



## Changing Stages

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*Miss Saigon* has long been criticised for its stereotypical representation of Asians and Asian culture, characterised by the sexualisation of Asian women, the 'backwards' male Asian characters, and the representation of a money-obsessed culture. These Western stereotypes of the East are embedded in the play's creation and therefore core parts of this misrepresentation, such as the sexualised depiction of Asian women as prostitutes, remain in the 2014 production. However, in studying the opening scene it is evident that some elements of this performance attempt to move beyond the limitations of representing basic stereotypes and there is a complexity to this musical, both in characters' psychology and in broader matters of Asian representation in theatre, that builds on the white male authorship to present multifaceted ideas of racial politics.

The opening scene of this production demonstrates the sexualisation of Asian women in its costumes, setting, and narrative. Keith notes this scene and its use of the titular 'Miss Saigon' pageant, quoting Boubilil to have said it was "a sleazy perverted version of what the Miss America pageant is".<sup>1</sup> This comment seems hypocritical considering the Miss America pageant shares patriarchal exploitative traditions of judging women on beauty, which has historically caused protests and controversy.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, the preferential treatment to Western culture can be seen in the choreography and dialogue of the scene. While the

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<sup>1</sup> Jeffrey Keith, 'Producing "Miss Saigon": Imaginings, Realities, and the Sensual Geography of Saigon', *The Journal of American-East Asian Relations*, 22:3 (2015), p.270

<sup>2</sup> Elwood Watson and Darcy Martin, 'The Miss America Pageant: Pluralism, Femininity, and Cinderella All in One', *Journal of Popular Culture*, 34:1 (2004), p.111

skimpy costuming is similar to that of the Miss America pageant, the movement in the scene is more overtly sexual: the bargirls' dancing involves aggressive thrusting, while they are spotlighted, standing on pedestal-like tables and at times they are carried around like props, literally objectified.

Similar objectification occurs in the dialogue, with the recurring motif of labelling women as meat: "the meat is cheap in Saigon".<sup>3</sup> These elements create a sexualised, perhaps 'sleazy' representation of Saigon, but the disjunction between the bargirls' assertively sexual dancing and the objectifying dialogue begs the question of who has the sexual agency. Shimizu contends that "the musical itself establishes the hypersexual carnality of the Asian women" and at the start of the scene this is seemingly what Gigi represents, both in her speeches ("If I'm your pin-up, I'll melt all your brass. Stuck on your wall with a pin in my arse") and her actions (grabbing a soldier's crotch to convince him to bring her to America).<sup>4</sup> However, the scene changes to introduce 'The Movie in my Mind' and the bargirls lose their sexual agency, becoming victims of destitution and male sexuality. This is emphasised by the staging in this production, which sets Gigi in the spotlight whilst behind her other bargirls simulate sex with soldiers and, as they sing their mournful lines beginning "They are not nice, they're mostly noise", the filming focuses on these women who turn away in discomfort from their partners.<sup>5</sup> Whilst Shimizu suggests that the actresses' "performances allow them to assert more powerful Asian female subjectivities" and that for some performing sexual acts created a sense of empowerment, this is undermined in this production by their loss of sexual agency and power.<sup>6</sup> This performance maintains the sexualised stereotypical representation of the Asian bargirls whilst simultaneously giving them a lack of ownership over their bodies, thereby normalising their objectification.

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<sup>3</sup> A. Boublil and C. Schönberg, *Miss Saigon* (Theatre Royal Drury Lane, London, 20 September 1989; 2014 production). Hereafter: *Miss Saigon*

<sup>4</sup> Celine Parreñas Shimizu, 'The Bind of Representation: Performing and Consuming Hypersexuality in *Miss Saigon*', *Theatre Journal*, 57:2 (2005), p.249; *Miss Saigon*

<sup>5</sup> *Miss Saigon*

<sup>6</sup> Shimizu, p.259

Despite the condemning sexualisation of Asian women embedded into the story, this production's opening scene does not wholly conform to the dichotomy of East as bad and West as good. The opening scene represents the 'sleazy' again in the violent, lustful American soldiers, evident in the multiple fights, but particularly prevalent in the treatment of Kim. As John and the Engineer haggle over Kim, she stands docile and silent, lacking any control over the transaction. Then, after she is bought, she is moved around the stage by the men in the scene: John drags her around the stage and positions her inappropriately around him. Kim is clearly presented here as a victim of the American soldiers' libidos and her innocence contrasts the Western cynicism. However, the later arrival of Thuy, a Vietnamese character who equally represents patriarchal control over women ("you're mine until we die"), means that this portrayal does more to convey the commodification of women than any evils of the West.<sup>7</sup>

