Sometimes Writer-Blogger  
Cutcha Risling Baldy

I went to "Ishi: Last of the Yahi" at UC Berkeley and all I got was this blog entry. (Review) (http://www.cutcharislingbaldy.com/blog/i-went-to-see-the-ishi-last-of-the-yahi-at-uc-berkeley-and-all-i-got-was-this-blog-entry-review)

3/11/2012 12 Comments (http://www.cutcharislingbaldy.com/blog/i-went-to-see-the-ishi-last-of-the-yahi-at-uc-berkeley-and-all-i-got-was-this-blog-entry-review#comments)

Ishi: the Last of the Yahi is currently being performed at the Zellerbach Playhouse on the UC Berkeley campus and runs through today (March 11). I attended the play as a guest of my cousin, Kayla Carpenter, who is attending UC Berkeley as a graduate student in Linguistics. We are both Northern California Native peoples. I am enrolled in the Hoopa Valley Tribe with ties to the Karuk and Yurok peoples. I am also a PhD Student in Native American Studies at UC Davis where I focus on Native American Literature, Native American Women, California Indian History and Contemporary Society, Indigenous Politics and Contemporary Society, Indigenous Methodologies, and the Decolonization of Theory. The play was originally introduced to me by another UC Berkeley Graduate Student, Tria Andrews who offered a review after she was required to attend the production for class. I recommend reading it. (http://nativeappropriations.blogspot.com/2012/03/ishi-last-of-yahi-uc-berkeley.html) I offer this response to my experience attending this play as a way of continuing the conversation “in a good way.” Thank You.

First let me tell you about the point where I almost walked out. Ishi, having been living in the Museum of Anthropology at UC Berkeley for a few years was finally brought back to his home (Deer Creek) by Alfred Kroeber, his junior faculty Thomas Waterman and Dr. Saxton Pope (who will eventually be the person that betrays Ishi’s wishes and dissects his body and harvests his brain to send to the Smithsonian). At Deer Creek a number of “hilarious” things happen, Kroeber admits that he doesn’t really like nature all that much (and misses his wife), all the European American characters get together and sing cute little songs like “She’ll be comin’ round the mountain when she comes (yee haw)” and Dr. Saxton Pope (of the brain harvesting popes) “goes Native” where she dresses in a two piece buckskin outfit (am I to assume she bought these from a street vendor in Berkeley before she left? Or perhaps at Forever 21 or Urban Outfitters?) and simulates giving birth while whooping, hollering and standing up. She also tears the umbilical cord with her teeth, as a real Native woman would do.

It’s meant to be tongue in cheek, I get it. These crazy European American scholars, tee hee, ha ha.

In the mean time, they want to continue to pressure Ishi to tell his story. His story will make them a lot of money, you see, and "build them a museum,"

When Ishi finally does tell his story it rests with the fate of his sister. You see Ishi and his sister had been in an incestuous relationship for a while now but then she was "raped" by a white man. However, when Ishi points this out to her she desperately clings to him and says "First I was unwilling, now I am willing. This makes it alright."

It was at this point I started gathering up my things. I couldn't take it any more. First Ishi is just "a man" and then he is a man who has sex with his sister and then he is a man who kills his incestuous baby by drowning it in a creek because they are trying to get away from being hunted by the "colonizers" of California. And then he is a man cuckholded by his own sister who has to let her go or otherwise she may say things that he doesn't want to hear and "If she said it, I knew I would beat her, I was almost beating her now."
I Ishi helps to kill her half breed baby, because the sister believes this will mean she can be with her man. Why Ishi helps her little unclear. Why she sends her to her death is also a little unclear. Anyway you cut it Ishi’s sister doesn’t have a name, she’s just called “Woman” and in the end her last line is “Good. Dead. Dead for you.” I eerily felt like she was speaking to the playwright himself.

