The Eyes Have It

Marc Oka’s future lies in his past

February 1, 1997 By Michael Adams

Several years ago, the casting of Caucasian actor Jonathan Pryce to play a Eurasian in *Miss Saigon* caused a notorious dust-up among theater folk and activists. Battle lines were drawn between those who felt the role should go to a member of the woefully underemployed Asian acting community, and others who felt these “pc” objections underestimated the power of theatrical magic to transcend reality.

Marc Oka, a Japanese-American dancer in the show, didn’t disapprove of Pryce’s casting, merely of the idea that the star might wear prosthetic eyes and yellow make-up. “It would have been like putting on blackface,” he says.

Eventually the flap subsided and Pryce went on -- without the cosmetics. Since then, Oka -- now assistant to the choreographer -- has had a hand in seeing that every Asian role in the show has gone to an Asian performer.

Oka’s pride in the accomplishment takes on a far greater resonance when seen in light of his childhood: “All I wanted then,” he says, “was to be white.”

His parents were born in Northern California, and both were sent to Japan as teenagers by their families. They were safely ensconced there during World War II, while their relatives in the United States were forced into internment camps. After the war, Oka’s parents settled in Los Angeles, where they married and raised their son. “There’s so much of their past they won’t talk about,” he says. “I don’t even know how they met.”

Oka calls their reserve “very Japanese: It was all about sublimating feelings, putting up a front.” He regarded the families of his non-Asian friends with melancholy envy: “The parents talked to their children, laughed, asked how their day had been. They touched them.”

Oka’s mother and father recoiled when he told them he was gay, at age 20. “I’ll never forget the first time my mother suspected. She was chopping vegetables so furiously and crying that she should be put away for being such a bad mother. I’d never seen her cry before.”

And when he decided to become a performer, they cut off financial support. “Asians don’t make it in show business,” they said.

Haunted by their words, Oka was determined to sing, dance and act better than anyone else. Yet even a steady string of jobs in commercials and musicals was no balm to his gnawing self-hatred: “I despised the way I looked.”

It wasn’t until he moved to New York City and was cast in the kind of show he had once reviled (a revival of *Chu Chem*, billed as “the first Chinese-Jewish musical”) that he began to embrace his culture. “I was in a company that looked like me, felt like me, shared my experiences. It was a family.”

Being in *Miss Saigon* helped strengthen his identity. “I benefited by not being Caucasian,” he says. “Creative [read: color-blind] casting is flourishing. I’ve felt more racism on the streets of New York than I ever felt in the theater.”

But two years into *Miss Saigon*’s run, Oka learned he was HIV positive. The news threw him into a massive depression, compounded by drugs and alcohol. “I’ve never felt so alone,” he says.

A few years later, while he was in rehab and in the presence of a therapist, Oka shared his HIV diagnosis with his parents. “It was terrible. The four of us in this room. My father sat stone-faced. My mother just cried.”

Oka, at 33, is now heading toward his third year of sobriety and continues the intersecting journeys of living with HIV and embracing his ethnic heritage. He’s begun to reach out to other Asians with HIV and to find solace from Shinto, the native religion of Japan.

Of his parents, he says, “They’re giving as much as they can give. My father’s informing himself about HIV. He’s coming to terms with [my boyfriend] Jamie. I’m beginning to see his incredible wisdom and serenity.”

And his mom? “That’s harder. She still doesn’t talk to me about AIDS.” But he cherishes a gift she made for him -- a framed sculpture of two cranes in nimble flight. Each bird is formed of hundreds of tiny, individual gold and silver origami cranes. “It’s so beautiful,” he says. “It’s a work of art -- Japanese art.” Just like Mark Oka, a work of beautiful Japanese art.

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