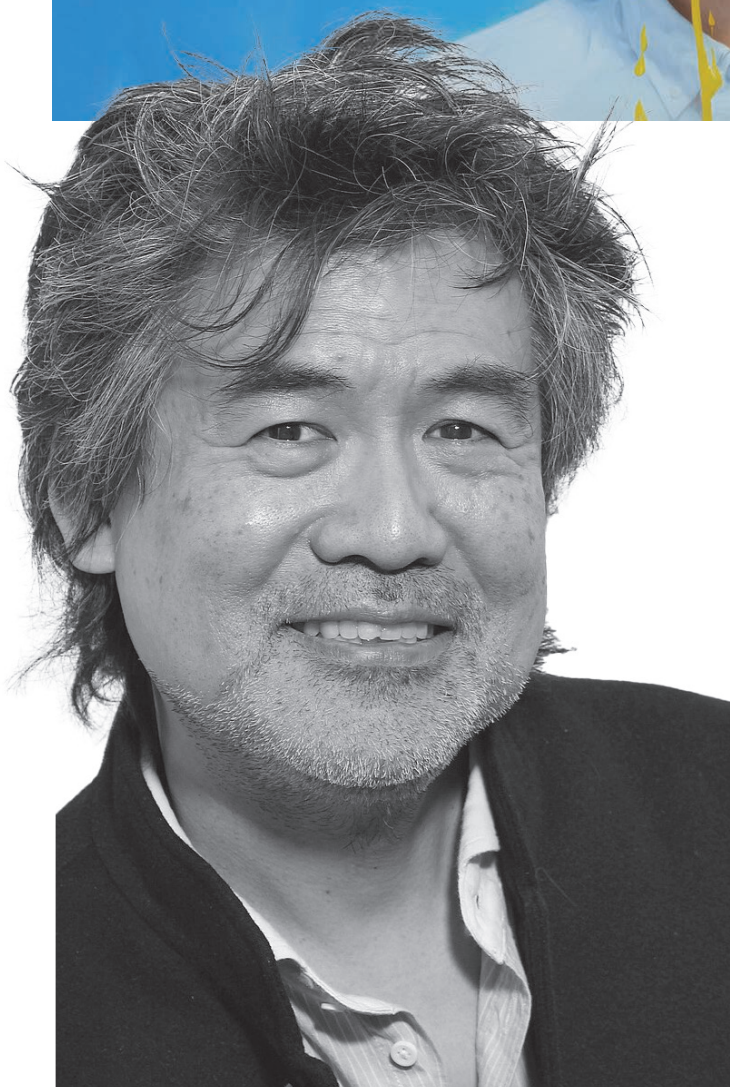




Study Guide 2026

Oregon Shakespeare Festival



About the Author:

David Henry Hwang (b. 1957)

- David Henry Hwang is an acclaimed American playwright, librettist, screenwriter, and professor of theatre. He was born and raised in Los Angeles and currently teaches playwriting at Columbia University.
- In addition to attending the Yale School of Drama, Hwang studied playwriting under Sam Shepard and María Irene Fornes.
- Hwang is best known for *M. Butterfly*, which won the Tony Award for Best Play and was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize. His other notable works include *FOB*, *Golden Child*, *Flower Drum Song*, and *Yellow Face*.
- Hwang has also written for opera and musical theatre, collaborating with composers such as Philip Glass, Elton John, and Jeanine Tesori.
- In a profile for *The New Yorker*, theatre critic Hilton Als described Hwang as “the most successful Chinese American playwright this country has produced.”

David Henry Hwang. Photo by Lia Chang. Wikimedia

The Context: A Tumultuous Broadway Transfer for Miss Saigon

In 1990, after an immensely successful run in London's West End, the musical *Miss Saigon* prepared for a Broadway transfer that garnered a record-breaking \$25 million in advance ticket sales. The move was driven by Cameron Mackintosh, the producer behind multiple smash hit musicals including *The Phantom of the Opera* and *Les Misérables*. However, the production's transfer was riddled with casting controversies that would later inform David Henry Hwang's *Face Value*, the play-within-a-play at the center of *Yellow Face*.



The most visible controversy surrounding *Miss Saigon* involved the casting of Jonathan Pryce, a white British actor, as the Engineer, a Eurasian character who is both French and Vietnamese. Even more outrageous was the bronzing cream and eye prosthetics used to racialize Pryce as East Asian, prompting widespread protest from Asian American artists. Pryce, they argued, was engaging in yellowface: the practice of non-Asian performers portraying Asian characters through exaggerated makeup, prosthetics, costuming, and accents. Such casting not only excluded Asian actors from performing in major roles depicting Asian characters but also perpetuated reductive and stereotypical representations.