There’s been a fair amount of controversy over the staging of this play Ishi: The Last of the Yahi written and directed by John Fisher for the UC Berkeley Department of Theater, Dance & Performance Studies. You can read a beautiful and poignant review and initial reaction by UC Berkeley Graduate Student Tria Andrews here [http://nativepropductions.blogspot.com/2012/03/ishi-last-of-yahi-uc-berkeley.html]. Faced with watching this play for class, Tria wrote this review as an immediate response to the careless, horrific portrayal not just of Ishi but also of Native people in general in this play.

It was because of that review that I attended the play along with other students and Native peoples who wanted the opportunity to “talk back” to the staff after the show was completed. As a result of the hard work of the American Indian Graduate Student Association at UC Berkeley there were two inserts added to the program, the first being a “response” quote from Director/Writer John Fisher and the second being a statement about Ishi written by the Native American students.

John Fisher’s statement is as follows: As I state in my “Authors Note,” Ishi is a work of fiction based on fact. I have combined research with creative writing to make the point that the California Holocaust was a horrific event; its perpetrators ruthless and sadistic. There is much we do not know about Ishi’s life before he came out of the woods, and I have tried here to depict how terrifying that life might have been and how egregious life during any genocide must be for the victims. For a factual account of Ishi’s life and the harrowing aspects of his genocide, as well as Ishi’s subsequent exploitation by men like Kroeber, I recommend most highly Orin Starn’s “Ishi’s Brain.”

The students, on the other hand provided a touching quote from Ishi himself, effectively giving Ishi the voice that he is denied throughout the play. When I am dead, cry for me a little. Think of me sometimes, but not too much. It is not good for your wife or your husband or your children to dwell too long on the dead. Think of me now and again as I was in life, at some moment which is pleasant to recall, but not for long. Leave me in peace as I shall leave you, too, in peace. While you live, let your thoughts be with the living.

A poetic and beautiful statement which clearly illustrates that Ishi was an intelligent and insightful human being. Throughout this play he often speaks in broken, short, “Indian” speak such as “No, you stay. I go.” (this is in fact his last line) or “One good thing, no more therapy. No more questions. I do my rounds.”

In fact, at the end of the play where “Ishi” finally gets to make his eloquent speech about the perils of manifest destiny and the trappings of “survival” it is not Ishi who makes this statement it is (as written in the script) the actor “dropping character, rising and speaking as the ACTOR who plays the role.”

Nowhere do we get Ishi’s voice in this play, at no time is Ishi given the real opportunity to show that he is much more than “a blank slate waiting to be named and reinscribed” or that “So much was taken away by the time he came to us that we wasn’t a Yahi man with a Yahi name anymore, he was a no one.” This is the “ACTOR” speaking as himself at this point, lecturing the audience, reminding the audience and anyone they pass this information along to that by the time these Native peoples were coming out of the woods they were utterly destroyed. They were falling apart (granted at the hands of the genocide going around them) but, you know, “manifest destiny was a two way street” and it was a degenerate time, where all people were driven to degeneracy. Especially those, as Dr. Saxton Pope states about Ishi’s sister who “had no cosmology, no morality, so she created her own.”

The implication here being that Ishi and his sister were denied their cosmologies because their father was killed when they were so young. Left as “wild children” they raised themselves so they naturally degenerated into an incestuous relationship that resulted in violence and ultimately the death of the sister as a result of her ignorance, and the death of “Ishi” or his “true name” as after this he decides to leave the woods to “die.”

I am floored. Ishi was a person. I want people to consider the legacy that Ishi tried to leave. He told stories, old stories, from his tribal peoples. He wanted their “cosmologies” to be acknowledged. He was 49 years old when he “came out of the woods” and he was well aware of the society around him. His camp included pots and pans and tents. He was also, to be frank, not the last of his tribe. The fiction created by Kroeber, created by Berkeley, created here by John Fisher, is the continued exploitation of a real person who lived the last five years of his life in a museum. Fisher is not more innocent because he also portrays Kroeber as an arrogant, flawed, self centered man. He is not more innocent because he “knows” about the “genocide” of Native peoples in California and wants to use his “art” to shock people into “having a conversation.” He is not more innocent because he hides behind historical fiction and calls it “based on fact.”

