

# AUDIENCE GUIDE

HOPE THEATRE ARTS  
PRESENTS

# YELLOW FACE

BY DAVID HENRY  
**HWANG**

DIRECTED BY  
SUSAN FLETCHER

Nov 15 – Dec 1, 2024  
at The Main • Newhall, CA



HOPE  
THEATRE ARTS

*Yellow Face* is presented by special arrangement with Broadway Licensing, LLC,  
servicing the Dramatists Play Service collection. ([www.dramatists.com](http://www.dramatists.com))

THE MAIN

## DIRECTOR'S NOTES

---

People have asked why HOPE Theatre Arts decided to stage David Henry Hwang's *Yellow Face*. After all, we are not an Asian American theatre company. So is it our story to tell?

HOPE's mission statement is to tell the stories that encourage us to consider what is essential. When we search for plays to produce, we look for scripts that make us all think about the deep issues that confront our community and maybe provide hope for the future. In *Yellow Face*, we found humor, irony, questions of ethnic identity, honesty or the lack thereof, relationship juggling, a search for belonging, and even a little New York theatre fun thrown in. We think those are all essential topics to consider. But we don't want to tell our audience what is essential. We want you to tell us what you find essential in the story.

As to the question of whether it is our story to tell, we feel that this story transcends any ethnic boundaries. We are all faced with owning up to our mistakes, searching for our self-identity, figuring out our family relationships, looking for a place where we fit in. It is a human story, not just an Asian story. Because it is told through an Asian voice, we feel a responsibility to be accurate and sensitive in portraying that voice. We formed a cultural advisement committee with members of the Asian community. We brought an Asian American on board as Assistant Director. We made sure we cast Asians in Asian roles! Hopefully, we get it right.

This is not a simple play with an ordinary format. It's fast paced and filled with history, some of it more accurate than others! We believe the Audience Guide will help you understand who some of the characters are and the landscape of the times in which the story is set. This guide is intended to give you a backdrop before coming to see the show.

We hope you find this production to be thought-provoking as well as entertaining. David Henry Hwang invites us to join him in laughing at himself. Are we brave enough to also laugh at ourselves? HOPE invites our audience members to stay for a talkback with cast and crew following every performance. We want to know what you found to be essential in the story! Please stay and share your thoughts with us. And let us know if this Audience Guide helped you understand the story.



**Susan Fletcher**  
Director of *Yellow Face*

*Yellow Face* was originally produced by the Center Theatre Group, Michael Ritchie, Artistic Director; Charles Dillingham, Managing Director, and The Public Theater, Oskar Eustis, Artistic Director; Mara Manus, Executive Director.

First developed at the Lark Play Development Center, New York City, *Yellow Face* was later developed in collaboration with the Stanford Institute for Creativity in the Arts, Stanford University.

The Center Theatre Group production of *Yellow Face* was presented in association with East/West Players.

## HISTORY OF “YELLOW FACE” IN AMERICAN THEATRE AND MOVIES

HOPE Theatre Arts wants to bring a spotlight on the term “yellow face” which refers to the practice of non-Asian actors using makeup or prosthetics to portray Asian characters on stage or screen. This term specifically relates to a form of racial impersonation where individuals who are not of Asian descent alter their appearance to look stereotypically Asian. It has been widely criticized as a practice that perpetuates stereotypes and denies Asian actors’ opportunities to portray their own ethnicities authentically in media and entertainment. The term also describes situations in which non-Asian people control what it means to be Asian on stage and screen.

The title of the play *Yellow Face* is both a reflection on the playwright David Henry Hwang’s activism regarding the use of non-Asian actors in Asian roles (which he compared to blackface minstrelsy) and an examination of the role of “face” (a Chinese concept embodying dignity, reputation, and respect) in American society.

In Chinese culture, “face” (面子 miànzi) is a complex concept that encompasses reputation, dignity, prestige, and social standing. It is crucial in interpersonal relationships and societal interactions.

