

## Transforming *Three Sisters*: A Hapa Family in Chekhov's Modern Classic

By Elizabeth Liang

"All right, let's agree that this town is backward and vulgar, and let's suppose now that out of all its thousands of inhabitants there are only three people like you...But you won't simply disappear; you will have some influence. And after you've gone there will be six more, let's say, like you, then twelve, and so on, until finally people like you will be in the majority. In two or three hundred years, life on earth will be unimaginably beautiful, astonishing." (Vershinin in Act I of *Three Sisters* by Anton Chekhov, translated by Paul Schmidt)

It is an act of courage or foolhardiness to produce theatre in the heart of the film world, depending on your point of view and how large the houses turn out to be. In the fall of 2005, I produced *Three Sisters* in a 60-seat theatre in Burbank, California (home of Disney and Warner Brothers). The odds were stacked even higher against the show's success when my assistant producer and I stipulated that the main characters, the upper-class and highly educated Russian Prozorov siblings, had to be played by Hapa<sup>1</sup> actors. I chose to foreground mixed heritage Asians because I am Hapa and wanted to see something akin to my own family on stage. The play had never been cast this way anywhere according to my research. Meanwhile, I assumed that our audience would be largely European American, because that is usually the case whenever I attend the theatre. Thus it was difficult to predict if this production would spark any interest in the average L.A. theatregoer, since people tend to flock toward stories to which they can relate. I hoped that they would be intrigued by our unusual "take" on a play with which they were likely familiar (as it is one of Chekhov's most popular works), but I

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<sup>1</sup> Hapa is a Hawaiian term that is most commonly applied to people of partially Asian and/or Pacific Islander descent plus any other ethnic/racial heritage. There has been some controversy over this use because some see it as having been co-opted and redefined without permission from or due respect for its indigenous Hawaiian culture. For an argument that recognizes the impulse to use the word while ultimately arguing against it, read "Hapa: The Word of Power" by Wei Ming Dariotis. I will use the term in this essay because its most widely understood definition widely encompasses people of partially Asian and/or Pacific Islander descent. While using it for efficiency's sake may be seen as perpetuating the problem, I am encouraged by the fact that many native Hawaiians, like the assistant producer of *Three Sisters*, are happy to share the term. It is a challenging issue; I do not believe there will be a perfect solution until another word replaces "Hapa."

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also worried that they would feel the ethnic “layering” was forced and unnatural, or that we were trying to teach them something they had no interest in learning. My reasons for casting the siblings as Hapa were manifold:

- To deliberately represent a section of the population that is normally under- and misrepresented. Census 2000 proved that over 6.8 million or 2.4 percent of Americans considered themselves multi-ethnic. 25 percent of those people resided in California. (And Census 2010 discovered that over 9 million or 2.9 percent of Americans considered themselves to belong to two or more racial groups. Among those, Asian and white are the third most common pairing.)
- To allow the actors to interpret legendary roles in which they might not normally get cast.
- To further emphasize the difference of the Prozorov family from others by adding race to Chekhov’s division based on class and education.
- To tell the audience a mixed heritage story without making it feel like a classroom lesson.

## The Play

*Three Sisters* is widely regarded as a masterpiece of modern theatre and one of Russian playwright Anton Chekhov’s greatest plays. Written in 1900 and first produced in 1901 by the Moscow Art Theatre, it was directed by Konstantin Stanislavsky, whose emphasis on psychological realism (Worrell 11) had a staggering influence on actors and theatremakers in the USA (Gordon 71) and ultimately across the globe (Whyman 155). *Three Sisters* is considered an early modern play because it portrays the Russian gentry’s ordinary daily lives and conversations, their self-involvement and their self-delusion, with no moral to the story (Schmidt 4-5). All of these attributes were relatively new in the era of imported melodramas, opera, and vaudeville in Russia (Stites 25). Also, *Three Sisters* preceded the Russian revolution by more than a decade, yet it predicted the upper class’s eventual demise.

The play revolves around the three Prozorova<sup>2</sup> sisters, who are in their twenties at the beginning of the drama, which spans five years. Olga, Masha, and Irina were born into a military family in Moscow and spent their formative years there while both parents were alive. The sisters are desperate to return to that cosmopolitan city because they live in a backwater town to which their father was posted as a general, and where they are outsiders. They pin their hopes for a distinguished future on their brother Andrey, who dreams of becoming a renowned scholar. The family is frequently visited by soldiers posted to the town who are more traveled and educated than any of the locals. The new Lieutenant-colonel seduces Masha into an adulterous affair while Irina is wooed by soldiers she does not love. She also enters the workforce only to discover how numbingly boring it can be, which Olga already knows as an overworked schoolteacher. Meanwhile, Andrey disappoints the sisters by marrying a “townie” and mortgaging the family home due to his gambling debts. There are philosophical discussions, songs, arguments, confessions, professions of love, and a terrible fire—and through it all the siblings ache for a life more scintillating in a city where they believe

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<sup>2</sup> Russian surnames have masculine and feminine forms, depending on whether one is referring to a woman (feminine), sisters (feminine), a man (masculine), or a group including at least one man (masculine). Thus I will refer to the Prozorov siblings or family and the Prozorova sisters.

they would be understood by their neighbors. In the last act all of the siblings have made heartbreaking compromises and have settled for much less than their dreams. As one critic writes, “[the sisters’] knowledge and sensibilities find no application and wither to no purpose” (Skaftymov 82). A duel brings the play to a tragic end, and the sisters will never return to Moscow.