Sternfeld asserts that Schönberg's use of the East versus West dimension meant "*Miss Saigon* would be part of a tradition of telling stories of conflict between cultures (and using such stories as fodder for romantic plots)".<sup>8</sup> Indeed, in exploring Saigon's history, Keith notes that its "social scene grew toxic as Americans and Vietnamese came to know one another primarily through sex, violence, and exploitation" and it is this same mingling of cultures and values in the setting of a brothel that begins the narrative and creates the impending tragedy.<sup>9</sup> Therefore the product of this cross-cultural romance, personified in Chris and Kim's child, is extremely significant. Tam represents an innocent victim to this conflict, which this production emphasises by maintaining his innocence with choreography (always facing away from violence). Perhaps this depiction would confirm the story as a tragedy of conflict, where there is no preferential culture, however, Tam is also representative of an opportunity for redemption that is signified in his mixed-race features: "let me see his Western looks".<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> *Miss Saigon*

<sup>8</sup> Jessica Sternfeld, *The Megamusical* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2006), p.295

<sup>9</sup> Keith, p.260

<sup>10</sup> *Miss Saigon*

This speech links redemption to the West, much like the later song 'The American Dream', and in doing this the narrative moves away from a pure cultural conflict, and becomes an almost colonialist celebration of the West's 'saving' tendencies. Chow acknowledges this representation of the West in *Miss Saigon*, reporting its portrayal as "strong, prosperous, and paternalistically benevolent", whilst Asia is "weak, subdued, and open for conquest".<sup>11</sup>

Certainly, this is signalled in the motif of Chris's gun that Kim keeps for protection. Thuy sings "Of course you have a gun, and now you'll shoot your cousin, and it's a U.S. gun", and thus the West is textually highlighted as Kim's saviour from her Vietnamese relative's backwards ideas of forced marriage and infanticide.<sup>12</sup> Regardless of the creators' innovative intentions of portraying a recent, real-life cultural conflict, the result of the language and narrative is a denigration of the East, based on stereotypes and colonialist values.

Despite the efforts made to present complex racial dynamics in the 2014 production of *Miss Saigon*, stereotyped misrepresentations of Asian people and culture remains core to the narrative that depends on the sexualisation of Asian women and representation of the West as redemptive. However, the lack of Asian representation in theatre begs the question: are stereotyped representations better than no representation? Perhaps if there were more opportunities for and portrayals of Asians on stage, representations such as *Miss Saigon's* would be significantly less harmful, especially considering the evidence Chow and Shimizu have presented concerning Asian actors' ability to gain empowerment and visibility from these roles and their opportunity to forge "resistances to white male authorial intentions".<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, the current effects of the musical and this production are to normalise the sexualisation of Asian women, stereotype Asian culture as 'backwards', and perpetuate colonialist views of the East.

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<sup>11</sup> Broderick Chow, 'Here is a Story for Me: Representation and Visibility in *Miss Saigon* and *The Orphan of Zhao*', *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 24:4 (2014), p.509

<sup>12</sup> *Miss Saigon*

<sup>13</sup> Chow, p.515; Shimizu, p.257

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Due to his self-professed sense of social responsibility and emphasis on “serving the greater community”, Kwame Kwei-Armah has made strides in diversifying the theatre industry through his work as a playwright and an artistic director.<sup>14</sup> These roles were informed by his experiences as an actor and feeling the need to “articulate [his] own arguments”, which has led him to create work representing black British experiences.<sup>15</sup> Additionally his position as Artistic Director of the Young Vic has allowed him to widen access to theatre and implement institutional changes that encourage diversity in the workforce. However, there are limits to the effects one man can have and, as Snow reports, “Nine tenths of bosses at the country’s 50 highest-funded theatres are white”, suggesting industry-wide reformation is needed to make theatre representative of and accessible to all.<sup>16</sup>

Kwei-Armah contends that his triptych of plays at the National were aimed at “chronicling the black British experience”, hence their importance is not limited just to bringing representations of black Britons to the stage, but also crucially explores complex issues of racial identity.<sup>17</sup> An important aspect of these plays is the mingling of past, present and future, both in the character’s lives (for example, Deli’s complicated history with his father in *Elmina’s Kitchen*) and in the historical context that surrounds the characters’ experiences and informs their psyches. Kwei-Armah asserts this importance himself, claiming his role as a playwright “is to be a chronicler of the present and an archivist of the past. The present becomes the past”.<sup>18</sup> However, it is the use of comingling times in an attempt to affect the future that achieves Kwei-Armah’s aim to “be a catalyst for change” and makes these representations of black British experience particularly impactful.<sup>19</sup> In studying Kwei-Armah’s