Face refers to the social status, respect, and dignity a person has in the eyes of others. It is about maintaining a positive image and not losing credibility or respect.

Face is deeply rooted in Confucian principles of social harmony, respect for authority, and maintaining proper relationships. It’s also tied to the concept of “guanxi” (关系), which emphasizes personal connections and networks.

Understanding face is essential for navigating social interactions in Chinese culture. It’s a nuanced concept that influences behavior, communication, and relationships, emphasizing the importance of mutual respect and maintaining harmony in social settings.

It has made its way into American culture through the phrase “Saving Face.” This is the act of preserving one’s dignity or avoiding

面子

miànzi

关系

guanxi



*Simon Gurney*

embarrassment, either for oneself or for others. Actions that cause someone to lose face are generally avoided, and efforts are made to resolve conflicts or issues in a way that preserves everyone's dignity.

Yellow face portrayals date back to at least 1767 in the U.S., and have a long history on screen, reaching back to Mary Pickford's Cho-Cho-San in *Madame Butterfly* (1915). Sessue Hayakawa was wildly successful as a Hollywood sex symbol in silent films. But the advent of talkies changed all that due to his heavy Japanese accent that was not accepted by audiences. Anna May Wong was a huge box office success in the 1920s, but her film roles were limited by stereotypes and prejudice. In 1935, she was considered for the leading role in "The Good Earth", but that went instead to German actress Luise Rainer who won the Academy Award for Best Actress for the role.

Asian actors continued to portray stereotypes in film and on stage that were usually demeaning. Actors of Asian descent most often landed minor roles while their Caucasian counterparts were awarded the leads, even when those characters were written as Asian. The list of actors who have donned yellow face at some point in their career reads like a who's who of the film industry: Lon Chaney Sr., Edward G. Robinson, Loretta Young, Boris Karloff, Myrna Loy, Peter Lorre, Anthony Quinn, Katharine Hepburn, Walter Huston, Rita Moreno, Rex Harrison, Fred Astaire, John Wayne, Marlon Brando, Ricardo Montalban, Alec Guinness, Tony Randall, John Gielgud, Max von Sydow, Peter Ustinov, Jerry Lewis, Linda Hunt, Leonard Nimoy, Joel Grey, and many others.



The most famous examples include the Charlie Chan and Fu Manchu movies featuring a variety of Caucasian actors as well as Rodgers and Hammerstein's musical *The King and I* starring the Russian born Yul Brenner as the King of Siam. The movie *Breakfast at Tiffany's* featuring Mickey Rooney's Mr. Yunioshi is considered one of the most egregiously offensive examples of yellow face with his taped-up eyes, Coke bottle glasses, buck teeth and an exaggerated

accent. On television, David Carradine played a nineteenth century Chinese American orphan in the series *Kung Fu*, a part he won over Chinese American actor Bruce Lee.

Author Robert B. Ito wrote in 2010 that job protection for Caucasian actors was one reason Asians were portrayed by Caucasians.

*“With the relatively small percentage of actors that support themselves by acting, it was only logical that they should try to limit the available talent pool as much as possible. One way of doing this was by placing restrictions on minority actors, which, in the case of Asian actors, meant that they could usually only get roles as houseboys, cooks, laundrymen, and crazed war enemies, with the rare “white hero’s loyal sidekick” roles going to the big-name actors. When the script called for a larger Asian role, it was almost inevitably given to a white actor.”*

HOPE Theatre Arts recognizes that there is an encouraging changing tide in cinema. Recent examples like *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018) and *Everything Everywhere All at Once* (2022) cast Asian actors in Asian roles and are lauded for depicting culturally authentic representations of the characters. These films are box office blockbusters with record-setting numbers of Hollywood awards and accolades. However, others see that the practice of yellow face continues to this day. It is clear that huge strides have been made. As with all efforts to reduce racial and cultural prejudice and limitations, care must be taken to go ever further.

