February 2, 2017

Lewis Center for the Arts’ Program in Theater presents Charles Francis Chan Jr.’s Exotic Oriental Murder Mystery by Lloyd Suh

_Play that satirically challenges racial stereotypes is directed by faculty member Peter Kim and features senior Kathy Zhao at Princeton University_

Photo caption: Freshman Tri Le (left) as Frank and senior Kathy Zhao (right) as Kathy in rehearsal for Charles Francis Chan Jr.’s Exotic Oriental Murder Mystery to be presented at Princeton University’s Lewis Center for the Arts, directed by faculty member Peter Kim

Photo credit: Justin Goldberg

What: Charles Francis Chan, Jr.’s Exotic Oriental Murder Mystery by Lloyd Suh, a satirical fantasia on Asian America which comically challenges racial stereotypes.
Who: Presented by Lewis Center for the Arts’ Program in Theater, directed by faculty member Peter Kim and featuring Princeton senior Kathy Zhao

When: February 10, 11, 16, 17, and 18 at 8 p.m. with a symposium about Asian American artists and representation of Asian Americans in theater in collaboration with East West Theater on February 11 at 2 p.m. The February 17 performance will be American Sign Language-interpreted.

Where: Marie and Edward Matthews ’53 Acting Studio at 185 Nassau St. in Princeton

Tickets: $12 general/$11 students & seniors when purchased in advance; $17 general/$15 students & seniors on the day of the performance or at the door

(Princeton, NJ) The Lewis Center for the Arts’ Program in Theater at Princeton University will present Charles Francis Chan, Jr.’s Exotic Oriental Murder Mystery by Lloyd Suh, directed by faculty member Peter Kim and featuring senior Kathy Zhao, on February 10, 11, 16, 17, and 18 at 8:00 p.m. Performances will take place in the Marie and Edward Matthews ’53 Acting Studio located at 185 Nassau Street in Princeton. The February 17 performance will be American Sign Language-interpreted. A symposium presented in collaboration with the student theater group East West Theater Company will precede the February 11 performance, beginning at 2:00 p.m. in the Matthews Acting Studio.

A play-within-a-play, Charles Francis Chan, Jr.’s Exotic Oriental Murder Mystery satirically and comically challenges racial stereotyping. The play is primarily set in 1967 during the Vietnam War and civil rights movement, when the term “Asian American” first emerged to replace the offensive, previously used term “Oriental” to refer to people of Asian heritage. It follows Frank Chan, recently flunked out of college and vulnerable to the draft and deployment to Vietnam, as he struggles with his newly found Asian American identity. With the help of his new wife, his ex-girlfriend, his draft sergeant, his brother, and an imaginary Monkey, he sets out to write a play in defense of this new ethnic designation. Chan is inspired by Agatha Christie’s murder mystery The Mysterious Affair at Styles and combines aspects of slapstick, vaudeville and sketch comedy to make fundamental and meaningful points on racial and sociopolitical stereotypes.
The play was commissioned by the National Asian American Theatre Company (NAATCO), a New York City-based nonprofit theater company whose mission is to assert the presence and significance of Asian American theater in the United States. One way it achieves this is by commissioning Asian American writers to adapt Western and European classics. NAATCO produced the world premiere of the play Off-Broadway in October of 2015. Kim serves as Associate Producer for the company and has developed and appeared in several of Suh’s plays.

Zhao, an English major from East Brunswick, New Jersey, pursuing certificates in theater and music theater, knew she wanted to propose a play about the Asian American experience as her senior thesis in theater for two reasons. A play reflecting this community had not been done since she arrived at Princeton, and she has had eye-opening experiences auditioning and performing as an Asian American actor. When auditioning, she often felt that her appearance added another layer of consideration or consternation for directors. In the Program in Theater's 2015 production of Zoyka's Apartment she was cast as Gandzalin, a Chinese opium dealer who runs a laundry and speaks broken English and is written as a very negative stereotypical character. She struggled with a role that so obviously violated her beliefs of how wrong it was to reduce her own cultural background to a stereotype. Ultimately, working with the show's director, the character was made less of the stereotype written. For her senior thesis she looked for a play that challenged racism and portrayed the Asian American experience. She wrote to playwright Mike Lew about his new play, Tiger Style!, but because it was going to be produced professionally, it was not available. Lew's agent suggested she look at the work of Suh, which led to Zhao reading Chan. She portrays the character Kathy, a performance artist struggling to effect positive change in the world through her art.