<sup>14</sup> Kwame Kwei-Armah, *Plays:1* (London: Bloomsbury, 2009), p.x

<sup>15</sup> Bernadine Evaristo, ‘Statements of Intent’, *Wasafiri*, 25:4 (2010), p.55

<sup>16</sup> Georgia Snow, ‘Slow progress on diversity exposed as The Stage survey shows 92% of top theatre bosses are white’, *The Stage* (2020) <<https://www.thestage.co.uk/news/slow-progress-on-diversity-exposed-as-the-stage-survey-shows-92-of-top-theatre-bosses-are-white>> [accessed 21/05/2021]

<sup>17</sup> Kwei-Armah, p.xi

<sup>18</sup> Evaristo, p.56

<sup>19</sup> Evaristo, p.55

trilogy, Goddard suggests that “his interrogation of how the past impacts on the present-day lives of black British communities focuses on how legacies of slavery manifest in continued disadvantage and disenfranchisement for black people in Britain today”.<sup>20</sup> Certainly, his plays expose long-standing racial discrimination and inequality that is emphasised in the overt combination of past and present in *Fix Up* through Alice’s investigation into her family history. Kwei-Armah makes this more pertinent by staging these explorations of black British identity at the National, therefore implicating the nation in these injustices, both to hold Britain accountable and to inspire change.

Goddard takes issue with the move of *Elmina’s Kitchen* to the West End, due to the largely white audience viewing a play about ‘black-on-black violence’ and suggests that “within the context of the West End, the production seemed to simply reaffirm rather than challenge widespread suppositions about black men that are potentially perpetuating fears about violent black masculinity”.<sup>21</sup> The extent to which the playwright is responsible for an audience’s prejudices is debatable, especially considering Kwei-Armah faced far more criticism of his plays that represented black stories in a positive empowering light, which he hypothesises is due to the fact that when “black writers are writing about the underclass, the white establishment is very comfortable because they can put us in a box and they can look at us with disdain”.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, *Elmina’s Kitchen* being the only play of the trilogy to transfer to the West End affirms this conclusion and suggests that despite black playwrights’ efforts, there is an institutional barrier to what representations of black experience reach the West End, based on what white audiences and critics are accustomed to and accepting of. Therefore, Kwei-Armah’s representation of ‘black-on-black violence’ is not inherently wrong for perpetuating stereotypes, but it is the lack of other representations of black Britons on the West End stage that problematise this production.

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<sup>20</sup> L. Goddard, *Contemporary Black British Playwrights* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p.43

<sup>21</sup> Goddard, p.52

<sup>22</sup> Evaristo, p.57

Another solution to this issue is lessening the reliance on white audiences, who may be more likely to affirm their stereotypical views in work exploring the black British 'underclass'. Kwei-Armah's work as the Artistic Director of the Young Vic has taken steps towards rectifying nondiverse audiences in his emphasis on widening access to the dramatic arts. Thorpe notes Kwei-Armah's assertion that "'first nights" and season launches at the Young Vic will no longer be formal occasions with a glass of wine. They will be DJ sessions that will mean more to Londoners".<sup>23</sup> These plans show Kwei-Armah making the setting of the West End theatre welcoming and accessible for a broader range of people than the typical white middle-class audience. Additionally, Kwei-Armah has conveyed plans to livestream all future productions and Brown notes his contention that "The pandemic has significantly widened digital access to the theatre and there [is] no going back".<sup>24</sup> Access to productions that would have been previously limited by socio-economic status (due to ticket pricing, travel, and location) is broadened and this shows the artistic director valuing accessibility over exclusivity, and therefore diversifying the audience to which theatre reaches.

As Artistic Director of the Young Vic, Kwei-Armah has implemented changes within the institution that aim to create a diverse workforce. Thorpe denotes Kwei-Armah's contentions "that the way meetings are held inside his theatre will also change, so it is not just about putting black people on stage", proving his commitment to wholistically diversifying the industry.<sup>25</sup> One instance of this that Akbar reports on is Kwei-Armah's work to remove racism within his organisation, evidenced by the theatre's partnership with Sour Lemons, who "will interrogate the internal structures that uphold institutional racism, raise awareness and

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<sup>23</sup> Vanessa Thorpe, "'We must give black talent the stage' says Young Vic's Kwame Kwei-Armah", *The Guardian* (2020) <<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2020/aug/15/we-must-give-black-talent-the-stage-says-young-vics-kwame-kwei-armah>> [accessed 20/05/2021]