### The Leap in Casting

The Russian elite in 1900 was overwhelmingly white, according to Russian historian Yuri Slezkine. Thus Chekhov’s plays have usually been cast with white actors. Some notable, “traditionally cast” productions in the USA include the 2011 revival directed by Austin Pendleton, starring Maggie Gyllenhaal and Peter Sarsgaard, at Classic Stage Company in New York; and the 1964 Actors Studio Theatre production starring Geraldine Page, Kim Stanley, and Shirley Knight. In the UK, two of the more distinguished productions were Laurence Olivier’s 1969 production at the National Theatre starring Joan Plowright, with Derek Jacobi and Alan Bates in principal roles and the 1991 Queen’s Theatre revival starring Vanessa, Lynn, and Gemma Redgrave.

We were taking a leap by portraying the Prozorovs as mixed heritage, and asking the audience to see them that way, instead of looking past their ethnicity with “colorblind”<sup>3</sup> casting. Chekhov’s plays have been cast nontraditionally<sup>4</sup> in the past, but it was a relatively rare (and sometimes controversial) occurrence in professional theatre until about ten years ago (Pao 118). Even now, such productions are “more often considered novelties, rather than events that enhance the reputation of a work” (Pao 132). A celebrated example of a nontraditionally cast Chekhov play would be the James Earl Jones-helmed production of *The Cherry Orchard* at the Public Theatre in 1973 with its all-African American cast. There were also productions like Pan Asian Repertory Theatre’s *Three Sisters* with its all-Asian (including Hapas) cast in 1988. More recently, the Oregon Shakespeare Festival mounted a production in 2001 in which the actresses playing the sisters were not all the same race/ethnicity. Although nontraditional casting has become more common in professional theatres of late, it nevertheless remains an exception. Furthermore, the majority of the productions that were cast nontraditionally appear to have been cast colorblind, with no racial or cross-cultural references in the interpretation. Thus we were breaking new ground with casting that was color *conscious* in a specifically Hapa way.

### Design and Interpretation: Early Pre-production

My assistant producer and I determined that our production’s color-consciousness would also be reflected in the design elements and interpretation. Since the siblings would be identified as both Russian and Chinese, the set, costumes, and props would reflect the siblings’ Chinese and Russian heritages. In our original vision for the production, these design elements would catalyze the other characters’

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<sup>3</sup> Colorblind casting refers to the casting of actors whether or not they share the same color/race/ethnicity as the characters. The actors’ ethnicities do not necessarily inform the interpretation of the play.

<sup>4</sup> Nontraditional casting refers to the casting of actors who differ from their characters in terms of gender, race/ethnicity, age, and/or physical ability. It also sometimes refers to other glaring differences between the character description and the actor: height, weight, etc.

discomfort or fascination with the siblings and their home. These feelings are already present in the play as written, with the implication that the other characters are reacting to the siblings' class and education, so here we were adding the element of ethnic heritage. Also, in the play, the siblings repeatedly mention their feelings of alienation. The sisters' yearning to return to Moscow is for a place or "state of being" in which the siblings could feel included and intellectually stimulated as well as liberated from small-town restraints. Traditionally, the justification for this yearning has been that the siblings are of a different social class from the local townspeople—the siblings represent the disaffected intelligentsia surrounded by the poorer working class (Golub 16-19). In our production, the siblings' yearning would also stem from their unusual ethnic heritage, to which no one else in the play would fully relate.

In *Three Sisters*, the other characters have constant and varied reactions to the siblings' uniqueness. Two characters attempt to squelch one or more of the siblings' individuality and freedom; others project their own needs onto the siblings without paying attention to the siblings' feelings; some ignore the siblings' attempts to communicate about their alienation; and one character admires the siblings and predicts that the world will change to become more like them. In my vision for the show, this prediction would have a traditional and nontraditional interpretation:

- a) it would allude to an idealistic future of education and enlightenment across Russia and the world, which is the typical interpretation;
- b) it would also allude to the growing number of mixed heritage people in the world today, and the increasing social acceptance of interracial relationships.

All of the reactions mentioned above would be attributed to the Prozorov siblings' ethnic heritage as well as their class.

The Prozorovs are also more privileged than the townspeople, which presented an interesting challenge. Should the privilege be partially explained by the siblings' multi-ethnicity, and if so, how? Would the rest of the cast be monoracial people of color—or multi-ethnic "multiple minorities" with no European ancestry—who could not enjoy the kind of "white privilege" that part-white people have, thanks to lighter skin and more "Caucasian" facial features?<sup>5</sup> Would the rest of the cast be diverse yet individually monoracial? Or would they be a group of white actors? In the latter two cases, the siblings' over-privileged attitude could come from their upbringing—their parents' desire to overcompensate for the prejudice and ignorance that they believed their children were bound to face from monoracial people.

## Hopes, Dreams, and Need for the Production

My desired results for the production were that it would be an emotionally moving and thought-provoking experience for the audience, and would at least break even financially, as with any well-received 99-seat theatre<sup>6</sup> production. However, I hoped it would be unprecedented in several ways, the foremost being that it would

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<sup>5</sup>On light skin privilege, see Rondilla and Spickard (1-2). Also, in "The Politics of Perception," Christine Beyer notes the way in which "mixed-ethnicity people of color...[were] shut down and discounted" by their mixed-with-white counterparts at meetings of multi-ethnic people in the early 2000s. She exhorts multi-ethnic people with European ancestry to acknowledge their own "White privilege" and to monitor their own behavior because it might be based on a sense of entitlement (62).