## YELLOW FACE PLOT SUMMARY

---

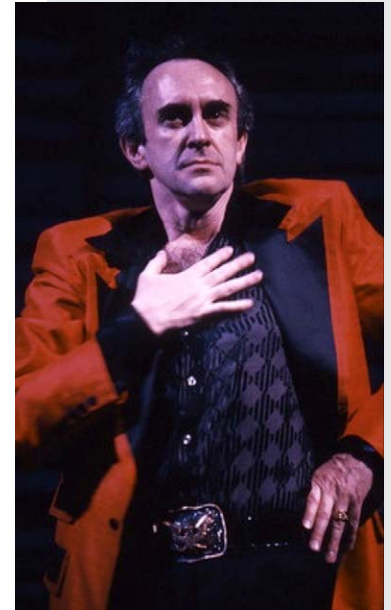
HOPE Theatre Arts is proud to present *Yellow Face* by David Henry Hwang. It is a comedy about a Tony-Award-winning Broadway playwright named DHH (David Henry Hwang) who protests the yellow face casting of a white actor, Jonathan Pryce, as the Asian lead in the musical *Miss Saigon* when it comes to Broadway. A few years later, DHH mistakenly casts a white actor, Marcus G. Dahlman, in the Asian lead in his own show, *Face Value*, thinking that the actor is at least part Asian. When he discovers that his new star is 100% Caucasian, he tries to cover up his mistake to protect his reputation as an Asian American role model.

As DHH attempts to hide his casting error from public discovery, he comically struggles to maintain his authenticity and manage his ever-growing envy of Marcus' new-found fame. Marcus is now the Asian American role model that DHH once was.

Part parody and part memoir, this play explores the historical marginalization of Asian Americans, cultural identity and authenticity, and the tensions between artistic freedom and the burden of representation. The playwright pays homage to his immigrant father HYH (Henry Yuan Hwang) and his true American-dream journey rising from his early struggles working in a laundry to a successful banking career as the founder of the first Asian-American-owned federally chartered U.S. bank, Far East National Bank, with assets exceeding \$500 million.

Most of the action takes place in the United States during the 1990s with short, interspersed scenes set in China in 2006. The play frequently breaks the fourth wall, (directly speaking to the audience) primarily by The Announcer, the voice inside DHH's head, who carries the audience from scene to scene across different time frames highlighted by a series of newspaper articles, family conversations, Senate investigations and a romp through theatre history.

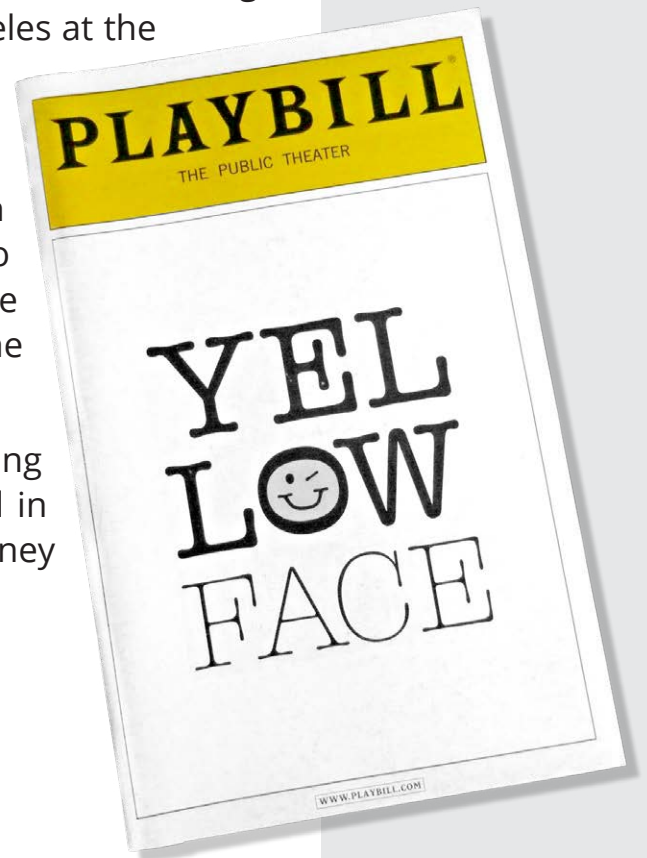
As the play ends, we learn that DHH is on a quest to explore his own personal performance of yellow face as an Asian American role model. He admits that he created *Yellow Face* as a way to cope with his father's death and fulfill his father's idealistic belief that in America, people can become anyone they want to be.