At the end of the play, having been subjected to the killing, filleting, burning, raping and molesting of Native peoples all over the stage. After having watched Native characters being “hunted” and chased around the theater, sometimes set to “cartoon” music. After having watched as Ishi drowned his child, beat and “raped” his sister, and was beaten by his own father -- I was exhausted. My stomach had a huge knot in the center. My neck was stiff. I listened to the tears falling from other Native peoples in the audience around me. I watched as my cousin clenched her hands tightly together and waited. The lights went up, people applauded, but I and several others around me did not.

I waited anxiously for the “talk back” and wondered what others in the audience would say. My cousin relayed to me that one man had walked up to her at intermission and told her that he had done work with the Hupa people before and that he was...
Watching the play in disgust, I had watched after intermission as the audience grew smaller on both sides. I didn't prepare any statements or statements but wanted to wait to see what others had to say.

After a statement by the Department at Berkeley, my cousin was given the opportunity to speak. She offered a prayer. And while I do not plan to transcribe the entire prayer, I thought it was a valuable illustration of the cosmology and ontology of Native peoples, especially those of California. This society (still viable, still vibrant FYI) had within it concepts of "growing old in a good way" and had a deep knowledge of the universe that while scarcely approached in scholarship and research, holds within it answers to some of the deepest questions of Western knowledge. Ishi's language was no different. And this insistence at portraying him with "Indian" speak, or broken English only further shows the ignorance of this play.

When the Writer/Director finally spoke, it was in response to a question from the audience. "Exactly how much of the story was based on fact would you say?"

Fisher's response was this: In sort of framing my participation tonight I think this is a work of art and the attempt to defend it of necessity must collapse on itself. I had very clear motives in creating it four years ago. It is now in its second incarnation and to talk about specifically what is story and what is fact I think is to attempt to explain it. And I can't really speak to explaining it, to defending it. I feel unprepared to answer that question.

From the audience I heard someone mumble "What?" And I felt the same way. We had stayed because of the "opening of dialogue" and "breaking ground for conversation about sensitive issues" (all statements made at the start of the talk back) and now we were told that there would be no effort to 'explain' this "work of art."

The talk back continued with people speaking about the effort to "create dialogue" by the play and "calling attention to these issues." After one audience member asked for a response from the American Indian students about why they didn't like the play a Native man stood up and took the microphone. He couldn't finish his statement and it ended in tears. It was a meaningful illustration of what this play really does, it doesn't open dialogue, it glorifies trauma. It erases the real, living Native peoples (some of whom are Ishi's relatives). It forgets that those people could be sitting in the audience. It refuses to dialogue with them when they ask real questions, how can you justify portraying Ishi and his story in this way? Why do you use this opportunity to give him a voice to destroy that voice? Why must you "confront" us with these images of the Holocaust and genocide but also include a pseudo-justification for it by allowing that "even the Natives were participating in these atrocities - against each other?" Why would you take a peaceful, intelligent man and belittle his story to a sensationalist, animalistic portrayal? Why will you not acknowledge that your "art" could have been better? And now that you have access to Native people who want to have a dialogue with you and offer real feedback so that you can learn something and also teach others why won't you actually talk to them?

But I didn't say any of those things. Caleen Sisk offered a response as the Chief of the Winnemem Wintu Tribe of California. She had traveled from Northern California to see the play for herself. Her tribe is relatives to Ishi's tribe. And after she was finished and another man spoke (who was slightly disturbed himself at the portrayal of Ishi) I took the microphone.

I offer my entire statement here for you to read. I spoke without writing anything down and from the heart.