<sup>6</sup> Most stage productions in Los Angeles are mounted under the 99-Seat Theatre Plan, which allows union actors to rehearse without pay and to receive a tiny stipend per performance.

afford mixed heritage audience members the experience of seeing themselves represented *as a group in leading roles* on stage. This occurrence is highly uncommon in the American theatre (with the possible exception of stages in Hawai'i). Our marketing plan would target members of mixed heritage organizations in southern California (Association of MultiEthnic Americans, UCLA and UC Irvine's Hapa Issues Forums, Occidental's Multi-Racial Alliance, Claremont College's M.O.R.E., etc.), Asian American groups, college theatre departments, as well as the general theatre-going public. The production would also expose monoracial audience members to multi-ethnic people, a minority group that rarely gets the opportunity to express its unique experience of race and race relations.

Until very recently (and even now), mixed heritage people have frequently been expected to claim one ethnic identity in order to be easily labeled. In the entertainment world, actors who can claim more than one ethnicity are generally expected to play monoracial roles. Keanu Reeves is an example of an actor whose mixed heritage is ignored on screen even though the public is aware of his ancestry—as Jane Park states: “Reeves and the characters he plays are white by default” (188). This practice not only erases part of an actor's ethnic heritage and identity, it also makes many multicultural actors (*unlike* Reeves) difficult to cast because they do not “look” like they belong “sufficiently” to a single ethnic group. Thus actors of mixed heritage are often left between a rock and a hard place—denying an essential part of their ancestry or not getting cast at all. In rare occurrences, as in the case of actor Vin Diesel, lighter skinned mixed heritage actors with European heritage can actively claim multi-ethnicity while continuing to “minimize the race-salient traits that distinguish [them] from the white mainstream,” as is argued by Yale legal scholar Kenji Yoshino (qtd. in Nakamura 69). Greg T. Carter argues that while Vin Diesel acknowledges his mixed heritage, the fact that he does not specify exactly what that heritage is has actually limited “the breadth of identities [the actor] can assume” in his public life and even the way in which he portrays his ethnically diverse roles (212).

While it is perfectly justifiable for any actor to want to play many leading roles, it is disturbing that for this to happen, any precise acknowledgment of mixed heritage actors' non-European ancestry still frequently must be sidestepped. I wanted to do the opposite with our production.

Since mixed heritage people are rarely represented on stage or in the media as being mixed heritage, multiracial actors tend to get cast as monoracial people with “matching” monoracial relatives, or they are not cast at all in roles that have any family members who are seen. African American and Latina/o communities may be more accustomed to having multi-ethnic members represented as familials on stage or screen, because many African American performers are of acknowledged mixed heritage and have played one another's relatives regardless of their actual “mix,” as is also true of Latina/o performers<sup>7</sup>. However, when playing familials on stage or screen, their characters are virtually always identified as exclusively Black or Latina/o, not mixed heritage.<sup>8</sup> (Dwayne Johnson (The Rock) may be the only huge celebrity to have broken

<sup>7</sup> However, unlike the African American and American Latina/o populations, the large percentage of European Americans who have mixed ethnic/racial heritage remains unacknowledged by the mainstream (Brown 18). Historically, this denial of non-European ancestry has been crucial for people who identified as white to maintain their social/economic standing (Spickard 12-23).

<sup>8</sup> Latina/os are a multi-ethnic/multiracial culture (Nash 64). This fact is curiously ignored on stage and screen much of the time. They tend to be portrayed as a homogeneously dark-haired, tanned monoculture. For more on the racialization of Latina/os on screen, see Beltrán.

through this barrier as an actor (Carter 215-216). However, in the film *Walking Tall* his character's parents are not exactly the same ethnicities as his real parents, even though they represent an interracial marriage.)

On the most personal level, I chose to cast this play this way because I yearned to see my family, my self, my fellow folk of mixed heritage on stage. We would not be pretending to be one race nor asking the audience to see how we “transcended” race when we were cast “colorblind.” I just wanted what most monoracial actors take for granted. I don't know if they can imagine the yearning I felt as a child watching television—the yearning to see someone, anyone, who seemed to understand my experience<sup>9</sup>. No one did—not on “The Brady Bunch” or “The Partridge Family” or “Good Times” or “Happy Days” or “Laverne & Shirley” or “Sesame Street” or “The Electric Company” or “General Hospital” or “The Facts of Life” or “Different Strokes” or “Square Pegs” or “Family Ties” or “The Cosby Show” or “Knots Landing” or anything I saw as a kid on American television inside or outside the USA. (American shows were quite popular outside the USA when I was growing up in different countries.) No one in any show, commercial, or film seemed like they might comprehend my family, with two exceptions: the Willis family on “The Jeffersons” and the O'Briens on “Star Trek: Next Generation,” in very few episodes. If there were more examples, I was not aware of them. As I grew up I noticed actors like Phoebe Cates and Jennifer Beals and Keanu Reeves and Danica McKellar; but they never fully played what they were racially / ethnically. So it wasn't what I was looking for. The fact of my existence only came up in stories with Black characters, like Lonette McKee's multiracial role in *The Cotton Club*, which I absolutely loved seeing, but which wasn't quite my story, either, since I was not from that era or African American. And the rare film that showed a multiracial character invariably gave them a tragic end (*Imitation Of Life*, *Pinky*) or a doomed love story (*Love Is a Many Splendored Thing*).

