time and that environment was really conducive for responses to the criticisms. And, while you and the Grad students and the department folk who responded to the play did so in a manner that wasn’t aimed angrily towards the cast, there were several people who did seem to attack us and I didn’t think we could respond. And respond I would have liked to. Yes, I may be a sophomore but that doesn’t mean I, personally, am unwilling or unable to accept the responsibility for my own actions, or to attempt to answer for them. And (I really don’t mean to sound facetious here, but that’s how it may read from a non-face-to-face reading) if I shouldn’t shoulder the burden of responsibility as a sophomore, the question that follows is: when should I shoulder it and who gets to decide the right age? I haven’t been able to speak about this with the entire cast, but some of us would in fact like to establish that we do have agency and are willing to answer for what we should individually be answering for, difficult though it may be. I guess the trouble with using pronouns in this kind of situation is that it’s not always clear who I’m talking about (partially because I don’t actually know most of these folks who speak out) and it seems like it’s again leading to an “us vs. them” mentality that is really unproductive. I can talk with individuals, like you, like Paa, and I feel like I’m learning a lot by conversing in this way. But I can’t talk with abstract “peoples,” some of whom DO seem to be attacking me and my castmates directly.

http://www.dailyca.org/2012/03/20/ishi-cast-member-reflects-on-the-play-and-its-criticisms/
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Kayla Carpenter - Intae Kim - 5 years ago

Intae - the play is a form of knowledge production here on campus and in the larger community, about Ishi, and Californian Indian peoples. The playwright/director hasn’t felt prepared, as he has communicated, to take on any questions from his mostly non-Native audience, about that production. That provides some context here, in my opinion, to whats playing out in regards to responsibility, and I think engaging with individuals rather than imagining abstract peoples is a good process.

Harvest McCampbell - 5 years ago

"When I am dead, cry for me little. Think of me sometimes, but not too much. It is not good for you or your husband and children to allow your thoughts to dwell too long on the dead. Think of of me now and again as I was in life, at some moment which was pleasant to recall, but not for long. Leave me in peace as Ishi leave you, too, in peace. While you live, let your thoughts be with the living." Ishi

Ts'ah - 5 years ago

It’s plays like this that keep stereotypes alive and as a valid source to use against other minorities. The primitive ideas people will take away from this play, especially one put by UC Berkeley, makes the outside world think it’s okay to see Native Americans in a gross pair of lens because staff and students in 2012 from a renown university that’s supposed to have a “larger” diverse crowd allowed it and publicly defend that it’s okay. Especially since Native American history in general is stopped in time by history textbooks written from a Eurocentric perspective where teenagers and children actually believe Native American have disappeared and suddenly a play like this is put on by a “great” university so it only validates their views on what they know about Native Americans prior to being thrown into the real world.

I'm sure he would not appreciate a Native American putting on "Asian" attire, eating people and raping their own sister then speaking in an "Asian" accent saying the terrible things that have happened to you (ie. Manifest Destiny) was a "two-way street" and claiming the play to be historical. Not everyone at Cal or those that see the play can "read between the lines" and think critical enough to know that the word usage of "historical" means it’s fiction or partially fiction.

He says to have done research? What kind of student won’t put their own perspective into things that have happened to you (ie. Manifest Destiny) was a "two-way street" and think critical enough to know that the word usage of "historical" means it’s fiction or partially fiction.

He says to have done research? What kind of student won’t put their own perspective into the play and speak out about making changes, even if a little (an actor at that)? He is in a profession where criticism will come even more personal and "hurtful" so he and his fellow actors and actresses should take this as a learning experience. And since it’s an experience, they should be lucky to actually get the crowd to shed real tears and voice their opinion openly even if it’s not the tears or opinions they were expecting, they were real and as personal as it can get.

William Gandalf Hearst - Ts'ah - 5 years ago

Firstly, attack the directing and writing, not the actors. It is the role of the actor to do as directed. In theater you have to work as a team and the director is the coach. If the director tells you to do something that you do it, even if you disagree, because it is their creative vision that pulls the whole thing together. While you can suggest things to the director, there is no assurance that they will listen and if you don’t do what they want then you won’t get roles.