I did not expect to be so personally affected by what I was seeing on stage. I did want to take the opportunity to tell everybody here and all of the people in the play that I don't want you to leave thinking that Ishi is a rapist, that he had sex with his sister, that he killed a baby - that he was a part of it. I want you to go out and find out about him. He was a gentle, peaceful person and he gave of himself personally to keep the dialogue going. And for that to be what anybody walks out of this place with- it's a tragedy, because we fight every single day to be heard and I don't want you to just hear that. And I think there is a real opportunity here for everybody involved to take a step back and understand that you can change this. And I know that it feels very personal, I myself am a writer, and if somebody were to come tell me to change something that I made it would be like changing one of my children, but this is different. You don't get to hide behind historical fiction; it doesn't work that way. Not when you have a people who are based in what Kayla was talking about- to grow old in a good way, to be whole and balanced. If you leave here tonight with one thing repeat to yourself - that was not Ishi, that he deserves more, he deserves a real voice and take it upon yourselves to figure out how you are going to find that voice for him or you will have done him a great injustice again.

There will be a followup "dialogue" on Tuesday at 4pm in the Durham Studio Theatre in Berkeley. I have also heard that people have gone to sit outside the play to sing and call attention to the lies about Ishi. The last night of the performance is tonight. The images -- they will stay with me -- but I will let only the good things in and none of the bad.

Ts'ehdiya.

Here is the picture I took of the program for the play. Notice the third character(s) down are listed as "Maid, A Squaw"... And then even further down you have "Indian (A Maid)". So while the male Indian gets at least some tribal affiliation (and that's not to say even this is the best designation for these characters) - the Native Woman who is raped and killed after she first appears is simply known as "A Squaw." I write more about this in the comments below.

http://www.cutcharislingbaldy.com/blog/went-to-see-the-ishi-last-of-the-yahi-at-uc-berkeley-and-all-i-got-was-this-blog-entry-review
To keep people updated as things happen I am adding on the following part to this review:

Here is the article where the Theater Department at Berkeley apologizes for staging the play [http://www.dailycal.org/2012/03/13/theater-department-apologizes-for-ishi-production/].

Here is an article written for The Daily Cal by the Native Graduate Students about art and ethics and the play. [http://www.dailycal.org/2012/03/13/american-indian-graduate-student-association-calls-for-art-with-ethics/]

Here is a blog entry by a Professor at Berkeley which talks about what happened at the teach in with students and Professors. [http://www.kimallbear.com/1/post/2012/03/no-human-subjects-ethics-protocols-for-playwrights-and-actors.html]

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**Marlette Grant**  
3/11/2012 08:14:32 am

Very Good Cutcha, I wish there was more we could do... you, Kayla and Caleen did a good job of representing all of us! I can just hope that John Fisher and the likes can learn something from this as to not do it again!

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**Scott Wallin**  
3/11/2012 11:03:37 am

Dear Ms. Risling Baldy,

Thank you for an excellent account of both the performance and the talk-back session. The performance desperately needs such critical feedback. I left the talk-back session feeling frustrated because I felt the production's participants should have acknowledged Caleen Sisk, you, and others' responses. Many graduate students in our department are committed to following up on this to ensure that such purported dialogue, introspection, and critique goes farther than it appeared to Friday night.

Sincerely,

Scott Wallin

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**Stephanie Lumsden**  
3/11/2012 11:13:57 am

I'm not sure Mr. Fisher deserves the thought that you have put into this response, but I know that Ishi does, and I'm sure he's made glad by it.
Thank you Cutcha! I remember going through a similar experience at a premier of a movie about Ishi, years ago. I was in tears and was about to leave when I was put on the spot. Since several of the hosts knew I was the only Native American at this event, they thought it would be a great idea to get my input. I was at a loss for words. It was so wrong and I did not think that my comments would make any difference to the film makers or the audience. I decline to comment. It was too painful.

Thank you for doing what I could not do, Cutcha.