### **Colorblind vs. Color-conscious Casting of People of Color**

Since I have always strongly supported nontraditional and colorblind casting, some fellow theatre artists thought it contradictory when I stipulated that the siblings in my production be played by Hapa actors. But deliberately representing a mixed heritage family does not preclude my appreciation for nontraditional casting. They both support representation of people of color in leading or pivotal roles, which is an objective that needs to be met more frequently.

My assistant producer and I had precast ourselves as two of the Prozorov siblings, Irina and Masha. We wanted to play our roles in *Three Sisters* because we loved *Three Sisters*. While we could not wait for the time when there might be a plethora of fantastic, multifaceted mixed heritage characters in plays of renown from which to pick and choose, seven years after we produced our show there are still virtually no wonderful, non-stereotypical leading mixed heritage roles in numerous plays that are being widely produced in the USA. Thus I remain a proponent of nontraditional casting, because otherwise mixed heritage actors will be waiting in the wings indefinitely, unable to exercise their craft or their art, which would “wither to no purpose” like the education and skills of the Prozorova sisters (Skaftymov 82).

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<sup>9</sup> My identity was also hugely influenced by my peripatetic international upbringing, which involved cross-cultural issues similar to those in the mixed heritage experience, but I chose to focus on race/ethnicity for this production.

Nevertheless, critics I heard about from friends had trouble understanding that I needed to experience what monoracial actors have always experienced. White families are overwhelmingly represented on the American stage and screen, African American and Black families are represented, and Asian Americans occasionally get to see Asian American families (not enough, but it's not unheard of), and so on. I wanted the multiracial family to be acknowledged, not hidden or ignored. It didn't need a drum roll, but it did need a simple recognition, because we do exist.

### **Contrasting Visions: the Producers and the Director**

When we began preproduction, there was an added challenge in communicating our vision to our director, who is European American. My assistant producer had offered her the directing job via email while our potential director was working abroad on an enormous project, so the communication was kept short. We stated that we had been strongly considering casting all of the siblings as Hapa, but at the time it was not yet an absolute—this was a full year before the production opened. We committed to the concept shortly after the job was offered to the director, but we did not communicate this until she returned to the United States months later. This delay was an egregious error on our part.

The producer's job is to *support the director's vision*. The director usually has a concept for the way s/he will direct the play, and this concept can include anything from tone (humor/irony/solemnity/etc.) to design elements to casting and so on. S/he works with the designers and actors to bring that concept to life. The producer normally does all s/he can to make the director's vision possible, from finding the theatre to hiring a team (designers, stage manager, PR representatives, etc.) who will understand the director's vision and devote themselves to helping to fulfill it. As producers we had turned the tables by asking the director to support *our* vision. This practice is not completely unheard of, but had we done it when we offered her the job (or soon after when we had fully committed to our vision), she could have made an informed choice. We could have had serious discussions about the interpretation before she came aboard or at least before she returned to L.A. But as I recall, we didn't expect strong protestation to the vision, partially because the director and assistant producer are good friends.

At the first preproduction meeting, we mentioned our concept as an absolute, in response to which our director stated her concern that we were forcing an unnecessary or invalid interpretation onto a modern classic. This surprised us for two reasons:

- the director was also an actress who had been cast nontraditionally in the past, and
- my assistant producer and I are both Hapa, which was why we had come up with the idea for the Hapa siblings in the first place. Nonetheless, the director did not understand why we wished for the other half of the family to be cast with mixed heritage actors of partially Asian and/or Pacific Islander descent.

This highlighted the stark contrast between a monoracial viewpoint and ours. In one highly charged moment, the director asked if we intended to set the play in Tokyo. We were flabbergasted, since we had never mentioned setting the production outside of Russia and neither of us is of Japanese descent. We had merely stated that we wanted the siblings to be played by people with partially Asian and/or Pacific Islander heritage.

As we discussed the theme, it became clear that the director was apprehensive about taking a play with “universal” themes and making it specific to a minority culture. She expressed worries about making the play too “foreign,” even though its characters are from the upper class in 1900 Russia, which is a unique demographic that is arguably quite foreign to the USA today. (Or it may be that she felt it was already foreign *enough*.) Meanwhile, we had agreed upon the most “accessible” translation we could find, per the director’s request. The translation by Paul Schmidt changes Irina’s “name day” to “birthday” and her birthday meal consists of roast turkey and apple pie, rather than the original Russian dish pirog. While I understood the desire to make the play as accessible as possible to an American audience<sup>10</sup>, I worried that we were implying that American(ized) characters and families are “universal.” I was not comfortable with this notion, and it continued to remind me that I ought to have committed to and presented my vision of the production to the director before offering the job. (In hindsight, I wonder if my assistant producer and I had unconsciously procrastinated because deep down we didn’t have full confidence in *anyone’s* supportive response to our interpretation?)

Ironically, my assistant producer and I wanted to demonstrate Chekhov’s themes of unrequited love, loss, alienation, and displacement through a mixed heritage lens because we felt that people of mixed heritage have a very deep understanding of all of those themes. We are primed to portray alienation and displacement by virtue of our life experience, thanks to the way in which people frequently react to our mixed heritage, and of course we understand love and loss because we are human. Furthermore, our lens was as valid as any other, since all of these themes *are* universal (by which I mean human) in and of themselves.