Secondly, non-traditional casting was just about the only way to perform this show. There are few, if any Native Americans in the UCB theater department and of those, how many are good enough to carry a leading role with such emotional depth? I am not saying that this show was a good choice for the department, nor arguing for or against the depiction of Native Americans in this play, but it is not the actor’s faults for taking the roles. It is very hard, even today for non-white actors to get roles and though questionable in content, this play did provide a large number of roles for them to gain experience. Acting work is hard to come by, even in school so when you get it, you run with it.

Thirdly, they are actors! It is not their job to have been through every experience they portray on the stage. Even method actors try to approximate it as closely as they can, but they won’t go out and kill someone in order to play a murderer. That is ridiculous. It is their job to approximate and portray the experiences of characters according to the director's directions. If an actor had to actually have experienced the life of every character he or she portrayed, many great works would never be seen again. Also, having shared the pain of a character does not make you a good actor. Just because you have been in unrequited love doesn’t make you eligible to play Juliet.

Yes, the play itself is questionable in it’s representations and yes, John Fisher’s judgment is obviously clouded, but that is not the fault of any of the actors or crew who labored for this production. They are just doing their jobs.
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One can always refuse a part on ethical grounds . . .

It is unrealistic, or at least seemingly inappropriate to ask for an actor to request that the playwright change his or her play. Also, if this discussion is about race, ethnicity, and respect. How could you degrade Intae's performance for having an Asian accent? It is how he speaks, and I am sure if he were to mimic a "native american" accent you could just as easily criticism him for making a "mockery" of a dialect. There is no winning in this view.

One's role as an actor is to make the text come alive to the best of his abilities, not to change the character that was designed unless the opportunity to do so was presented.

I am aware first hand that Intae did research, and that he put a huge amount of effort into the production. Also you stated that "Not everyone at Cal or those that see the play can "read between the lines" and think critical enough to know that the word usage of "historical". It is nearly impossible to create a play that has no lines to read between. Having those lines is what makes art what it is. It is what allows people to form different opinions, to exchange discourse, and not every person appreciates, or even understands the same things.

I am not saying that it is okay to misrepresent or mistreat native americans, rather what I am trying to distinguish a piece of art from something that blatantly and intentionally racist, which this play is not. It is art. It's goal is not to satisfy everyone. It's goal is to present an intended message, whatever that may be.

Paa Tamoy: I just read your comments and would really like to thank you for opening my eyes a little. I feel like, if conversation were to continue in this direction, perhaps on April 5th and onward, we would be inching closer towards ultimate progress. While I may disagree with some specific points you raise, I understand what you're saying and it seems like we could have an actual discussion. (a sidenote: I do my best to not "act defensively" [I do!]. And I'm always willing to listen -- and listen carefully -- to those who'll listen to me, and even to some who won't. I promise. Ask anyone who knows me.)

Harvest and Ts'ah: It pains me to say this, but I don't have the first clue how we can start a conversation, or what good such a conversation between us could possibly amount to. I try not to be too stubborn, but -- and I think we can all, as fallible human beings, attest to this sentiment -- I can only be moved so much from my base perspective in a given time period.

We incorporated that quote by Ishi in our program and I believe we made clear our intention, in producing this play, to raise awareness about the California Genocides (the success or failure of said intention is up to the individual audience members to decide). That you won't even realize that basic intention has us on extremely different planes of thinking that I don't think are easily reconcilable and I know aren't conducive to a progressive dialogue happening between us any time soon. To Ts'ah, in particular, I am inherently inclined to react negatively to the abrasive rhetoric you've been using, especially in regards to my natural-born ethnic background. I do take this as a learning experience, but please don't try and tell me what to feel.

The main issue I have, Intae Kim, is not against you. You did not write the play or decide to allow it to be produced. To portray a nonviolent Native man as a very violent and dishonorable character perpetrates untrue stereotypes about Native people. Stereotypes which non-Native audience members have most likely been exposed to in the past. This reinforces these stereotypes. Our Native children live in a world where their classmates often view them as less than honorable people because of such stereotypes.

I was not trying to blame you. I was just trying to encourage you to try to understand this from our point of view.
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