Anonymous Audience Member

This play is extremely problematic, and I understand how offensive certain aspects of it are. I do not in any way deny that. I do not, however, believe that this play was intending to justify the Native American genocide. However spectacularly it may have failed in doing so, or misguided it may have been in its attempt, it seemed to me that the play was intending to do exactly the opposite. As an audience member, I saw the show as an attempt to prove that what was done to the Native Americans was sick, inhuman, and wrong. While the scenes of violence were extremely disturbing, and at times, I felt, a little over-used-- overall it seemed to me that the scenes of Native Americans being raped and killed were meant to function the way scenes of Jews being killed in gas chambers in films about the Holocaust are meant to function: to evoke horror and disgust in the audience toward the perpetrators, and to put human faces to the victims who suffered these atrocities. At least, that is how they made me feel while I was watching them. I don’t know...perhaps I reacted like that because I do not, myself, identify as Native American. Perhaps, in the end, it is not constructive to use violence in this way.... I only wish to make this point because I personally did not leave the theater thinking that the Native Americans deserved to be hunted, but rather that the white people who hunted them were sadistic monsters. I wonder, wouldn’t it have been equally as awful to NOT depict the violence? Would not showing it be somehow a way of acting as though it never happened? I don’t know. I am still very mixed in my feelings about this play and am far from coming to a conclusion as to whether or not this piece was ultimately helpful or hurtful...

There is only one other point I wish to make in defense of the play that I felt has been misrepresented in both this and Ms. Andrews' review; specifically the interpretation of the line “maybe manifest destiny was a two way street.” By saying this I do not wish to in any way dismiss or diminish the opinions or feelings expressed here, but only to correct something I feel has been misstated; I do not mean, in any way, to suggest that the play was perfect and wonderful...

I wrote down the entire speech from which that line was quoted to use for a paper I am writing in response to the play for a class. After reading it again, it seems to me that both this review and Ms. Andrews' have taken that line about the "two way street" out of context.

This is what the speech actually says:

"You see we don't like privacy. We live in a psychological age. We want to know everything; all the secrets. That's journalism, that's therapy, that's the way great cities are born and kept alive: through interactivity, community, and the exchange of truths. And as we play our humanistic game, amuse ourselves with truth, other men-- men who don't sleep--rape our wilderness, exploit our children and rob our victims. And we who weave stories in our depths of despair can tell ourselves: "In some fables rape leads to love, love can be engendered of hate, maybe manifest destiny was a two-way street, so even rape must be ok." Never realizing the wages of rape; not for the victim, but for the rapist. For one day the rapist must achieve responsibility, he must erase his past, and all of us humanistic suckers must go to hell."

In my opinion, although this speech has some major syntactical weirdness, it does not in any way state that manifest destiny was, in fact, "a two-way street", but instead suggests that the idea that "maybe manifest destiny was a two-way street" is a story, a LIE that we as a society tell ourselves to:

a) make ourselves feel better---to somehow deal with the guilt for the atrocities we have committed against the Native peoples of this country,

and b) to pass part of the blame onto the Native Americans themselves, thus denying full responsibility for the genocide.
I did not get from this monologue that the Native American genocide was in any way acceptable, justifiable, necessary or “okay;” but instead that anyone who believes this nonsense is a “sucker” who must “go to hell.” It seems to me that white people are implicated in this speech as the “rapists” who are looking to “erase [their] past,” and “achieve respectability.”

Personally, I don't see how this statement could have been understood to mean otherwise, but perhaps someone can explain to me why they thought it was expressing the opposite of my interpretation? I'm curious to hear peoples' thoughts.

Thanks very much for reading, I appreciate your comments.

Cutcha Risling Baldy 3/12/2012 03:56:20 am

Comment 1 of 2 (cause I figured out it was too long! Thanks!)

I wanted to take a quick moment to thank everyone for reading and for commenting on this review. I didn't expect to reach so many people but I am glad that it is continuing this conversation and calling attention to the efforts of UC Berkeley American Indian Graduate Students to address the issues of this play.