When monoracial experience is insisted upon, consciously or not, as the norm or universal for all, the insister is denying his or her fellow human beings and friends the right to claim their full experience of so-called “universal” but actually *human* themes. I feared that our director believed those themes could only be expressed with a Judeo-Christian, European American, and Midwestern viewpoint. The irony, of course, is that Chekhov did not take an American perspective in his plays. He specifically wrote about the elite of Russia, who were highly influenced by French and German cultures, but who were also quintessentially Russian in a way that existed in his lifetime. Our director’s interpretation of *Three Sisters* ended up being influenced by her own life experience as a middle-class Christian-European American. Both her vision and mine had the right to take artistic license—but I was disappointed that my vision did not hold more sway. Again, it was an invaluable lesson: I should not have attempted to reverse any portion of the roles of producer and director *after* hiring the director.

One might ask why we did not hire a Hapa director, and the answer is simple—there are so very few that we had not worked with any in Los Angeles. Hapa directors with an affinity for Chekhov are exceedingly rare in this city. On such an ambitious project, not to mention my debut as a producer, we wanted to hire someone we knew and in whose work we already had confidence. The director we hired has a great love for Chekhov and she knows how to direct a play to be dynamic, with humor and pathos—she would not make it stolid, dull, and chockfull of self-pitying characterizations, as so often happens with Chekhov’s magnificent plays. Also, she had a keen sensitivity toward the Prozorova sisters’ yearnings, which was paramount.

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<sup>10</sup> Schmidt defends his translation persuasively in his introduction to *The Plays of Anton Chekhov* (5).



Our director ultimately embraced our need to cast the family with mixed heritage actors of A/PI descent when my assistant producer was courageous enough to open her heart about what it was like to be Hapa with a European American mother in Hawai'i.<sup>11</sup> This gave me the courage to talk about the way people had assumed that I must be adopted when they saw me as a child with my own mother. These were the kinds of details we did not normally share with our monoracial friends, because we experienced rebuttals, dismissals, or sometimes the sense that we were making the listeners extremely uncomfortable. It was a relief, then, to watch the director change her point of view. As we described what we had faced—and, horrifyingly, absorbed into our own values until we could no longer bear them—she began to understand our reasons for wanting to deliberately represent Hapas onstage, and she became an ally.

### Talking about Mixed Heritage

Before our director embraced our theme, the initial tension between us mirrored my life experience. I was once told point-blank by a monoracial acquaintance that multiracial black-and-white children should not be born because it would be “cruel” to subject them to the rejection they were “bound” to receive from African Americans and European Americans. Perhaps she mistakenly thought that I would not be horrified by her statement because my ancestry has a “mix” that is different from the one in her example.<sup>12</sup>

Sometimes people would argue with me about my racial identity. My looks had changed over the years; while most casting directors and agents saw me as “ethnic,” I was unwittingly “passing” for white a great deal outside of casting offices, so some monoracial friends and acquaintances who thought I looked white felt I should also identify that way<sup>13</sup>. For instance, whenever I mentioned that it was difficult to get cast due to my mixed heritage, one monoracial friend would insist “But I think of you as *white*.” (I have repeatedly observed monoracial people’s assumption that they have “the” universal and authoritative evaluation of a multiracial person’s phenotype.)

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<sup>11</sup> Marie Murphy Hara speaks of the way in which “Hapa Haoles...were often marginalized figures with a questionable role” in Hawai'i when she was growing up (10).

<sup>12</sup> Nora Okja Keller describes a friend’s parents discussing the perceived doom of multi-ethnic children: “‘Is it fair to bring mixed-race children into the world?’ they whispered in the same tones with which they would discuss cancer” (19).

<sup>13</sup> The issue of a mixed heritage person’s morphing phenotype, which leads to her being treated differently over time, deserves study. In my case, while virtually everyone saw me as “ethnic” during my formative years, in my adulthood it is as if my childhood and adolescent selves have been erased (“whited out”), judging from the way many people react to my looks now. When I was in an all-Asian cast in a play that was mounted in a homogeneously white town several years ago, some audience members were confused and irritated by my presence. I didn’t look authentically Asian to them alongside my more phenotypically Asian cast-mates. The irony is that for the first 20-odd years of my life, every time I lived in the USA, I was frequently made to feel “other” for *not* looking European American. In my adulthood, this has flipped. Once, I was actually accused of passing, because I had not mentioned my heritage so the European American accuser assumed I was white and then blamed me for not having corrected her when I had no idea that she was making said assumption. I cannot fully describe here what it is like to be a multi-ethnic person whose looks have apparently changed so radically that people who once excluded her for being different now accuse her of a) being a poser who is trying to align herself “inauthentically” with people of color and b) trying to pass as white. Both assumptions base themselves on my being perceived as having European looks, but I’m damned either way.

Interestingly, this person stopped insisting on her interpretation after she met my Asian-European-Latino father, who provided visible proof of my heritage.

Meanwhile, monoracial people who thought I looked ethnic believed I should identify as Latina *or* Asian—usually the latter due to my Chinese surname, even though I had never been to Asia, whereas I spent much of my youth in Central America and half of my extended family (the side with the Asian heritage) lives there. Once a coworker expected me to be particularly happy when an Asian American woman won an Academy Award, because the coworker assumed that I identified exclusively as an Asian American. While I certainly was happy to see a woman of color and an Asian American win an Oscar, I did not identify with her completely. When I attempted to explain that there was more to my heritage, another coworker asked, “Then, what *are* you?” When I replied “Well, I’m several things, I’m Guatemalan and—” they looked at one another, snorted, turned on their heels, and returned to their desks. Although it may seem like a minor event, this was an experience with which I was all too familiar when it came to discussing ethnic/racial identity. Most of my monoracial acquaintances never considered the possibility that I could identify as mixed heritage, and I found it nearly impossible to make them understand that I did, due to their unwillingness to hear me out.