<sup>24</sup> Mark Brown, 'Young Vic to livestream all future productions, says artistic director', *The Guardian* (2021) <<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2021/may/06/young-vic-to-livestream-all-future-productions-says-artistic-director>> [accessed 20/05/2021]

<sup>25</sup> Thorpe [accessed 20/05/2021]

accountability, and listen to staff's experiences of racism inside the building".<sup>26</sup> By implementing anti-racism policies and taskforces, Kwei-Armah ensures the Young Vic is a safe environment for people of colour, thus both protecting the diversity of current staff and proving the accessibility of employment at the theatre for diverse candidates.

During Kwame Kwei-Armah's career as an actor, playwright and artistic director, he has made great efforts to increase diversity in the theatre industry. As a playwright, Kwei-Armah's work supplied black representation to the West End stage, whilst further exploring the complexities of racial injustices and identity politics. As an artistic director, he has encouraged diversity in both his audiences and his personnel, through implementing policies and schemes promoting accessibility and anti-racism. However, his work in diversity is limited by the wider industry, where "just 8% of theatre leaders – artistic and executive directors combined – [are] from minority ethnic backgrounds".<sup>27</sup> The lack of diversity in theatre leadership positions leads to less diversity in other areas of the sector and proves a need for industry-wide reformation in order to make theatre a place for all.

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*The Hamilton Mixtape* is an album that reworks songs from Lin-Manuel Miranda's *Hamilton: An American Musical*. Within this mixtape there is a move away from Broadway musical conventions and a gravitation further towards the hip-hop traditions that *Hamilton* draws from. This is particularly prevalent in 'Immigrants (We Get the Job Done)' (hereafter: 'Immigrants'), where technological and formal remediation extends themes of diversity and intertextuality from the source. Williams determines *The Hamilton Mixtape* a "hybrid and overtly political space" and indeed the adapted form and audience allows the creators to

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<sup>26</sup> Arifa Akbar, "The heat is on': top theatres act to root out 'system failure' of racism", *The Guardian* (2021) <<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2021/apr/14/heat-young-vic-royal-court-theatres-root-out-system-failure-of-racism>> [accessed 20/05/2021]

<sup>27</sup> Snow [accessed 21/05/2021]



further politicise elements of the musical and draw more relevance to current affairs.<sup>28</sup> This means that multiculturalism is amplified through bilingualism and lyrical discussion of immigration issues, whilst intertextual allusions to the source text, modern politics, and hip-hop culture work to promote marginalised groups and subcultures, thus building on the values of this ‘American musical’.

A core aspect of *Hamilton* is its diverse casting, which is important not merely in supplying roles to actors from minority ethnic groups in an industry which lacks representation from these groups. It also affects the meaning of the musical by representing America as a country for all and, as Kajikawa asserts, by placing “marginalised groups at the centre of the American experiment”.<sup>29</sup> This celebration of diversity remains fundamental to the remediated mixtape, and while the very title of ‘Immigrants’ proves this, we also see this in the range of ethnicities and nationalities in the song’s performers. This reflects the show’s diverse cast, but additionally, as Williams attests, “The variety of singers adds an air of inclusivity and universality”.<sup>30</sup> Certainly, this is emphasised by the signalling of their multiculturalism in their lyrics, languages, and accents – for instance, Riz Ahmed raps ““look how far I come” Hindustan, Pakistan, to London”.<sup>31</sup> The use of bilingualism in the song is particularly impactful in Snow Tha Producer’s use of code-switching: “Ya se despertaron, It’s a whole awakening”.<sup>32</sup> In these lines she repeats the motif of awakening in both Spanish and English to emphasise how current political issues affect all cultures. This prevalence of bilingualism builds on Lafayette’s use of French and English in *Hamilton*, but due to the remediated form there is no longer such a reliance on lyrics to understand the narrative and this allows ‘Immigrants’ to delve further into other languages. This results in Residente’s verse being

<sup>28</sup> Justin Williams, ““We Get the Job Done”: Immigrant Discourse and Mixtape Authenticity in *The Hamilton Mixtape*”, *American Music*, 36:4 (2018), p.487

<sup>29</sup> Loren Kajikawa, ““Young, Scrappy, and Hungry”: Hamilton, Hip Hop, and Race”, *American Music*, 36:4 (2018), p.468

<sup>30</sup> Williams, p.492

<sup>31</sup> K’naan, Residente, Riz Ahmed and Snow Tha Product, ‘Immigrants (We Get the Job Done)’, *The Hamilton Mixtape* (2016). Hereafter: ‘Immigrants’

<sup>32</sup> ‘Immigrants’

solely in Spanish, showing less importance being put on the English language, which was brought to America by colonisers.