I also wanted to address some of the questions brought up by “Anonymous Audience Member” here in the comments. First, thank you for your comment. And second, since reading your comment I have been thinking about the word “intent” or the “intention” of any piece of work. This, perhaps, lends itself to John Fishers' comment at the talk back where attempts to “explain” (as he put it) or define, or even discuss the intent of the “work of art”, “must collapse on itself.” While I considered for myself that Fishers “intent” may have been rooted in his desire to “make the point that the California Holocaust was a horrific event, its perpetrators ruthless and sadistic” (as stated in his Author’s note) the execution of this play did not, for me, in any way accomplish this task. As I said in the review, it did not open up dialogue but glorified trauma. And this is where I think Fisher can vastly improve upon his play. No matter if the intent was, as you write “to prove that what was done to the Native Americans was sick, inhuman, and wrong” – the play failed in this attempt and it failed in its “intent.”

I quite honestly think that this is what happens when someone approaches a subject without much historical or even contemporary knowledge about the subject or without consulting community members. Using your example, though I am familiar with the history of World War II and the story of this holocaust, should I endeavor to write the entire story of say “Anne Frank” from a historical fiction point of view, and use that story not only to portray the horrific violence against Jewish people, but to also make Anne Frank in to an incestuous, violent, murderous, inarticulate person I would be doing a great injustice to her, to what she has come to stand for and to the Jewish community. This does not put a human face to this tragedy; instead it glorifies it by making a sensationalist attempt to fatten up the story with untruths in the name of entertainment.

Fisher, for me, was misguided in his attempt to “humanize” the Native people in this play. Take for example the name of the first Native woman who is killed. In the program she is designated as “Squaw.” This term is a deeply offensive term to Native peoples. It was long used as a derogatory way of referring to Native women and as a justification for why the extreme violence committed against them was okay – you see they were just “squaws.” I don’t particularly see why Fisher would choose to designate a Native woman, a Native person, in this way in the play. She has no name. She does not even get the benefit of her tribal affiliation. She is called “squaw” – this does not “put human faces to the victims who suffered these atrocities.”

I also do not believe that this play was “intending” to justify the Native American genocide, but – that is exactly what it did. You are right – Fisher spectacularly failed and I think we need to hold him responsible for that. We cannot rest on his intent or his “attempt.” And after the talk back session where he did not actively participate in the discussion I think it became perfectly clear to me that he wasn't willing to really have the dialogue that he purported to support.

COMMENT 2 Posted next...
As far as your question: "I wonder, wouldn't it have been equally as awful to NOT depict the violence? Would not showing it be somehow a way of acting as though it never happened?" I think this is where dialogue and discussion and consultation could have come in handy for those who were in the audience and also for those in the play (and the playwright himself). There will be many answers to this question by many different people. And I do see the point in that we don't want to erase that historical violence from the narrative. However, the violence in this play was surrounded by the violence performed by Ishi and other Native characters. And this is where I call foul. This is how, subconsciously, the play justifies the violence against Native peoples. It insists that they too were driven to horrific violence. And while I will say that the violence throughout California during this time was varied and that some Native communities did participate in the act of fighting for their lives, I cannot condone this portrayal of Ishi who was known for his nonviolence. I also, as I mentioned above, cannot condone the non-naming of Native characters, the treatment of them as props to "demonstrate" the violence of this time.

And finally, since I've talked your ear off (or written your eyes tired?) I will address the use of the line "maybe manifest destiny was a two way street." I want to thank you for providing the entirety of the monologue in which this line was used. Originally, in my review, I included the entire monologue as well and a lengthy response to it. But – as blogs and reviews go I had to cut out information as to not make this a twenty page long response. I agree with you that this monologue "has some major syntactical weirdness" and that it "suggests that the idea that 'maybe manifest destiny was a two-way street' is a story, a LIE that we as a society tell ourselves."

Originally I wanted to point out the irony of this ending statement (by Kroeber's wife). Because she is, for me, directly speaking to the Director/Playwright. When she states "You see we don't like privacy. We live in a psychological age. We want to know everything; all the secrets..." she could be talking to John Fisher and reminding him that he, too, has participated in this with his gross retelling of Ishi's story in this manner.