This issue was compounded by the fact that when my assistant producer and I began preparations for our production, we were sometimes met with an indifferent attitude from monoracial people when we told them of our theme. Mixed heritage seems to be considered a “non-issue” by two enormous camps: the very young generation that has grown up with Tiger Woods and other “out” mixed celebrities, and the middle-aged-and-up monoracial generations that have never been interested in the mixed heritage story except when it’s exploitive and/or tragic (*Imitation Of Life*, *Pinky*, etc.). Sometimes the listeners implied that they were “beyond” our theme or “post-racial.” But if they were “past race” then why were they against the idea of this casting? If you’re “post-racial” then *any* casting is acceptable, not the opposite.

### **Casting Heritage vs. Phenotype**

I must add: I did not care if the Hapa siblings looked alike when we were casting the play. I knew the mixed heritage people in the audience would be glad to see their families represented, regardless of our looks—especially since so many of us come from families in which the biological siblings don’t look alike and no one believes we’re siblings. (We may even identify differently, ethnically/racially speaking, as Maria P. P. Root affirms in her Bill of Rights for People of Mixed Heritage.) My assistant producer and I had been inspired to do the play because so many people had mistaken us for one another, so we agreed that we should play sisters someday, which led to the discovery that we both loved *Three Sisters*. The fact that we were both mixed heritage of partially A/PI descent sparked the idea for our theme. But we felt that our identities had been mistaken more due to ignorance than our actual looks. (I had a pixie cut at the time, while she has always had a waterfall of hair. We are also of noticeably different sizes.)

I believed a Hapa actress would automatically understand the mixed heritage experience in her marrow the way no monoracial person could. Meanwhile, I could count on one hand the number of times I had been called to audition for a role with an ethnic background even vaguely similar to my own. I was committed to giving the opportunity to other mixed heritage actors of A/PI descent. Happily, we had an excellent turnout of Hapa actresses at the auditions, probably because they knew it was

a unique prospect. (The actor playing our brother had been pre-cast when we committed to our concept; he was a colleague we had worked with numerous times.) As it turned out, the two people who played our siblings apparently did bear a resemblance to both of us, according to audience members. But I almost wish the four Hapa siblings had looked *nothing* alike, which would still be completely realistic. It would also teach the monoracial audience members something they might not have realized about multiracial biological families: the frequent phenotypical divergences therein.

I should mention that the other 11 roles were cast openly—two of the actors who won them were people of color while the rest were European American. Thus we did cast “colorblind” for three-quarters of the cast. And although we did not care about the race of the best actor for each of those roles, once they were cast, we did not expect the audience to look past their colors. In the world we created, there was more ethnic diversity than in Chekhov’s social circle—so in our show, mixed heritage stood out from monoracial diversity. I am pleased that over one-third of all the characters were played by people of color in our production of this modern classic play that was originally written for a white cast.

### **Design and Interpretation: Rehearsal Period, or Representing Hapa**

Although the issue of casting was a hurdle we overcame, my assistant producer and I realized we would still need to educate our director in order for her to fulfill our vision of a mixed heritage *interpretation* of the play. By interpretation I mean: 1) the design elements, and 2) the choices the actors made while playing their roles.

We determined that the Prozorovs’ father had been a white (Slav) Russian and their mother had been Russian of fully Chinese descent. In the director’s attempt to incorporate our theme and keep the budget low, at one point she expressed a desire to show the characters eating their supper while kneeling on the floor. I explained that I was not certain if anyone Chinese or of Chinese descent would have done this in a modern family in 1900—to my own limited knowledge, she was describing an old Japanese custom. I declared that I refused to produce a false, “pan-Asian, Disneyfied, Oriental-ish” version of *Three Sisters*. We knew the siblings’ maternal grandparents were Chinese and therefore anything Asian they inherited had to be specifically from China. Eventually the director conceded my point, because she understood that specificity is always a boon to any theatrical production. She would never have pushed for a “pan-European, Occidental-ish” interpretation if we had decided to make the siblings’ mother Italian. She knew that European nations are not interchangeable, and the same is true of Asian nations (and all nations).

Fortunately for us, our brilliant set designer was able to find numerous set pieces and props that were in the Chinese style—without going over our budget—thanks to her connections at East West Players, one of the nation’s premier Asian American theatre companies. By sheer coincidence, she is also Hapa, so I did not have to over-explain the reasons for our Hapa theme. She designed a lovely, evocative set that was nuanced with Chinese and Russian elements. Also, my assistant producer and I brought various Chinese pieces from our homes to help decorate the set. They were small but they made all the difference to us.