Although the prominence of multiculturalism in 'Immigrants' reflects the value of diversity in the original musical, *Hamilton* has been criticised for representing diversity whilst ignoring the social inequalities and injustices that America is founded on – as Galella contends, “Miranda demands that audiences forget the “cultural baggage” of how this nation was built upon dispossession, slavery, and genocide”.<sup>33</sup> However, as Kajikawa notes, “*Hamilton's* politics depend upon who is watching and listening”, and therefore its remediated form as a mixtape changes the audience and allows for different and more overtly political comment.<sup>34</sup> In 'Immigrants', this politicisation is both lyrical – through the direct comment on immigration issues and racism (“immigrants we don't like that”) – and furthered by a use of sampling that develops the theme of intertextuality prevalent in *Hamilton*.<sup>35</sup> The recurring employment of sampling in the song shows remediation through technology transitioning the music of *Hamilton* further towards hip-hop traditions that it draws upon, and this is particularly evident in the sampled clip that introduces the song. Williams describes this sample as a “news-style commentary”, that is “Common for political hip hop tracks”.<sup>36</sup> According to *Genius*, this clip is spoken by one of the producers of *The Hamilton Mixtape*, and indeed his use of rhetorical questioning here, a linguistic tool commonly used by American news reporters, shows the intention to present this introduction as news-like.<sup>37</sup> In setting out the song in this way, the creators validate their arguments as factual reports, and highlight their topic of immigration and asylum seeking as news-worthy, despite a lack of interest from mainstream media, whilst also invoking notions of hip-hop's authenticity. Furthermore, this commentary immediately denotes the political nature of the song and shows the creators reinterpreting

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<sup>33</sup> Donatella Galella, 'Being in “The Room Where it Happens”': *Hamilton*, Obama, and Nationalist Neoliberal Multicultural Inclusion', *Theatre Survey*, 59:3 (2018), p.369

<sup>34</sup> Kajikawa, p.478

<sup>35</sup> 'Immigrants'

<sup>36</sup> Williams, p.494

<sup>37</sup> 'Immigrants (We Get the Job Done)', *Genius* <<https://genius.com/Knaan-immigrants-we-get-the-job-done-lyrics>> [accessed 23/05/2021]; 'Immigrants'

the ideas of immigration and diversity present in the original musical. Even the song's intertextual allusions to other items of hip-hop culture ultimately reflect the song's subject of migration: "Who these Fugees".<sup>38</sup> In referencing The Fugees, Ahmed reminds hip-hop fans of the band's politically charged work, whilst also celebrating hip-hop culture as a result of multiculturalism.

Sampling is otherwise used in 'Immigrants' to remediate clips from the *Hamilton* cast recording of 'Yorktown (The World Turned Upside Down)'. The insertion of these samples from the source musical highlights the themes 'Immigrants' is expanding on, and therefore weights the importance of the lyrics within each sample. Manipulations of the phrase "Immigrants, we get the job done" reoccur through the chorus, and this also being the title of the track shows the creators emphasising *Hamilton's* portrayal of immigrants as hardworking and enterprising, while their own lyrics take this further by contrasting this depiction with the criticism immigrants face in relation to employment: "I'll outwork you, it hurts you, you claim I'm stealing jobs though".<sup>39</sup> Their remediation of lyrics from *Hamilton* allows them to bring values the musical espouses into modern politics and create a critique of anti-immigration rhetoric.

Ellis-Peterson asserts that "Hamilton has established itself as one of the biggest stage shows of the century" and due to its prominence, the values of multiculturalism and diversity that the musical advocates for (in its use of diverse casting and intertextual hip-hop allusions) have reached a wider audience.<sup>40</sup> However, its political comment is somewhat limited by the narrative, setting, and form of the musical, and therefore its remediation into *The Hamilton Mixtape* has allowed songs like 'Immigrants (We Get the Job Done)' to further politicise core themes, by utilising hip-hop conventions of sampling and intertextuality.

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<sup>38</sup> 'Immigrants'

<sup>39</sup> 'Immigrants'

<sup>40</sup> Hannah Ellis-Peterson, "This isn't colour-blind casting': Hamilton makes its politically charged West End debut", *The Guardian* (2017) <<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2017/dec/20/colourblind-casting-hamilton-west-end-debut>> [accessed 22/05/2021]

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