Jonathan Pryce  
Cameron Mackintosh Ltd.

David Henry Hwang is best known for his 1988 Tony Award-winning play, *M. Butterfly*. *Yellow Face* premiered in Los Angeles at the Mark Taper Forum in 2007 and has been performed Off-Broadway and in the UK. The play earned Hwang his third Obie Award in Playwriting and his third nomination as a Pulitzer Prize finalist in Drama. In 2013, *Yellow Face* was adapted into a YouTube video by director Jeff Liu. Recently released on Audible, the play is read by Daniel Dae Kim who will star in the Broadway premiere in September 2024.

HOPE Theatre Arts recognizes *Yellow Face* as being even more relevant today than when it premiered in 2007. Apparently, Broadway agrees! Save your money and just see this play in Santa Clarita!



Mark Taper Forum  
2007 Playbill

## PLAYWRIGHT DAVID HENRY HWANG

---

David Henry Hwang's works span the stage, movies, opera, and television. His works often blend drama with social commentary, exploring issues of cultural identity, assimilation, and the complexities of the immigrant experience in America. His writing is characterized by sharp wit, keen observation, and a deep understanding of the nuances of cross-cultural interactions.

A professor at the Columbia University School of the Arts, he is a three-time Tony nominee, won the Tony Award for Best Play 1988 (*M. Butterfly*), a three-time OBIE winner, a Grammy winner, and a three-time finalist for the Pulitzer Prize in drama.

In *The Guardian* May 2014, Hwang commented on *Yellow Face*:

*"A wise friend once said that, in order to have a conversation about race with a member of a different race, you have to be willing to make a fool of yourself. With **Yellow Face** I inadvertently stumbled on a way to apply this principle dramaturgically. DHH is the most foolish character in the show, giving audiences permission to laugh at controversies over race and culture. And perhaps laughter leaves us a bit more open to consider differing points of view."*



David Henry Hwang  
Gregory Costanzo

Hwang's complete works is an extensive list. He is celebrated as America's most-produced living opera librettist.

## PLAYS

- *FOB* - 1979
- *The Dance and the Railroad* - 1981
- *Family Devotions* - 1981
- *The House of Sleeping Beauties* - 1983
- *The Sound of a Voice* - 1983
- *Rich Relations* - 1986
- *M. Butterfly* - 1988
- *Bondage* - 1992
- *Face Value* - 1993
- *Golden Child* - 1996
- *Peer Gynt* - 1998
- *Yellow Face* - 2007
- *Chinglish* - 2011
- *Kung Fu* - 2014

## MUSICAL THEATRE

- *Book for Aida* - 2000
- *Revised book for a revival of Flower Drum Song* - 2002
- *Book for Tarzan* - 2006
- *Book and lyrics for Soft Power* - 2018

## OPERA LIBRETTI

- *1000 Airplanes on the Roof* - 1988
- *The Voyage* - 1992
- *The Silver River* - 1997
- *The Sound of a Voice* - 2003
- *Ainadamar* - 2003
- *Alice in Wonderland* - 2007
- *The Fly* - 2008
- *Icarus at the Edge of Time* - 2010
- *An American Soldier* - 2014/2018
- *Dream of the Red Chamber* - 2016
- *Circus Days and Nights* - 2020
- *The Rift/Written in Stone* - 2021
- *M. Butterfly - The Opera* - 2022

