

2023

A Real American Wife, A Japanese Object: Puppetry and the Orient in Minghella's *Madam Butterfly*

Tobi Poster-Su

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.lib.uconn.edu/ballinst_alterity



Part of the [Asian American Studies Commons](#), [Ethnic Studies Commons](#), and the [Other Theatre and Performance Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Poster-Su, Tobi, "A Real American Wife, A Japanese Object: Puppetry and the Orient in Minghella's *Madam Butterfly*" (2023). *Representing Alterity through Puppetry and Performing Objects*. Edited by John Bell, Matthew Isaac Cohen, and Jungmin Song.

https://digitalcommons.lib.uconn.edu/ballinst_alterity/5

A Real American Wife, A Japanese Object: Puppetry and the Orient in Minghella's *Madam Butterfly*

By Tobi Poster-Su

Abstract: In Anthony Minghella's celebrated 2005 production of *Madam Butterfly*, three men manipulate the small, fragile body of Sorrow (Butterfly/Cio-Cio-San's child) and, in a dream sequence, Cio-Cio-San herself. Both characters are Japanese or part-Japanese, and are portrayed by puppets, with American characters all portrayed by human beings. The puppets were built and originally manipulated by the British puppetry company Blind Summit, which drew partly on the traditional Japanese form of *bunraku*.

What to make of the racial dynamics of the piece when principal Japanese characters are played by white actors? How does this interact with Puccini's text, itself a European vision of Japan? Are the puppeteers "playing" Sorrow or is Sorrow played by the puppet? How might notions of the agency of the puppet lead to a diffusion of responsibility? How do we read Japanese American identity into the features of a puppet child sculpted by Nick Barnes, a British man? When Cio-Cio-San returns in the guise of a puppet, looking both radically and racially different to her human form, how does this shape our understanding of character and identity?

At the core of these questions is the following line of inquiry this paper will trace: How does this production use puppetry to represent the racialized Other, and how might this subvert, reinforce, or make visible Orientalist views of the East within the source text?

Keywords: puppet, representation, race and ethnicity, opera, theater

In Anthony Minghella and ENO's celebrated 2005 production of *Madam Butterfly*, three men manipulate the small, fragile bodies of Cio-Cio-San (also known as Madam Butterfly) and her child, Sorrow. Both characters are Japanese or part-Japanese, and both are portrayed, at least in part, by puppets, with white American characters all portrayed by human beings. These puppets were built and originally manipulated by the British company Blind Summit, which drew on the traditional Japanese form of *bunraku*.

In this paper, I argue that the use of *bunraku*-inspired puppetry, while lending Minghella's production a notional sense of cultural authenticity, ultimately functions to reinforce and reify the exoticizing and imperialist gaze present in the original source material. At the same time, I assert that even as the use of puppetry functions to further perpetuate Orientalist constructions of East Asia, it simultaneously destabilizes and makes visible these constructions in fruitful and interesting ways.

The purpose of this analysis is not to theorize how one might stage a "less-orientalist" version of *Madam Butterfly*. Rather, I wish to explore how this particular puppet performance might both reinforce and critique the Orientalizing gaze and the mechanics by which this happens. In doing so, I hope to better understand how puppetry might elsewhere function as a tool to actively interrogate and deconstruct the various gazes that minoritized Others commonly find themselves subjected to in mainstream cultural production. I term this practice *critical puppetry*, wherein phenomena inherent to the form of puppetry are used to critique or resist politically constructed hierarchies of value within a performance. I suggest that, intentionally or otherwise, there are many examples of critical puppetry already in existence.

The Text

In Puccini's 1904 opera, a US naval officer named Pinkerton marries a 15-year-old Japanese geisha named Cio-Cio-San, planning to leave her when he finds, in his words, "a real American wife." Pinkerton leaves Japan soon after the wedding, shortly after which Cio-Cio-San gives birth to their child, Sorrow. When he returns with his American wife in order to bring Sorrow to the US, Cio-Cio-San commits ritualized suicide. Many contemporary academics interpret the text as a quintessentially exoticized and imperialistic view of Japan—Wisenthal (2006) suggests that *Madam Butterfly*'s image of "the Orient" is entirely a cultural construct of white, Western nations that were vigorously engaged in the attempted conquest of other parts of the world during the period" (3). In this reading, as summarized by Yoshihara (2002), "Pinkerton

symbolizes the dominant, masculine America, while the fragile, exotic beauty Cio-Cio-San stands for the subordinated, feminized Asia” (4).