I myself used the line as a way of showing how what stuck with me from that monologue was not the "intent" of the statement but instead, after piling on all of the other problems in the play, that "manifest destiny was a two way street." Because, to me, this is exactly what the play is implying. And regardless of how the statement was written, Fisher was not providing this type of experience with the rest of the play. For me, you cannot write a play so problematic and then at the end say essentially "because you see, we are all responsible, and we have to know better, even though I didn't know better, even though I did tell a story where rape was okay, where I violated the community, interactivity and exchange of truths, where I portrayed manifest destiny as a two way street..."

I do appreciate your comment and information and hope that this clears up some of the questions you had. And I hope, if you have the opportunity you will be attending the dialogue on Tuesday. I cannot attend myself – but look forward to hearing about how this conversation is continuing. Thank You!

Andrew F 3/13/2012 07:22:09 am

I found nothing salvagable in this play. Tempted to walk out at intermission, we regretted staying till the end, nonetheless.

What bothered me most was reiterated in this review - Ishi was robbed of voice, and poignancy reserved for white actors. This problematic story arc of a "white hero" is repeated endlessly in popular film (e.g. Dances with Wolves).

So much self-indulgent dialogue, too many characters, unbelievable and unnecessary exchanges ... what a 3 hour disaster! I wish I had the constitution to stay for the talk back!
In some fables rape leads to love, love can be engendered of hate, maybe manifest destiny was a two-way street, so even rape must be ok. Never realizing the wages of rape; not for the victim, but for the rapist. For one day the rapist must achieve respectability, he must erase his past, and all of us humanistic suckers must go to hell."<--based on this, the final words of the play, and the fact that Fisher refused to contribute to his own talkback because "explaining" his play would make his work of art "collapse on itself," I think all fault lies with the playwright. His author's note in the program is just as awful. I feel for the actors in this production, because sometimes you just get wrapped into something you can't change or control, and they tried to remedy that in their own way by including a real quote from Ishi as their contribution to the playbill. As if the actors were saying, "We know. And we are sorry." I am flabbergasted and angry, because Fisher took his white-privilege bias and tried to use it towards a world he does not understand. The greater metaphor about rape really gets to me as well. Again: "Never realizing the wages of rape; not for the victim, but for the rapist." NO. As an actor, as a woman, as someone with a tinge of Native blood, this infuriates me. If I ever see the name John Fisher tied to a production, I will not audition for it. Even if it's the role of a lifetime.

Since I live on the other side of the country, my opinion/argument might not have as much weight, but I spend a lot of my time working with Playwrights as they develop New Works. It bothers me that at a school as esteemed as Berkeley, there was no Dramaturg to say, "Hold on. Let's do some fact-checking here." If I had been an actor tied to this production, I don't know if I would have had the courage to go on stage every night. I am sorry that this play was produced, and if for some reason the play has a future, I hope that SERIOUS re-writes take place.

As a thirty year veteran of hundreds of productions and someone who knows a bit of the inside story I though I would add a few comments.

The two way street line is not that manifest destiny had any positive side but that the perpetrator of a crime is also hurt by their own actions. That this policy hurt America as a whole by destroying (or trying to) a culture instead of opening it self up to it.

As a work of fiction I would generally say get over it. The problem is that there are real people's names used for some characters and so there is an implication of fact. That puts this in a weird place where the playwright really did need to do truer representations of the characters, probably.

I say probably because it's also a work of art. Picaso did not paint realism but you would not get a lot of support for demanding that his portraits be redone to look more accurate.

It's NOT a documentary. It was always a work of fiction and it was always clearly stated as such.

Richard the third was a hansom young man and did not have a hunch back. A play, a film is NOT reality. Even "reality" TV isn't close to reality.

As an audience you have every right to love hate or be bored by a production but you don't have a right to demand it be altered.

If you offended well lots of folks have been offended by lots of different things. You have probably offended someone at some point. It happens.

That is my professional out look.

Personally I understand why people are offended and the first time I saw the first chase scene I was taken aback.