## FILM/TELEVISION

- *The Dance and the Railroad* - 1981
- *Blind Alleys* - 1985
- *M. Butterfly* - 1993
- *Golden Gate* - 1993
- *The Monkey King* - 2001
- *Possession* - 2002
- *The Affair* - 2015



## YELLOW FACE CHARACTER GUIDE

---

### FICTIONAL VS. REAL – CAN YOU SPOT THEM?

- **DHH – David Henry Hwang** – Tony Award winning American playwright, librettist, screenwriter, and theater professor at Columbia University in New York City
- **THE ANNOUNCER** – The voice inside DHH's head that puts history into context from his memory
- **MARCUS G. DAHLMAN** – Stage name Marcus Gee – Actor who was racially miscast as Asian in DHH's play *Face Value*
- **HYH – Henry Yuan Hwang** – DHH's father, immigrant, founder of the first Asian-American-owned federally chartered bank in the continental United States
- **LEAH ANNE CHO** – DHH's ex-girlfriend, Actress
- **NWOAOC** – Name Withheld On Advice Of Council – Reporter investigating Chinese banking practices
- **BD WONG** – Actor who appeared in DHH's works. Best known for his roles in *Jurassic Park* and *Law & Order*
- **JANE KRAKOWSKI** – Actress in DHH's *Face Value*. Best known for her roles in *30 Rock* and Trop 50 commercials
- **DOROTHY HWANG** – DHH's mother
- **CARLA CHANG** – Actress and Asian activist
- **FRANK CHIN** – Playwright, colleague of DHH
- **MARGARET CHO** – Comedian, Actress. DHH was hired to make her 1990's sitcom *All-American Girl* look more Asian
- **WILLIAM CRAVER** – DHH's agent at Paradigm
- **BERNARD JACOBS** – Longtime president of the Schubert Theater in NYC
- **VINNIE LIFF** – Broadway casting director for *Miss Saigon* and many other top productions
- **MARK LINN-BAKER** – Actor in DHH's *Face Value*. Best known for his roles in *My Favorite Year* and *Perfect Strangers*
- **CAMERON MACKINTOSH** – Superstar producer of *Miss Saigon* and many other hits; *Les Mis*, *Phantom of the Opera*, *Cats*, *Hamilton*
- **MILES NEWMAN** – Casting director for *Face Value*

- **STUART OSTROW** – Broadway producer of *Face Value*, *M. Butterfly*, *Pippin*, and others
- **JOE PAPP** – Legendary producer, director and founder of the Public Theater in Manhattan
- **FRANK RICH** – New York Times lead drama critic and op-ed columnist
- **MICHAEL RIEDEL** – New York Post theater columnist
- **LILY TOMLIN** – Actress who presented DHH with his Tony for *M. Butterfly* in 1988
- **JULIA DAHLMAN** – Marcus' mother
- **MARGARET FUNG** – Co-founder and Exec Director of AALDEF (Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund)
- **GISH JEN** – Writer and novelist
- **BEATRICE CHANG** – CFO Far East National Bank
- **DON MIHAIL** – Vice Chairman Far East National Bank
- **GEORGE F. WILL** – Columnist for The Washington Post
- **ROCCO PAMIERI** – Former aide to Senator Fred Thompson
- **SENATOR FRED THOMPSON** – Republican US Senator from Tennessee 1994-2003
- **ED KOCH** – Democrat Member of US House of Representatives 1969-1977 and former Mayor of New York City 1978-1989
- **DICK CAVETT** – Late night TV talk show host
- **RODNEY HATAMIYA** – Actor in *Go for Broke*
- **FRITZ FRIEDMAN** – Film Executive, Arts Commissioner, Marketing Executive
- **WEN HO LEE** – Taiwanese-American nuclear scientist exonerated of all federal charges against him for stealing US nuclear secrets for China
- **MULTIPLE SENATORS, U.S. REPRESENTATIVES, JUDGE, FBI AGENT, GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS. BROADWAY and MEDIA PERSONALITIES**

## **CHINESE BANKING INVESTIGATION**

---

In *Yellow Face*, there are many sections that reference the 1996 Senate investigation of US campaign contributions from China, and the role that HYH (Henry Y. Hwang, DHH's father) may have played in the controversy.