Puppetry and Authenticity in Minghella’s Staging

Minghella’s 2005 production of *Madam Butterfly* has been described by Dorothy Max Prior as “a pivotal moment for UK Puppetry” (in “Madam Butterfly.”) and has been remounted consistently since its premiere. Throughout its long performance history, the press and marketing around the show has made much of the Japanese cultural authenticity supposedly conferred by use of bunraku-inspired puppetry. This is typified by a 2016 review that asserts, “Choa’s choreography and the intricate work of the puppeteers of Blind Summit Theatre offer authentic Japanese counterpoints to the opera’s Western elements” (Hall). This is an interesting claim to make about the work of a Hong Kong Chinese choreographer and a white British company who describe themselves as being only loosely influenced by Japanese bunraku, but the claim has been made repeatedly. Another review describes the puppet versions of Cio-Cio-San and Sorrow as “easily the most authentic characters on stage” (Clarke 2005). It’s interesting to consider how and why the other characters might be understood to be less “authentic.” For one possible answer we can turn to Minghella, who had originally hoped to cast a teenage Japanese soprano in the title role. In fact, the role was originated by white British soprano Mary Plazas. Here it is worth noting that in both the UK and the US, the cross-racial casting of Southeast and East Asian characters, often referred to as yellowface, has been largely discontinued in commercial theater. By contrast, cross-racial casting and racial mimicry remain fairly common in opera, justified by suspect and increasingly untenable claims regarding a lack of suitable singers.

Interestingly, while both reviewers and Minghella have commented on the inauthenticity of the casting of Butterfly and other Japanese characters, those same people have not questioned the Japanese identity of Sorrow and Cio-Cio-San as played by puppets. If we acknowledge Cio-Cio-San’s human casting as racial mimicry, then how do we understand the relationship between non-Japanese puppeteers, and the Japanese and mixed-race characters they portray? I suggest that either the act of puppetry is effectively occluding the race of the performers, or that they are not understood as ‘performing’ the characters in the same manner that the singers are.

Sorrow’s Entrance

Let’s explore a particular moment from the performance. In this instance, from a 2005 staging at the Met:

Cio-Cio-San, in great distress, runs to the back of the stage and throws back three paper screens, revealing a small child. The child reaches up to her and she lifts him into an embrace. "And our son?" she asks, as he looks at her adoringly. She puts the child down and takes his hand. "Can a Japanese boy have blue eyes? ... This fair complexion?". She gestures towards her child.

This is one way to read the scene, by focusing on the puppet and ignoring the presence of the puppeteers. However, Broderick Chow (2014) suggests that to best understand the representation of race in theater, we must consider not only the content of a work but also the aesthetic mechanism of theatricality. Let's approach the scene again, this time focusing on the mechanics of representation.

Patricia Racette runs upstage and throws back three paper screens, revealing a small humanoid puppet with a bald head, large ears, black eyes, and tan skin considerably darker than that of Racette, who appears to be white. It is dark at the back of the stage but after a second we can make out three veiled figures operating the puppet. One of them lifts the puppet's left hand towards Racette, who stoops as the three puppeteers lift the puppet into her arms. One puppeteer directs the puppet's face towards Racette. "And our son?" she asks. As Racette and the puppeteers lower the puppet to the floor, the lighting allows us to see their veiled faces, particularly that of lead-puppeteer Marc Petrosino, who also appears to be white. Petrosino's gaze remains fixed on the head of the puppet, and when Racette takes the puppet's hand, his expression becomes one of excitable delight. "Can a Japanese boy have blue eyes? ... This fair complexion?" asks Racette, gesturing towards the puppet, which fits none of these descriptions.

There are a few things made legible by these two distinct readings of Sorrow's entrance—chiefly, the design of the puppet and the presence and manipulations of the puppeteers.

Sorrow's Design

The puppet's face displays exaggerated East Asian features, particularly for a mixed-race child, and is striking in its proximity to Yellow Peril iconography and the stage makeup employed by white actors to mimic East Asians. It is unlikely that this was the intent of Nick Barnes, the puppet-maker. Nevertheless, the design brings to mind Daniel York-Loh's (Lee 2020) assertion that such was the ubiquity and cultural currency of yellowface and other stereotypical depictions of East Asians in latter 20th-century Western culture that many industry figures retain a warped and inaccurate idea of how East Asian people actually look.

Crucially, the puppet was not originally designed as a Japanese American child but rather, was a repurposed puppet which had originally been designed to represent a Chinese child. This substitution unavoidably brings to mind Western perceptions of the interchangeability of Asian identities as recently typified by Covid-19-related Sinophobic attacks on non-Chinese Asians.

Furthermore, given that Sorrow's white American parentage is key to the narrative, and the libretto contains descriptions that are explicitly contradicted by the appearance of the puppet, the use of this particular puppet can be understood to heighten Sorrow's alterity beyond what might be indicated by the source material.

