OP-EDS

Theater department apologizes for ‘Ishi’ production

BY PETER GLAZER | SPECIAL TO THE DAILY CAL

The current production of John Fisher’s play “Ishi: The Last of the Yahi” in the department of theater, dance and performance studies at UC Berkeley has sparked a number of strong reactions — especially among the Native American community, for whom Ishi’s story is sacred. On March 9, after a performance of “Ishi” in Zellerbach Playhouse, members of different California native communities, their relatives and their elders gave vivid witness to the ways the genocide of California native peoples is still a horrible wound, one that our production has reopened.

On behalf of the department of theater, dance, and performance studies, as its chair, I want to deeply apologize for any pain our production has caused.

The controversy “Ishi” has provoked is something that we take very seriously, and we take full responsibility for our actions and decisions as a department.

We appreciate that Native American students at UC Berkeley reached out to us directly to initiate dialogue — dialogue that we were remiss in not initiating ourselves at the time the production was being considered. As a department, we are committed to open discourse, sincere engagement with important political issues and with the many communities we serve and fulfillment of our teaching mission in all that we do. We are also committed, from this point forward, to reaching out to historically underrepresented minorities who may be represented in our work.

As a theatre-producing entity located within a university, we see the conversations, candid discussion and public engagement that happen around our productions as being a central fulfillment of our mission. The difficult and painful witnessing on March 9 was a beginning. To this end, there will be opportunities for additional dialogue in the coming weeks.

Ours is a department of teachers: of acting, design, dance, performance studies, directing, technical theater, stage management, literature, theory, playwriting — the list goes on. We are also a department of remarkable students, who learn and practice all those skills under the tutelage of our brilliant teachers and staff. Our students are not implicated in the decisions which led to this controversy.

At the post-show discussion, our community witnessed the sharing of stories and histories that will haunt us and that we will never forget. I hope that by being present for such witnessing, none of us will again commit such sins of omission and exclusion.

Peter Glazer is an associate professor and department chair in the department of theater, dance and performance studies.

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Converting the story of Ishi to a violent fictionalized production is perverse, an act devoid of character, devoid of perception. It is difficult to imagine something more offensive, and something more untrue, than this production. The failures here are monumental. The best apology would be the resignations of everyone associated with this debacle. As an American Indian Keeper of Ceremony and Sacred Objects, I am used to witnessing apologies would be the resignations of everyone associated with this debacle. As an American Indian Keeper of Ceremony and Sacred Objects, I am used to witnessing incorrect assumptions and misdirected actions in modern society....however, this production goes well beyond anything I could have imagined in being incorrect and offensive.

What purpose would the resignations serve? It is far less effective to make an example of someone by calling for their head on a silver platter than to initiate a dialogue, show them where they have erred, and give them a chance to prevent future offense.

As a Native student, I can say, those involved are committed to education. That’s why we reached out, and continue to be in dialogue. Its taken a lot of work to get to this point.

Agreed, working things out is much better than picketing and calling for resignations. Now if we could just convince the unions, BAMN and Occupy of that.

I’ve read some other writings about this production, and the violence is something that has been mentioned several times. I think this is a separate argument from whether the production was fair to Native Americans. It is reasonable to argue that historical violence. It is also reasonable to disagree with this idea. But to say that it is somehow wrong to include violence in a story of a person whose real family was violently killed seems misguided to me.

So literary and dramatic works have to present history exactly as it happened, then? Where does that assumption come from?

Every single historical play of Shakespeare’s is historically inaccurate. The solution is not to avoid ever producing the plays again; the solution is better education. Students need to learn not only how to sift historical evidence, but to apply appropriate hermeneutics in reading historical records and literary productions, and discerning the difference between them.
Nunya Beeswax • 5 years ago

Well, for a start, proper education enables people to tell the difference between historiography and dramatic works with historical subjects.

This isn’t a matter of "Truth," it is a matter of respect and ethics. If something similar had been done in regards to the Jewish Holocaust you better bet Yudof would write a letter (Oh wait, he did)… would it be acceptable to disparage the victims of the Holocaust in the name of art or sparking a conversation? Would it be acceptable to inflict violence on the survivors of the Holocaust? Art is powerful, that is why you should think about actions before you act.

There are also standards on campus climate clearly violated here, so don’t dismiss under the label of PC those concerns and well thought out positions of California Natives. That is a bogus label too often used to dismiss those educated on the issues. How much California History do you know? How much about Contemporary people?

Nunya Beeswax • commentsactionsuck • 5 years ago

How was violence inflicted on anyone? Not metaphorical violence—real violence?

Criticize the production all you like. From all accounts it looks as though it deserves to be criticized, and that’s part of the exchange of ideas in the public sphere. But you’re not just calling the participants in this production task, you’re seeking to prevent their doing anything like it in the future, perhaps even trying to remove them from their jobs. Do the words "censorship" and "chilling effect" mean anything to you?

Mam1132 • 5 years ago

The concern here is not whether this production was correct or not correct or historical or not historical….the concern is does this play convey the truth about Ishi? Does this play honor this man? Did this play take to account the opinion of the native american people before the play was conceived? Was it even thought of to get the opinion of the native american community? Native Americans are still around. They are no longer the invisible people. It is incidents like this that saddens me. Americans needs to be educated about the First Nations People. For instance, do you people know that November is native american history month? Did you all know that Christopher Columbus did not discover America…. There were already people here. Did you know that Berkeley U is housing thousands of native american bones which should be buried back into mother earth? Did you know that half of California housing is on top of sacred Native American burials? I am all for a theatrical production about Native Americans (we need more plays and movies on Native American issues)…but do it with honor, respect, truth and beauty. Ah—ho

Nunya Beeswax • Mam1132 • 5 years ago

Perhaps you should try getting a production mounted which presents another side of the story.

Guestbook • Mam1132 • 5 years ago

"Americans"… so "Native Americans" aren’t, by definition, American?

Misa Joo • 5 years ago

I pushed "like" in error. I meant to push "share." I would not demean Peter Glazer's position by saying "like" or "thank you." When one expresses correct action, let the action
stand. I am moved to say while reading the apology that there is a strange continuum from the museum to the Berkeley theater -- of a production which steals Ishi's life and degrades him as a human being, a line extending from putting him in a museum as a human exhibit, "the last of his tribe" to reducing him to everything he was not. Probably the Kroebers acted with "good intention" in the name of expanding knowledge with as much thought as this production distorted for the sake of free expression and shock value entertainment. Neither gets close to knowing who Ishi really is because without his people, without his home, without his way of life he is someone who had lost so much and then in 2012 whatever he had to give, like a butterfly pinned to a cardboard, became distorted into someone's egotistical distorted creation, a butterfly de-constructed into a monster.

Frankly, the play says more about the playwright, the director, than it does about Ishi. Ishi who was created by his Maker was erased in Berkeley. What's done cannot be undone. But the elders and those brave young Native students were there, stood as witnesses to his death, their words memorialized his true life and they moved Peter Glazer's sense of decency to apologize for a great travesty done by someone representing their department and the university poorly. The buck stopped with him and I'm going to remember his name and honor him by not demeaning his action, late as it was in coming, with something like a "like" or a thank you.

Ur kiddin' me, right? · 5 years ago

Good theater should spark discourse. As an educational institution, you shouldn't apologize for this production. You and others have learned from this experience. Isn't that what education is all about? Theater should step on toes, not tip-toe around feelings. Stop being politically correct, and welcome the discourse.

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