In 1997, Senator Fred Thompson of Tennessee launched an investigation into alleged attempts from China to influence American politics including the 1996 Presidential election. As the hearings progressed, a number of campaign-finance abuses were uncovered, but Thompson's charge that the Chinese government had manipulated American elections was never proved.

Many Chinese Americans were investigated for potential involvement. Henry Y. Hwang, as the founder and CEO of the Far East National Bank, was investigated for money laundering for the Central Bank of China. A successful US bank in California, Far East National received international deposits of funds that Senator Thompson found suspicious. However, the committee never found proof positive of illegal Chinese influence on the presidential campaign. Henry Hwang was never charged and his Far East National Bank was never indicted.



*iStock: Li-guojie*

### **Acknowledgments:**

Wikipedia "1996 United States campaign finance controversy"  
CNN AllPolitics March 5, 1998

## BLACK BOX THEATRE

HOPE Theatre Arts is once again gratefully utilizing The Main theater, this time for the brilliant play, *Yellow Face* by David Henry Hwang. The Main is a black box theater which allows the audience to connect with the performers in a purposeful and more intimate way. In its most basic description, it is a simple, open space consisting of three walls surrounding a stage, and a ceiling – all painted black. This gives the appearance of being “anyplace, anywhere, anytime” and also allows for innovative lighting designs to shine through. The flexibility in the room also allows sets and props to be creatively staged without the confines of a traditional set’s walls.



The black box theater has its roots in the American avant-garde theater of the early 20th century. It became popular and increasingly widespread in the 1960s as rehearsal space. Almost any large room could be “transformed” into a black box theater with the aid of paint and/or curtains, making for an easily accessible and budget friendly option for artists and performers. The black box theater is also considered by many to be a place where more “pure” theater can be explored, with the most human and least technical elements in focus.



HOPE Theatre Arts loves The Main. Robert Read, our production designer and HOPE board member, makes exceptional use of this space and also creates a set which allows the audience to plug in their own imaginations. We can’t wait for you to see *Yellow Face* come to life in our hometown’s very own black box theater – The Main.

*Acknowledgments: Utilized portions of Dr. Darrell G. Floyd on September 10, 2021  
“Utilizing a Black Box Theater for High School Performing Arts”*

**HOPE THEATRE ASKS:  
WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE ASIAN?**

## On Being Asian

By Matt Fernandez  
Assistant Director, *Yellow Face*

Being Asian is chow mein and soy sauce, hot dogs in banana sauce spaghetti and Jollibee chicken with gravy, sushi on birthdays and rice with every meal. Being Asian is getting made fun of for eating with a spoon, watching the snacks the other kids once deemed nasty become trendy, and hearing how ube is the next big food “discovery” when you’ve been eating it since you were a child. Being Asian is anime, Nintendo, Hello Kitty, and ninjas. Being Asian is the expectation of being quiet, polite, and well-behaved. Being Asian is Anna May Wong, Jackie Chan, Keanu Reeves, Michelle Yeoh, and Simu Liu. Being Asian is Mao and the CCP, Duterte, North Korea, and alleged Wuhan labs. Being Asian is the label of nerd or weird kid, but not in the cool, endearing way. Being Asian is seeing people pull their eyes up at the corners and babbling nonsense at you. Being Asian is the expectation of genius, but having your abilities deemed an unfair advantage, your hard work and achievements taken for granted. Being Asian is having a tight and loving family unit, but also contending with “tiger parents” who try their best but aren’t quite able to reconcile the customs from their old home with the culture of their new home. Being Asian is watching your country, which you were born in, laud you as the model minority, then turn around and ask where you’re really from because your English is surprisingly good. Being Asian is showing up to a casting call but being turned away because you’re the “wrong kind of Asian,” and the casting directors didn’t think or bother to specify.