Zhao is an active member of the University’s theater community. In addition to her role in Zoyka’s Apartment, she was in a Princeton Atelier course that culminated in the world premiere of Act IV of Fred Ho’s action-adventure martial arts musical fantasy Journey
Beyond the West: The New Adventures of Monkey (a character that factors into Chan), and in productions with Princeton Shakespeare Company. After taking Brian Herrera’s course “Movements for Diversity in American Theater,” she began to work towards greater diversity in the theater community at Princeton. She led a group of students to found Princeton’s first Asian American theater company, East West Theater, which is committed to increasing the representation of Asian Americans on the stage, representing the diversity of all experiences, and welcoming newcomers to theater. She also serves as a Lewis Center Peer Arts Mentor, mentoring students from underrepresented backgrounds about pursuing the arts at Princeton.

Zhao arrived at Princeton planning to major in pre-med and took geoscience and chemistry classes. She was heavily involved in science clubs in middle and high school and had been discouraged from pursuing the arts by cultural pressures. However, she took two theater courses her sophomore year, "Developing the Multi-skilled Performer,” taught by John Doyle and "Beginning Studies in Acting” taught by Tracy Bersley, and decided theater would be her focus, going on to taking courses in playwriting and musical theater writing. For her combined English and music theater thesis, she is writing the book and lyrics for a new musical play about an Asian American student who is torn between art and medicine and finds inspiration in figures from Asian American history, and is currently working with a composer on the music.

A lecturer in theater at Princeton, Kim is also an actor, producer and activist in New York City. He notes that as a professional actor he has had similar experiences to Zhao and to the characters in the play, which he describes as a funny, entertaining, biting satire that includes both Yellowface and Whiteface. Kim has appeared on Broadway, Off-Broadway with Playwrights Horizons, Second Stage, Signature Theatre, Public Theater, Play Company, Ma-Yi, NAATCO, and Ensemble Studio Theatre, as well as regionally and in television, film, and commercials. He is a steering committee member of the Asian American Performers Action Coalition (AAPCAC) and the co-creator of the critically
acclaimed Off-Broadway comedy, SIDES: The Fear is Real... He holds an M.F.A. in Acting from the Yale School of Drama, a B.F.A. from New York University, and is the recipient of the Lilah Kan Red Socks Award.

Suh has also authored the plays American Hwangap, The Wong Kids in the Secret of the Space Chupacabra Go!, Jesus in India, Great Wall Story, The Children of Vonderly, and Masha No Home, which have been published by Samuel French, Playscripts, Smith & Kraus, Duke University Press, and American Theater magazine. A member of Ensemble Studio Theatre and The Actors Studio, Suh is an alumnus of Youngblood and the Soho Rep Writer Director Lab, and from 2005 to 2010 served as Artistic Director of Second Generation and Co-Director of the Ma-Yi Writers Lab. He has been the director of artistic programs at The Lark since 2011.

The cast also includes Ross Barron ‘17, Tri Le ‘20, Changshuo Liu ‘19, Carl Sun ‘20, and Nancy Xiao ‘17, and the production features set design by Casey Ivanovich ‘17, costume design by Julia Peiperl ‘17, lighting design by Hannah Yang ’17, sound design by Njuguna Thande ‘19, and original music by Vince di Mura, Resident Musical Director and Composer of the Lewis Center for the Arts.

The symposium on February 11 from 2:00 to 6:00 p.m., presented by East West Theater Company with support of the Lewis Center and the Program in American Studies, will feature playwright Suh; dramaturg, designer and theater scholar Christine Mok; actor and writer Erin Quill; and director Kim, moderated by Program in Theater Assistant Professor Brian Eugenio Herrera. Panel discussions will include theater activism and performance in relation to Asian American identity and the visibility of Asian American artists. There will also be a student-centered discussion by those involved in the production.

Tickets for Charles Francis Chan, Jr.’s Exotic Oriental Murder Mystery are $12 general admission and $11 for students and seniors when purchased in advance, and $17 general admission and $15 for students and seniors purchased the day of performances at the box
office. Tickets are available through University Ticketing, which offers online ordering and print-at-home tickets. To purchase tickets online visit http://arts.princeton.edu/events/charles-francis-chan-jr-s-exotic-oriental-murder-mystery/2017-02-10/ or call Princeton University Ticketing at 609.258.9220, or stop by the Frist Campus Center Ticket Office. Tickets will also be available at the door prior to performances.

To learn more about this event, the Program in Theater, and the more than 100 other activities presented at the Lewis Center visit arts.princeton.edu.

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