One of the ways in which the director and I agreed to take artistic license was in translating some of the text into Mandarin. When the Doctor speaks a few words in

French in Act II, we had him speak in Mandarin instead. Although his character was not Hapa in our production, we felt he would have learned a few Mandarin words from the siblings' mother, since he was a very old friend of the family and had been in love with her. We also translated part of the song Masha sings throughout the play into Mandarin. "Beside the sea there stands a tree, and on that tree a golden chain...and on that chain an educated cat goes around and around and around" became "*Zhai hai de ne bian, yo yi ke shu*, and on that tree a *jin shiang-lian*...and on that chain an educated *mao* goes around and around and around." The idea was that the siblings' mother had sung them the song as a lullaby, and had used it to teach them some Mandarin. (The concept came from my life experience with my bilingual Spanish-English speaking father.) I listened to numerous classic Mandarin songs in order to create a melody that would sound similar and authentic without being an exact copy of any of the originals. Our superb sound designer incorporated the melody into the production's sound design, so it played during the transition between Acts I and II of the four-act play. The designer used his technical wizardry to make it sound like the melody was being played by Chinese wind instruments like the *xindi*. This was one way in which my vision for a Hapa interpretation was fully realized.

Nonetheless, although we spoke to the cast about the mixed heritage theme at the first table reading so that everyone would understand our interpretation, I found it difficult to broach the subject with the monoracial cast members after that, due to my uncomfortable life experiences and the intense discussions I had already had with our director. I was leery of having to defend the concept yet again. But no one in the cast questioned or argued with me about it when I mentioned it at the table reading, so I probably could have explained my reasons for the theme much more than I did after that. This group of people was on for the ride. Sadly, I was unable to garner enough confidence to talk to them about it more. Years of conditioning were too hard to break in that respect. I was brave enough to introduce the Hapa theme in the production but too apprehensive (and perhaps too tired) to talk about it regularly with most of my cast. A strange paradox.

### **Masha and Me**

Meanwhile, the practical responsibilities of producing were so overwhelming that I could not keep a sharp eye on the theme as we rehearsed. In the 99-seat theatre world, the producer usually has to take on jobs that others would do on a production with a higher budget. In my case, I had more tasks than I could possibly list here. During the rehearsal period, they included securing costumes and props for 15 characters from multiple sources; interviewing potential stage managers when the original stage manager had to pull out right before rehearsals began; organizing the mass mailing of postcards to approximately 3,000 recipients; marketing the show incessantly by email; hand-delivering postcards to theatre departments of different universities around L.A. County; selling ads for the program; assisting with set construction; assisting with the lighting set-up; and so much more that I subsisted on four hours of sleep each night. Due to my countless duties as producer, I could only keep an eye on the Hapa theme for myself as an actor, and even then I did not do it as much as I had intended. Throughout the play, characters make statements that could be applied to the mixed heritage experience. For instance, when Masha says "But most people in this town are so vulgar, so unpleasant, so stupid...I get physically sick when I see someone who lacks finesse, who lacks kindness and gentleness," it was easy to

interpret that as a mixed heritage woman talking about a homogeneous monoracial town in Russia. The paradox between my experience and Masha's is that she is an educated woman from a formerly wealthy family, speaking negatively of the uneducated, poor locals, whereas I experienced most prejudice and unpleasantness from the rich, "educated" kids at my schools in the USA.

Masha says, "Their behavior is insulting; it's painful to see people so uncaring," when she speaks of the townspeople. She could be speaking not only of their general coarseness but also of their prejudice toward her and her siblings. That prejudice could have been experienced in various ways. The townsfolk may have flung racial slurs at the Prozorovs (similar to what is happening now in Russia to people who look "other").<sup>14</sup> On the other end of the spectrum of prejudice, the townspeople and soldiers might want to socialize with the siblings only if the siblings never mention their mixed heritage. A dismissal or "censorship" of her heritage could be as painful to Masha as a verbal insult to it, even if she were accustomed to either treatment. This sort of choice and direction could have informed my interpretation of the role and thus the message of the play.

I subtly imbued the words with the subtext above, but I was not brave enough to do it in a blatant manner, because I felt so out on a limb already. Toward the end of the rehearsal period, the director began to appreciate how much of the dialogue about alienation and displacement could be interpreted in the context of the mixed-heritage experience, particularly in 1900 Russia. But by the time she noticed all of the opportunities to use such subtext, we were close to the last week of rehearsal. By then I had mourned the idea of interpreting many lines with an obviously mixed heritage perspective, and let the concept go, for the most part. To bring it back so late in the game would have required a flexibility I did not have. It was frustrating to receive full support for a mixed heritage interpretation after I had almost entirely given it up as an actor and was exhausted by my duties as producer. I am glad that at least the family was Hapa, and the set, costumes, and props reflected the siblings' heritage.

I did manage to imbue one recurring bit of dialogue with a plainly intercultural perspective: the song Masha sings, mentioned earlier. When she first sings it in Act I, she stops suddenly and says, "Why do I keep saying that? I can't get it out of my head." In our production, the actor playing Masha's husband would stand and glare at me disapprovingly when I sang the song. The idea was that Masha's husband, who was white, had no interest in her Chinese heritage and did not like to hear her make any reference to it—nor did he like her to "act out" in any way. Later in the play, in the last act, after Masha's lover has left her, she sings the song again while having a nervous breakdown. At this point, when she stops and asks "What does that mean, 'beside the sea...?'" we kept the Mandarin translation. So when I asked "What does that mean, 'zhai hai de ne bian, ...?'" my Masha was deeply frustrated from not understanding the Mandarin her mother taught her, which was part of Masha's breakdown. In our production, Irina would hold Masha's hands and try to calm her, but could not answer the question and console Masha because we had decided that while Olga and Masha could speak a little Mandarin, Irina as the youngest sibling only knew a word or two. We hoped this mixed heritage and cross-cultural reading lent an added poignancy to the scene.