The intent I believe in the depiction of the native americans was to show them as the whites at the time were viewing them. That comes off as generally offensive today. And I don't think it was made clear in context.

It also may have been a serious error in concept. I'm not sure that even if the idea was clear that it wouldn't have been just offensive.

It is wrong to say however as some did that this is a white guy making non-whites look bad while the white hero comes through in the end.
The ONLY sympathetic character other than Kroeber's wife is Ishi. He is the only one with any integrity. There is no "white hero".

Part of the point of the play, and it is actually stated in the play, is that we don't really know Ishi's reality. He told lots of stories and some have been translated. As I understand it there are six hours of stories but only one cylinder has ever been translated. That means there are on the order of 59 that are un translated.

Anyway the point was that they are stories, no body knows what is real what was just a story, what was said to keep Kroeber happy. Nobody knows the truth. The variations on the "story" that have Ishi sleeping with his sister and drowning a baby are all a characters attempt at translating and interpreting stories that Ishi has told and are not presented as fact but as a white guy at the times interpretation of his not terribly good translation of a story by Ishi.

And again this may well have been a direction that was doomed from the start because you are dealing with characters people take very personally.

So the play may fail in what it attempted. Actually the reaction strongly points in that direction. But the intent was in reality quite the opposite.

That is the problem with art though. If you aim at bold some times you miss disastrously.

I personally don't think artists should worry too much about who they please or piss off. But you as a person have every right, and I applaud you for being public with it, to voice your opinion.

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Kayla Carpenter
Co-Chair of AIGSA, UC Berkeley

4/19/2012 06:34:26 pm

We're not imagining these things that are in the play. In this quote for instance, character Ishi is at this point telling, rather than Waterman 'reporting' from the 'white perspective.' That reporting was a scene, yes, but the play was 3 hours of other scenes.

Since you bring up the issue of the stories, as a tribal person and a linguist, I feel it absolutely appalling how they were used and abused in this play. Anyone who has spent significant time with the stories, or time understanding the figure of Coyote in Northern California tribal stories, would not have made Ishi to be Coyote.

Kayla Carpenter
Co-Chair of AIGSA, UC Berkeley

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Theater veteran
4/25/2012 08:01:36 am

Well you see as you mentioned it "Is a Play". It is a work of fiction. Now it may be your stance that everything presented on canvas and the stage and on film MUST be totally factual and be checked and have anything that might offend any person removed. I wouldn't want to live in that environment. There are people offended if you mention Jesus and those if you don't. I have met people that are offended by certain colors.

Coyote is also the hookers union, so maybe that is what he was referencing. That is of course silly but so is holding "fact" up as a standard for art.

If the playwright had been concerned with getting the iconography correct well there would be a point there. But the play wasn't about any of that.

The failure of the play isn't what everyone is moaning about it is that he didn't see what a distraction it would be to the play. However that is a failing that is probably fairly unique to UCB. It's a little like doing a play questioning the sanctity of the Pope and opening it in the Vatican.
It's very disappointing to me that folks are so focused on finding slights that they loose sight of anything else.

there are a lot of good and meaningful discussions that could come from this play. Instead we get a who can get more offended contest.

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Author

Cutcha Risling Baldy is an Assistant Professor of American Indian Studies at San Diego State University. She received her PhD in Native American Studies from the University of California, Davis. She is also a writer, mother, fan of "The Good Wife" and "The Walking Dead", who likes to go for long walks on long piers...

(5) Top Posts

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Pope Francis decides to make Father Junipero Serra a saint or In Which I Tell Pope Francis he needs to take a Native Studies class like stat (http://www.cutcharislingbaldy.com/blog/pope-francis-decides-to-make-father-junipero-serra-a-saint-or-in-which-i-tell-pope-francis-he-needs-to-take-a-native-studies-class-like-stat)

I need to read more Native blogs!

A few that I read...
http://www.cutcharislingbaldy.com/blog/i-went-to-see-the-ishi-last-of-the-yahi-at-uc-berkeley-and-all-i-got-was-this-blog-entry-review