David Henry Hwang, the newly minted Tony Award winner for *M. Butterfly*, emerged as one of the most vocal opponents of Pryce's casting. Alongside actor B.D. Wong, Hwang published letters condemning the decision, which ultimately led to the Actors' Equity Association (AEA) blocking Pryce's casting altogether. Although the AEA later reversed its decision under pressure from the show's producers, the controversy ignited a national debate about racial authenticity in casting. It also galvanized Asian American theatre activism, drawing attention to casting inequities and raising enduring questions about the politics of racial representation onstage.

David Henry Hwang's Artistic Response to the *Miss Saigon* Controversy

With 1998's *M. Butterfly*, David Henry Hwang had become the first Asian American playwright to win a Tony award. Just a few years later, his second play, *Face Value*, premiered on Broadway in 1993. Hwang wrote *Face Value* in direct response to the *Miss Saigon* controversy; the play centers around a white actor who is cast in an Asian role. Hwang described it as a "comedy of mistaken racial identity," written to address the marginalization of Asian American actors and the long history of yellowface casting. In deliberately portraying racially "inappropriate" casting onstage, Hwang inverted these histories and complicated contemporary perspectives on race-based casting.

"With theatre, we agree to suspend our disbelief about so many things but not about race. It's totally OK to have one actor playing five roles—people are willing to believe that but they won't believe it if there's a Black or an Asian kid who has White parents. What does that say about us?"

—David Henry Hwang in *Chicago Magazine*

However, in a Broadway culture that is often hostile to overtly experimental satire, *Face Value* was met with such an overwhelmingly negative critical reception that it closed during previews. In retrospect, however, the play is discussed less as a failed comedy and more as a pivotal moment in Asian American theatre history. It encouraged conversations about representation and yellowface and later became a central part of Hwang's *Yellow Face*. Premiering in 2007 at The Public Theater in New York City, *Yellow Face* similarly uses satire and metatheatricality to interrogate race, incorporating *Face Value* into its commentary. Reflecting on the trajectory of *Face Value*, Hwang remarked in an interview with Alison Stewart of WNYC that "after 20 years, the story has a happy ending."



Protest against violence attacks targeting Asian Americans in March 2021 in Washington, D.C.. Photo by Elvert Barnes. Wikimedia.

Before seeing/reading the play:

1. Take a look at the 2021-2022 Visibility Report created by the Asian American Performers Action Coalition. What statistics or findings stand out to you most, and why? How do these numbers shape or challenge your understanding of Asian American representation in American theatre? This and other websites provide information: <http://www.aapacnyc.org/2021-2022.html>



Ethnic Dong women. Jialiang Gao, www.peace-on-earth.org. wikimedia.org

2. Research Amy Tan's visit to the village of Dimen to learn about Dong culture. Who are the Dong people, and what role does music, particularly the Grand Song, play in their culture? How has tourism affected Dong cultural traditions, both positively and negatively? The following websites include Amy Tan's interview with NPR, as well as a video about the Grand Song: <https://www.npr.org/2008/04/25/89943080/amy-tan-reveals-stories-of-dong-folk-songs> https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ywFJQQ_azyQ
3. Research the 1996 U.S. campaign finance controversy. Why were Asian Americans disproportionately targeted during this investigation? These and other websites provide information: <https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/law/campaign-finance-scandal-1996> <https://www.nytimes.com/1999/09/22/us/for-asian-americans-a-new-political-resolve.html>
4. Research Wen Ho Lee, the Taiwanese American scientist who is mentioned in *Yellow Face*. Who was he, and what occurred during the FBI investigation of him? What connections do you see between this case and the campaign finance controversies? This and other websites provide information: <https://medium.com/advancing-justice-aajc/21-years-after-the-arrest-of-dr-6098b921589a>