*Being Asian is all of these things.*

*Being Asian is none of these things.*



Asian Americans do not exist in a monoculture. Life for Filipinos is not the same as life for Koreans, which is not the same life for Cambodian, Indian, Thai, Chinese, or Japanese Americans. My parents' experience of being Asian is different from mine, as is with me and my siblings. So, when I was asked to be part of this production and to write this piece, I wasn't sure if I could. If I should. If this town was ready or interested in a story like this. Who was I to speak for all Asians in Santa Clarita? I can't even speak Tagalog. I'm not the biggest fan of Filipino food. I only started to overcome my first-generation shame and reconnect with my culture in small doses after college. How could I be worthy to tell a story about what it's like to be Asian?

As I've talked to people and observed the cultural landscape over the years, I've come to realize that my struggles aren't so unique. When Jo Koy's *Live in Seattle* standup special came out I laughed until I cried because it felt like he was narrating parts of my own Fil-Am life, and for the first time ever I saw myself on the screen. For years, I used Jenny Yang's *Asian Goggles* monologue for auditions, a piece that deals with the expectations society places on Asian culture and that we place on society. The animated film *Turning Red* explores the delicate dance of trying to be perfect and live in two cultures. The film *Didi* tackles the shame and search for belonging that first-generation kids often feel. And *Yellow Face* questions whether the line drawn between "Asian" and "American" is a connector or a divider.

I've realized "The Asian American Story" doesn't exist, but there are stories that Asian Americans tell. While my experience and story aren't the same as David Henry Hwang's, they don't need to be. I don't have to justify myself, especially not to myself. I've lived my life as an Asian American and that isn't changing any time soon. I didn't choose this face, but it's now the one I've learned to wear with pride. DHH and I both have our stories to tell. That's enough. I am Asian enough. I am Kenough.

*So what does it mean to be Asian?*

*Whatever the hell we want it to.*



## MUSIC CREDITS

---

### *Shall We Dance?*

Music by Richard Rodgers

Lyrics by Oscar Hammerstein II

This selection is used by special arrangement with The Rodgers and Hammerstein Organization, [www.rnh.com](http://www.rnh.com).

### **Recording of Dong Folk Songs:**

People and Nature in Harmony used by permission of Joanna C. Lee and Ken Smith.

The music of the Dong people has been documented in recordings and video footage by the Western China Cultural Ecology Research Workshop (<http://workshop.ffmm.com>), a Hong Kong-based, non-government, non-profit organization dedicated to cultural preservation and socioeconomic development in the region.

Its initial recording, *Dong Folk Songs: People and Nature in Harmony*, was honored in China's 2003 Ministry of Culture Media Awards and has been broadcast both in Europe and North America.

More recently, the Workshop has garnered *Travel & Leisure* magazine's 2008 Global Vision Award for Cultural Preservation and was a featured subject in the May 2008 issue of *National Geographic* magazine.

## SEE YOU AT THE THEATRE!

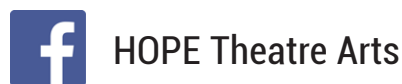
---

Please let us know if this audience guide was helpful to provide some insights into *Yellow Face*.

You can find HOPE Theatre Arts on social media or make comments on our website at [hopetheatrearts.com](http://hopetheatrearts.com)



### Follow us on social media:



### Visit us online:

[www.hopetheatrearts.com](http://www.hopetheatrearts.com)

HOPE Theatre Arts is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization telling the stories that encourage us to consider what is essential.