

**Questions for Miss Saigon panel at Overture Center Panel Discussion – Perspectives on MISS SAIGON: History and Community** WED, MAR 27, 7 PM – 8:30 PM | Promenade Hall 60 minutes plus 10 min Q & A

Leslie Bow

Josephine Lee, Ph.D., English and Asian American Studies, University of Minnesota

Lori Kido Lopez, Comm Arts, UW-Madison

Nancy Vue Tran, Director of Development of Grants, Freedom Inc.

Sandra Gajic, President and CEO, Overture Center for the Arts

Sarah Marty, dir. Four Seasons Theatre

**Introductions. 7:20pm Opening Round**

**Professor Lee:** Can you talk a little about the history of Asian representation on the American stage? I understand and negative responses to *Miss Saigon* did not appear in a vacuum but are part of a longer history of *questionable* representations of Asians since Gilbert and Sullivan's *The Mikado* and Puccini's *Madame Butterfly*. Can you talk about this history a bit?

What's concerning about *Miss Saigon*? In what ways does the play misrepresent Asian people?

Can you tell us a bit about the protests surrounding the play in the Twin Cities and the issues that activists had with this play?

Was there any impact as a result of the protests? Were these actions successful in raising awareness, in changing policy, affecting box office?

**Professor Kido Lopez:**

What are the specific critiques that Asian Americans have made about *Miss Saigon*? [Add anything that Professor Lee did not cover?]

[Jonathan Pryce] What is yellowface and why is it so concerning for Asian Americans?

How do the protests surrounding *Miss Saigon* reflect later activism surrounding issues of whitewashing in Hollywood? You've written about the casting of M. Night Shyamalan's *Avatar*, for example, and how fans began to protest what they saw as whitewashing, casting Caucasian actors in roles portraying arguably Asian or nonwhite characters.

[Devil's advocate: best actor for role, fantasy means there is not real referent for the air/water/fire/earth benders?] [*Aloha, Dr. Strange, Ghost in the Shell*]. Does casting Asians in Asian character roles solve the problem? Or is the type of stories told?]

**Ms. Nancy Vue Tran:** Freedom Inc. Hmong refugee community

As a Southeast Asian American woman, how do you feel about romanticized representations of the Vietnam War such as the one in *Miss Saigon*? How do plays like this impact American impressions about Vietnamese people?

What kinds of conversations are being had about racial representation in Southeast Asian American communities in Madison? Does the community have concerns about how the war is represented? Do you think that the southeast Asian community will find this show appealing? Will they turn out for a show like *Miss Saigon*? [Could it be triggering for those with first-hand experiences of the war, seeing traumatic experiences recirculated as entertainment?]

**Ms. Sandra Gajic:** CEO of Overture or selected general questions

Can you explain how the Overture chooses programming? I understand that you came on board at the Overture after *Miss Saigon* was already booked here. How did the Overture come to select works like *The King and I* or *Miss Saigon* for Madison?

Why do you think that plays like this still so popular with audiences when they seem to represent racial views that so out of touch? Are these works problematic to you? Do you feel a responsibility to bring more diverse stories to the stage?

What can Overture do be more responsive to the local community in Madison and programming that is more diverse? [racially, generationally, experimental?]

**Sarah Marty:** 4 seasons theatre, production, theatre

Sarah, you work in theatre production. Can you tell us how do you come up ideas about which plays to produce and who to cast in them? Are there particular challenges involved in casting roles for people of color on the stage? [Is diverse casting a priority for you?]

Are there forms of dramatic presentation that are particularly conducive to telling stories about communities of color beyond, say, traditional musicals? [dramatic monologue, one woman shows, experimental performance/ interactive performance?]

**By 7:50 General questions to the panel:**

*skip if answered in session:*

--*Miss Saigon* is by and large a sympathetic portrayal of the Vietnamese and its female protagonist. If I were to put myself in the role of a typical theatre-goer at the Overture, I might ask, "What's wrong with a *sympathetic* representation and a lead role for an Asian actress? Why is this a significant **racial** question when we're being confronted on a daily basis with calls for wall-building against immigrants or having to justify why Black Lives Matter? This call for awareness is small potatoes." How would you respond to this point?

--If diversity in the theatre is lacking, why? Who is responsible for bringing diverse stories and productions to the stage? If you could put your finger on the biggest hurdles in theatre in regard to diversity of stories, material, or casting, where is it?: local theatre companies, national booking agencies, investors, small number of dramatists of color, audience interest—ticketholders. Is it the disinvestment in the arts more generally?

--With all this media representation now penned by Asian Americans or Asian Canadians—I'm thinking *To All the Boys I've Loved Before*, *Crazy Rich Asians*, *Fresh off the Boat*, *Kim's Convenience*--has **theatre fallen behind** other media forms like film and television in terms of diverse portrayals or parts for Asian Americans? Is theatre contributing to its own demise by continuing to mount shows that hearken back to midcentury? [*South Pacific* or *The King & I* come to mind, stories that tend to glorify colonial past or imperial endeavors in the Pacific Rim/Asia]. We've experienced #Oscars so white movement. Is theatre lagging behind?

**If time or skip:** "Later" questions  
**Individual Follow-up questions**

**Jo Lee:**

Do you see similar themes or concerns emerge among Asian American dramatists or performance artists working now?

Which Asian American playwrights are you most excited about now? Who should theatergoers watch for?

**Ms. Nancy**

What kinds of stories about the Vietnam War do you think are missing?

What role can arts organizations like the Overture play in supporting communities of color?

**Sarah Marty:**

How do you weigh the audience that exists and is now buying tickets against one that could or *might* exist if material were produced that brings new audiences to the theatre?

Are there specific plays, playwrights, or theatre companies doing particularly exciting work on issues of race in the US?

**Sandra:**

What strategies might the Overture engage to bring different audiences to the theatre? Is there programming that you would like to see at the Overture that perhaps counterbalances *Miss Saigon*?

**Is there anything that anyone would like to add before we move to our closing questions?**

**By 8: 05 pm Closing:**

--What do you think should be done with shows like *Miss Saigon*? [popular, maybe on the verge of outliving their moment, dated representation?]

--[As an English professor, I'm sometimes accused of "reading too much" into a book or image, but at the same time, students appreciate thinking critically about issues and perspectives. A question to be posed to the audience as well: How might you look at *Miss Saigon* differently as a result of our discussion today? Is it possible to view this play with a **critical** lens that focuses on racial representation?

--How might theatre contribute to racial awareness? What would those stories look like?

**By 8:15 pm: Collect questions from the audience**

**Thank the panel:**

**Panelists have encouraged us to think about why** diverse representations matter esp., this political climate. Comments give us insight into how to engage diverse theater goers of the future.