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Courtesy Final Bow for Yellowface

A New Nutcracker Challenges Orientalism

by Kristi Yeung

Final Bow for Yellowface, founded by Phil Chan and Georgina Pazcoguin, is an organization that advocates for the elimination of offensive racial stereotypes from ballet stages. Despite the COVID-19 pandemic, 2020 has been a productive year for them. They published their [first book](#) in the spring and are now creating their own version of The Nutcracker. Called Mystery Nutcracker Theater, the film will feature Chinese shadow puppets riffing on a Ballet West archival performance. I sat down with Chan over Zoom to discuss this upcoming work.

Kristi Yeung: What is Final Bow for Yellowface's relationship with *The Nutcracker*?

Phil Chan: In 2017, I was invited by Peter Martins, the artistic director of New York City Ballet at the time, to discuss their production of *The Nutcracker*. He was in a bind because he couldn't change [Balanchine's](#) choreography but also couldn't ignore audience members who felt uncomfortable with the racial caricatures being presented. We talked about historical representations of Asian Americans and geopolitical issues—Chinese exclusion, Pearl Harbor and World War II, the Vietnam War, the Korean War—in relation to what was happening on ballet stages at those times. Looking at the "Chinese dance" in *The Nutcracker*, we identified three areas that could be modified to improve the presentation of Chinese culture: makeup, costuming, and choreography. Peter made changes to all.

After the meeting, I called Gina Pazcoguin, who is a soloist at New York City Ballet. We thought we could make this a bigger conversation about updating how Asian people are represented in the field. There is this four-hundred-year-plus tradition of orientalism: Western people defining how Asian culture is shown based off fantasy or two-dimensional objects. Now we're getting to a point where Asian creatives are stepping up to make work with cultural integrity. We created a pledge for ballet companies to eliminate yellowface from their stages and founded [Final Bow for Yellowface](#) to drive the conversation. Today, every major American ballet company has signed the pledge, and a lot of European companies are starting to have these discussions too.

KY: What inspired you to create your own version of *The Nutcracker* this year?

PC: We knew that there wouldn't be live performance with the pandemic. Companies would be streaming old performances instead, and inevitably there would be outdated versions. Usually, you can only discuss what is happening in the theater if you buy a ticket. This year, everyone will be able to see a streamed production from their homes. It's a chance to reach new audiences but also a chance to offend new audiences. Gina and I have realized that calling something out as racist doesn't work. It shuts down the conversation, and people don't respond well. It's not a great way to build audiences for ballet, and at the end of the day, that's what we're trying to do because we care about the art form. We wanted to approach *The Nutcracker* with humor instead.

KY: Your show is called *Mystery Nutcracker Theater*. How is it different from other productions of *The Nutcracker*?

PC: We both really enjoyed the show [Mystery Science Theater 3000](#), which features people watching old films and humorously commenting on them. We wanted to do something similar. We also wanted to borrow a classical element from my heritage and make it the center of the story instead of it being Eurocentric. We thought, "What if we're just unassuming Chinese shadow puppets going to see this strange, exotic, ethnic folk dance called *The Nutcracker*?" We reached out to [Chinese Theatre Works](#), which is a Chinese shadow puppet company in New York that recently worked with Awkwafina on *Nora from Queens*, to collaborate.

Mystery Nutcracker Theater is essentially Gina and I as these puppets watching *The Nutcracker* and judging whether it's racist. We're watching an old VHS copy of a 1984 Ballet West production. Ballet West performs America's original production, which San Francisco Ballet, a sister company to Ballet West with the same founders, first performed in 1944 but no longer performs. Today, more people are familiar with the Balanchine version, so it's nice to show this less-performed production. Hats off to Adam Sklute, the artistic director of Ballet West, and their whole team for being so open to us using their archives. We're also working with Josie Harrison, a podcast host and the mother of comedian [Jo Koy](#). Instead of a rat king, she'll be voicing "Chairman Maose" as our Filipino auntie. She is not a ballet person, so her commentary reminds us that what we take as tradition is also weird for people looking with fresh eyes. We hope this helps people shift what they see as the center, which is the bigger reason behind why we're doing this production. The tsar is dead, and we can't pretend we're performing work paid for by Russian royalty with an audience of one. We're now making dance for people like you and me. We can't find our place in this artform if it is always Eurocentric.

KY: How have COVID-19 restrictions impacted your process?

PC: We've always been completely digital, so it made sense to make a film. We started as a pledge on [yellowface.org](#), and our current strategy is all [social media based](#). For this show, it's all remote. Gina and I have not been in the same room together to record, though we're having these intimate conversations about *The Nutcracker*. Our editor, Darin Murano, is incredible; it's a lot of chopping things up and putting them together to make it feel cohesive. The show will be available on our website. There's a suggested donation to recoup our costs and support our future projects, but we wanted to make it a fun resource for people to have for free.

KY: What's next for Final Bow for Yellowface?

PC: We're starting to build an Asian American choreographic incubator that pairs emerging Asian American choreographers with composers, designers, filmmakers, visual artists, and more. We're building a pipeline not just for authentic Asian American voices and choreography but also for other Asian American creatives to collaborate around ballet.

[Mystery Nutcracker Theater](#), Final Bow for Yellowface, [yellowface.org](#), streaming starts December 24. This production contains adult commentary that may not be suitable for young children.

Interview with Phil Chan by Kristi Yeung, conducted via Zoom, December 14.

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