The Puppet/Puppeteer Relationship

Looking at the puppeteers, in Petrosino's mirroring of Sorrow's emotional state, we can see that the puppet, at least in part, functions as what Jane Taylor (2015) refers to as an "emotional prosthesis" of the lead puppeteer, wherein the puppet is understood as a prosthesis through which the lead puppeteer enacts their interpretation of the character. This would seem to point to the idea that Petrosino is engaging in a kind of yellowface. As Steve Tillis (1996) observes, puppetry is in some ways unique in physically separating the puppet, the site of signification, from the performer, the producer of signs. I suggest, however, that this physical separation may nullify a further separation produced by the act of human yellowface casting, wherein the clear distinction between the identity of the performer and that of the character draws attention to the imposture. I suggest that by occluding the spectacle of cross-racial performance, puppetry may give free rein to the reproduction of stereotypes that would be more clearly signaled and problematized by the use of a human performer in stage makeup.

Let's consider what stereotypes, other than those present in the design, might be reproduced within the performance. In a behind the scenes video from the 2016 revival, lead puppeteer Tom Espiner describes the character thus: "He's so eager to please, this little boy. He's living with this really, really very histrionic mother and he doesn't want her to get too upset." We can see here how Sorrow's primary characteristic appears to be compliance, a key feature of Orientalist narratives about Japan. Further, we can see how a potentially dismissive attitude towards the central character in the drama—one perhaps rooted in gendered and racialized cultural narratives that minimize the distress of women of color—may be naturalized and encoded within the performance through the mechanism of emotional prosthesis.

Cio-Cio-San as Puppet

In a dream ballet choreographed by Carolyn Choa, Pinkerton and Cio-Cio-San play out a condensed narrative of love, abandonment, and death. Both Pinkerton and Cio-Cio-San are portrayed by surrogates in this scene. Pinkerton is represented by an athletic male dancer, who appears to be white, whereas Cio-Cio-San is represented by a tiny, delicate puppet. The lead

puppeteer, Kevin Augustine, also appears to be a white male. The puppet giggles into her fan. She is picked up by the much larger Pinkerton and swoons in his arms before being flung about as if weightless.

Bearing in mind that both characters are surrogates, we might ask why Minghella did not use this moment to realize his initial desire to have Cio-Cio-San represented by a 15-year-old Japanese performer. One possibility is that the production instead uses puppetry to realize Puccini's imaginary construction of a young Japanese girl. The puppet, with its high cheekbones and impossibly slender neck and wrists, presents a far more exaggerated image of exoticized femininity than any human performer could.

What to make of the spectacle of Cio-Cio-San, portrayed by a tiny, exoticized object, being flung around the stage by a white man, as she is manipulated by another white man to react to him with timid adoration? As with Sorrow, I suggest that any representational issues are compounded by the framing of the puppetry as culturally authentic. Watching Puccini's opera, we are likely under no illusions that the work itself is authentically Japanese, yet by mobilizing the concept of authentically Japanese *bunraku* puppetry, the production seeks to convey an idea of authenticity that does not in fact involve any Japanese authorship. In turn, a consequential lack of cultural literacy means that these puppet performances reinforce Orientalist stereotypes while simultaneously occluding the authors of these stereotypes. Thus, an audience is confronted with a performance that is both notionally authentic and simultaneously misrepresentative.

The staging can certainly be read simply as a regurgitation of the racist tropes of Japanese femininity found within the original source text. However, by making a deliberate choice to read the aesthetic mechanisms of the puppetry—a perceptual shift which this staging does not necessarily invite—we can also read a potential for critical puppetry.

Interpreting the scene through a critical puppetry lens, the spectacle of a clearly artificial Cio-Cio-San being manipulated by Pinkerton and another white man might frame *this* Cio-Cio-San as an imaginary construct of Pinkerton's. This might further imply that the image of Japan that the opera presents us with is entirely a construct of Western-imperialist culture. In this reading, in contrast to the "real American wife" that Pinkerton eventually marries, Cio-Cio-San is in her various incarnations ersatz Japanese, ersatz woman, and ersatz human. This could be read as an acknowledgement that categories such as "Oriental" or "Woman" do not express essential identities, but rather, as Dorinne Kondo (1997) suggests, "named locations in a changing matrix of

power relations” that are defined in opposition to, in this instance, that which is Western, and that which is male (41).

This resistant reading is not necessarily intended by Minghella himself. The puppeteers are veiled, and the scene is framed explicitly as Cio-Cio-San’s dream, not Pinkerton’s. Furthermore, Minghella was explicit in rejecting the idea that his production was in any way political or anti-imperialist, arguing that the love-story rather speaks universally to the human condition (in Wolf, 2006). To suggest that this layer of meaning was not intentional is not to dismiss its power or its potential for resistance.

Conclusion

As I suggested above, my intention is not to improve representation within this text but rather, by examining the mechanics of representation of race in this performance, to theorize how puppetry might function as a mode of critique and resistance. In suggesting that critical puppetry offers the disruptive potential to make visible the ways identities are constructed and manipulated. I endorse Alex Istudor’s (2021) assertion that the politics of a theatrical work may reside most strongly not in the content of the work but rather in its form.