5. What role did the U.S. government play in projecting suspicion toward Asian Americans during the campaign finance controversies? Refer to this report by the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights. This and other websites provide information: <https://www.usccr.gov/files/historical/1998/g8-016.pdf>
6. *Yellow Face* is a semi-autobiographical play that examines racial representation for Asian performers through a blend of satire and memoir. Research the history of satire. What are the key characteristics of satire? Why can satire be an especially powerful or effective way to tell stories about race? Can you think of other examples of satire from politics, media, or popular culture? These and other websites provide information: <https://www.britannica.com/art/satire> <https://www.outofjoint.co.uk/production/from-horace-to-the-onion-a-history-of-satire/>
7. Research the history of yellowface in Western theatre as explained by scholar Esther Kim Lee. What is yellowface? When and why did it begin? In what ways does yellowface (or its legacy) still appear in theatre, film, or media today? This and other websites provide information: <https://history.duke.edu/news/esther-kim-lee-explains-how-todays-racism-has-roots-last-centurys-yellowface>
8. *Yellow Face* examines the intersection between racial identity and theatrical performance. How do you think racial or cultural identity is "performed"? In what ways do people perform identity in everyday life? Use the following articles in your research: <https://www.pbs.org/wnet/chasing-the-dream/2023/06/elevating-blackness-and-ethnic-representation-in-theater/> <https://www.roundabouttheatre.org/get-tickets/upstage-guides-current/1776/spotlight-on-7>
9. What is "Americanization"? Why have some immigrants to the U.S. embraced the idea of assimilation while others reject it? These and other websites provide information: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Americanization_\(immigration\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Americanization_(immigration)) https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cultural_assimilation <https://denso.org/catalyst/asian-american-movement/> <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/31/opinion/culture/asian-american-AAPI-decolonization.html>
10. Research the history of the #StopAsianHate movement. How did it begin? How has anti-Asian racism evolved in the United States? How do organizations like Stop AAPI Hate use data to raise awareness and/or affect legislation? This and other websites provide information: <https://stopaapihate.org/our-origins/> <https://exhibits.stanford.edu/riseup/feature/time-line-of-systemic-racism-against-aapi> <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC9168424/>

After seeing/reading the play:

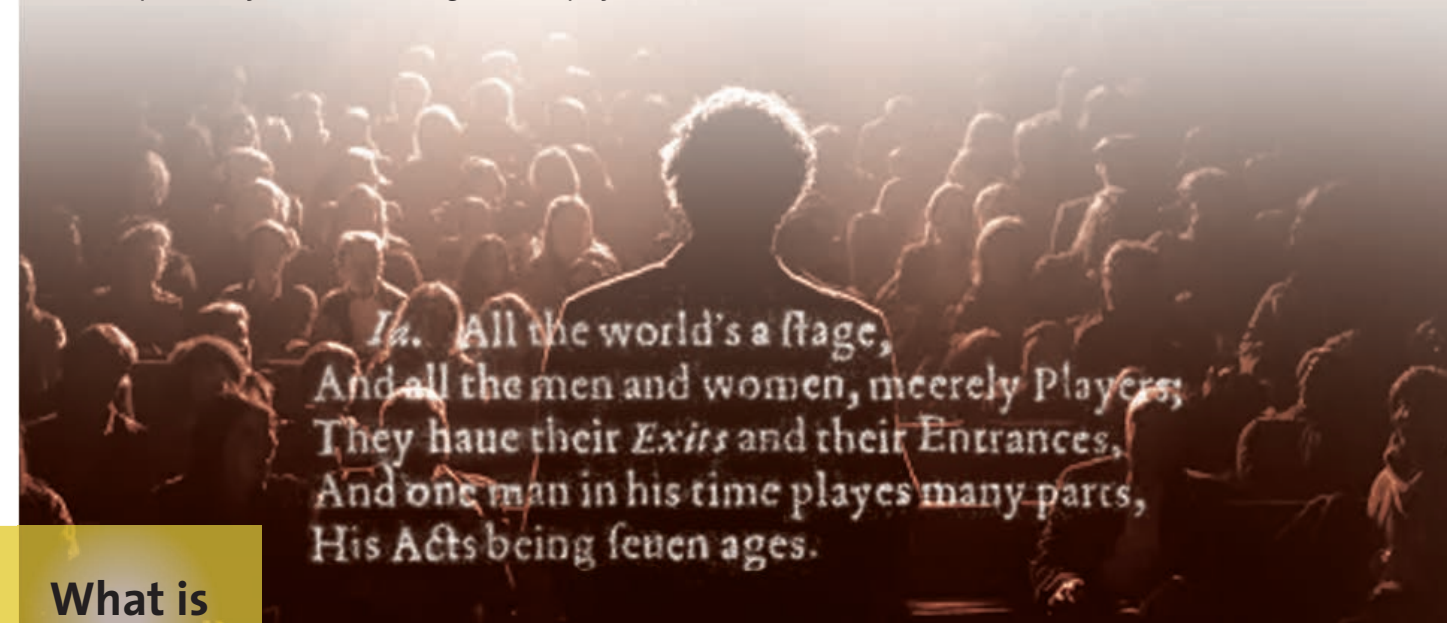
1. Refer to your research on yellowface and satire. What is yellowface? What is the significance of the title of the play? In what ways is this play a satire?
2. How does the Actor's Equity Union initially respond to the casting controversy surrounding *Miss Saigon*? What factors lead to a reversal? Why do they ultimately reverse their stance?
3. Think about the play's depiction of DHH's (David Henry Hwang) relationship with his father, HYH. What does HYH's story about "real life" in America reveal about his experience with immigration and assimilation? What is HYH looking for in his life in America? What is he hoping for his son's life in America?
4. Several Asian characters talk about being American and that they will always be perceived as a foreigner by other Americans. What harm is caused by asking "Where are you really from?" What is the difference between being Chinese and Chinese American? What responsibility does DHH feel toward the Chinese American community to speak out on their behalf? How does this responsibility drive him throughout the play?