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<sup>14</sup> Patrick Jackson's article "Living with Hate Race in Russia" describes the rise in race-based hate crimes in Russia, particularly toward black African students, since the fall of the USSR.

## Critical and Public Response

After we opened, word of mouth was good and we got mostly excellent reviews. Nonetheless, one of the critics stated that we didn't push the Hapa theme enough, that it was "just" in the casting and set design (and the latter only minimally). We had mentioned that the play would be interpreted with a new "ethnic nuance" in the press release. However, we did not bow and wear cheongsams and speak whole monologues in Mandarin (which would not have been realistic), nor did we have Chinese lion statues and scrolls on the set, nor did we point virtual neon arrows at all the lines of dialogue that could allude to our mixed heritage. So we were criticized by that reviewer because he wanted to glean more than he did. This contradicted our original fear that people would find our vision "forced." In fact, the reviewer wanted us to educate him in a more apparent manner, which was frustrating for contrasting reasons:

- he did not notice the Chinese-influenced sound design nor the Mandarin that was spoken and sung, and the numerous small but meaningful Chinese props on stage;
- I had only partially committed to interpreting Masha through a clearly mixed heritage lens, so I feared the review was partially valid, and I blamed myself. (An argument could be made that a mixed heritage actor always brings a mixed heritage perspective to a role because of who s/he is, but making this perspective apparent to audience members is another story.)

While it chafed me to think that the reviewer wanted something stereotypical, perhaps he would have noticed more if I had been more courageous in the way that I played my character. I will never know if he would have gleaned what I was doing in that case, or if he would only have discerned the most blatant (and, in my opinion, inaccurate) portrayal of a multiracial story.<sup>15</sup>

I do wish I had had the energy and will to reinterpret my character when our director gave me the freedom to do so. On the other hand, I also like the fact that the theme was implied rather than spotlit, because the people who actually saw and "felt" the Hapa theme were its intended audience: Hapas, mixed heritage people, and Chinese Americans. Those were the people who mentioned it to me and were very positive about it. Also, the broad response to the show was enthusiastic. I had fulfilled my intention to some degree.

Our director did her job superbly in spite of learning about our vision after she was hired. From her perspective, she must have felt that we had surprised her with something she was not initially equipped or willing to handle, but she did ultimately embrace it. She also demanded an active, dynamic portrayal of every character. There were times in rehearsal when I fell into the trap of playing Masha with self-pity. I am sure this was partially due to my own beleaguered feelings as producer as well as my feelings around being mixed heritage in a monoracist world. I am forever grateful to our director for strongly discouraging that tendency in my Masha, because it improved

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<sup>15</sup> Mine was not the first nontraditionally cast production (of a play written for white actors) to draw criticism for not having been more obviously cross-cultural. East West Players (who generously loaned us many set pieces) has come under similar criticism in the past—the implication often being that American theatre-makers of color are *expected* to educate and to highlight their differences from the European American majority in order to "'justify' the presence of non-white actors" (Pao 132). I consider this to be racist. The theatre-maker has the right to determine her/his interpretation, cross-cultural or not, regardless of the cast's color(s).

both my performance and my real-life approach to difficult situations. I am more likely to stand my ground instead of walking away resignedly. In this way art influenced life, and I have our director to thank.

The point of my assistant producer's and my vision, along with its purposes of activism and education, was to give mixed heritage audience members an opportunity to *empathize*, to be *moved*, in a way that was intended specifically for them. I got a taste of what that audience may have experienced the night I saw the play when my fearless understudy went on, with the portraits of the siblings' parents on the piano. I felt validated on a molecular level and I would find out over time that I was not alone. It is not a bad thing that the production was groundbreaking in this way, though it may be a sad thing that it was such a long time in coming.

I will always be proud of that show and grateful to everyone involved, including the countless monoracial people who worked tremendously hard on the production or came to see it. I did not do the show specifically for them, and I am glad that they understood and supported us anyway. If they left the show with a new understanding that a mixed heritage story is recognizably human and simultaneously unique; that there is no good reason to exclude people of color from playing great roles that were originally meant for white actors; and that multiracial families deserve to be represented on stage, then I am glad to have helped in teaching that lesson while providing entertainment.

It is also important for theatre-makers to know that there is a larger audience for this kind of production than they may have realized (certainly more than I realized—I was relieved and gladdened that the houses kept growing and the production broke even, which is successful for a period piece with 15 actors in the 99-seat theatre world). There is great potential for similarly themed productions of modern classics, and I would urge producers of those shows to fully commit to their vision. Seven years have passed since we mounted *Three Sisters* in Burbank, and in that time, dialogue about the multiracial experience has exploded across academia and the media.<sup>16</sup> It is much more common now to discuss multiracial issues, so perhaps a producer-actor today would have more courage than I did. But if future theatre-makers face challenges similar to mine, I urge those who want to interpret popular classics through a mixed heritage lens to not be defeated by dismissal, but to *press on* and make themselves heard.

Producing a Hapa-themed *Three Sisters* taught me a great deal about how and how not to educate people about the mixed heritage experience. It was one of the greatest lessons I have learned as a mixed heritage person and theatre artist.

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<sup>16</sup> Indeed, the three actresses who played the sisters in my production are now co-hosts of a podcast about the multi-ethnic experience, "Hapa Happy Hour," which was launched in 2008.

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