Further, I suggest any critique of representational practices must look beyond the artists directly visible in these representations and, instead, consider the structures of power and authorship in which these representations are made. Puppeteers working on mainstream productions are themselves often marginalized by institutions that seldom accord them the necessary resources of time or money, those institutions subject to boards and funding structures that may discourage change. In physically separating the site and production of meaning onstage and demanding an attention to the mechanics of representation, I suggest that puppetry invites us to consider both the complex nature of authorship and the material conditions in which theatrical work is created.

References

- Blind Summit. 2016. *Meet Sorrow - Madam Butterfly 2016*.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LlpZu8BEzcY>.
- Chow, Broderick D.V. 2014. "Here Is a Story for Me: Representation and Visibility in *Miss Saigon* and *The Orphan of Zhao*." *Contemporary Theatre Review* 24 (4): 507–16.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10486801.2014.946919>.
- Clarke, A. "Madam Butterfly (Review)." *Financial Times*. Nov 7, 2015
- Down, M. 2020. Blind Summit Artistic Director. *Interview with Tobi Poster-Su*. December 11.
- Hall, George. 2016. "Madam Butterfly (Review, Coliseum, London, 2016)." *The Stage*. May 17, 2016. <https://www.thestage.co.uk/reviews/madam-butterfly-review-at-coliseum-london--unforgettable>.
- Healy, Verity, and Alex Istudor. 2021. "The Perpetual Crises Engulfing British Theatre: An Interview with Migrant Theatre Director Alex Istudor." HowlRound Theatre Commons. March 8, 2021. <https://howlround.com/perpetual-crises-engulfing-british-theatre>.
- Kondo, Dorinne K. 1997. *About Face: Performing Race in Fashion and Theater*. New York: Routledge.
- Lee, Eelyn. 2021. "Casting Fu Manchu." *Chinese Arts Now*. February 12, 2021.
<https://chineseartsnow.org.uk/exhibitions/casting-fu-manchu/>.
- "Madam Butterfly." n.d. Blindsummittheatre. Accessed October 20, 2020.
<https://www.blindsummit.com/copy-of-shunkin-1>.
- Minghella, Anthony. 2011. *Puccini: Madama Butterfly (Metropolitan Opera)*. DVD. Sony Classical.
- Pao, Angela Chia-yi. 2010. *No Safe Spaces: Re-Casting Race, Ethnicity, and Nationality in American Theater*. Theater: Theory/Text/Performance. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Sheppard, W. Anthony. 2008. "Giacomo Puccini: Madama Butterfly." *The Opera Quarterly* 24 (1–2): 139–47. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oq/kbp002>.
- Taylor, Jane. 2015. "The Emotional Prosthesis: Puppetry and Political Memory: The Case of *Ubu* and the Truth Commission." Presented at Sadler Seminar at Leeds Humanities Research Institute, Centre for African Studies (LUCAS), University of Leeds.
- Tillis, Steve. 1996. "The Actor Occluded: Puppet Theatre and Acting Theory." *Theatre Topics* 6 (2): 109–19. <https://doi.org/10.1353/tt.1997.0014>.

Wisenthal, Jonathan, Sherrill Grace, Melinda Boyd, Brian McIlroy, and Vera Micznik, eds. 2006. *A Vision of the Orient: Texts, Intertexts, and Contexts of Madame Butterfly*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press. <http://www.deslibris.ca/ID/418876>.

Wolf, Matt. 2006. "The Whole Minghella." *Opera News*. 2006.
<https://www.operanews.com/operanews/issue/article.aspx?id=1761&issueID=79>.

Yoshihara, Mari. 2002. *Embracing the East: White Women and American Orientalism*. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press.

About the Author

Tobi Poster-Su is a UK-based scholar and theatremaker who specializes in puppetry and devised, cross-disciplinary work. He is a Lecturer in Drama at Bath Spa University and is undertaking an AHRC-funded PhD (*Towards a Critical Puppetry: Racialisation and Material Performance in the Twenty-First Century*) at Queen Mary University of London. He has published in *Critical Stages*, *Theatre Journal*, and *Applied Theatre Research*, delivered presentations at ATHE, IFTR, and TaPRA conferences, and is co-convenor of the TaPRA Bodies and Performance working group. As co-artistic director of Wattle and Daub, Tobi has co-created and performed in *Chang and Eng and Me (and Me)* (2021), *The Depraved Appetite of Tarrare the Freak* (2017), and *Triptych* (2011). He has directed puppetry for shows including Tom Morris' adaptation of *A Christmas Carol* (2018) and *Heidi: A Goat's Tale* (2012).