5. Why does DHH decide to equivocate about Marcus's racial background at the Asian American Resource Center event? In what ways does he speak the truth? In what ways does he not speak the truth? Why does Marcus choose to go along with this deception?

"Paradoxically, success shouldn't be your goal. Career success is the icing on the cake, not the cake itself."

- David Henry Hwang

6. In a tense conversation with Leah, DHH suggests that Marcus is drawn to her for a "diabolical" reason. What is DHH implying, and why might he be suspicious of Marcus and Leah's relationship?
7. Discuss whether Marcus is aware, at first, that he has been cast as an Asian in *Face Value*. Once it is clear that he knows, why does he continue to allow people to believe he is Asian? Why doesn't he tell Leah the truth? What does he find in the Asian community?



What is metatheatre?

Playwrights and directors sometimes look for ways to interact with the audience directly by referring to the theatrical event as part of the performance. Whether bringing attention to the theatre space, a character, or referring to performance in the text, this kind of interaction is referred to as "metatheatre."

Common devices include an actor speaking to audience members as though they were in conversation, sometimes called "breaking the fourth wall," which removes the imaginary separation between performance and audience. For example, many soliloquies/monologues are staged as though spoken to the audience.

The play's language may also refer to the devices of theatre, including acknowledging that actors are presenting characters or that the action is taking place in a performance venue. Metatheatricality can be found in Ancient Greek and Roman plays and in Shakespeare too. The famous line from *As You Like It*: "All the world's a stage..." is considered metatheatrical as it refers to theatre and performance in the dialogue.

8. During a montage of reviews for his new play, *Face Value*, DHH asks, "Is race a construct which is still useful, or is it mythological?" Reflect on this question. What does DHH mean when he calls race a "construct?" How can race function as a "useful" concept, especially in a theatrical context? How do you understand the term "mythological" in this context?
9. How do celebrity voices and media soundbites influence public discourse within the play? How do these media fragments function as a storytelling device?
10. Of the concept of "face," Marcus says, "the face we choose to show the world reveals who we really are." If this is accurate, what face has Marcus chosen to show the world, and what does it reveal about who he really is? What face has DHH shown, and what does it reveal? What face, if any, has HYH shown?
11. Think about the character of DHH. What are his flaws? What is he struggling with? How does he attempt to protect his reputation as an Asian American role model? What does he stand to lose by casting a non-Asian in an Asian role? What does he stand to lose by covering it up? By revealing the mistake? How does this play help remedy the situation?
12. In what ways does DHH's father, HYH, find belonging in America? In what ways does he remain an outsider? How does that change by the end of the play? Who else finds belonging by the end of the play? What does DHH learn from his father's journey in the play?
13. How does *Yellow Face* complicate ideas of "authentic" racial representation onstage? In what ways does the play ultimately argue for or against race-conscious casting? In what ways does it resist taking a strong position? How does DHH feel about this?
14. DHH and Marcus choose to let the world know the truth about Marcus and the casting. What do they both stand to lose by letting this be known? What do they stand to gain? In what ways will they lose face? In what ways will they gain as human beings?
15. Refer to your research on the Dong folk song "We Close the Village for Rituals." How does this song reflect Marcus's story, which begins in the United States and ends in China? Are there any specific

lyrics that feel especially connected to Marcus's journey? Why might Marcus be drawn to this song, even though he has no direct connection to Zhencong, the village he visits? How might this moment relate to DHH's own psyche, given that Marcus is a character DHH invents? Why has DHH put the fictional character of Marcus in Guizhou Province with the Dong people at the end of the play?

16. In what ways does *Yellow Face* challenge the audience to confront their own assumptions about race, identity, and authenticity? Which moments in the play most directly ask the audience to question their own beliefs?
17. In *Yellow Face*, playwright Hwang blurs the line between truth and fiction, often presenting real events alongside exaggerated or imagined ones. How does this blending of reality and hyperbole affect your experience of the play? What are some examples of hyperbole or exaggeration in the play? Why might Hwang choose to use this specific literary device to help tell this story?
18. If you are seeing *You Are Cordially Invited to the End of the World!*, compare and contrast the father/child relationships. In what ways do the children learn about their fathers through their deaths? How do their relationships evolve? What do the fathers learn about their children?

"Now I see — we are always most revolted by the things hidden within us."

-David Henry Hwang



Set design for 2026 *Yellow Face* by Timothy Mackabee.

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