

Reading Passage - Intermediate level (Set 2)

Read and answer questions in the Question-Answer Book.

Taking centre stage

5 [1] The lights go up. Max and Leo meet at the centre of the stage and start to discuss an idea the former has had for a hit Broadway show. This may be a recognisable scene to those familiar with the Tony-winning Broadway musical *The Producers* but, on this occasion, the two protagonists look Asian — and instead of plotting to produce a sham show as part of an elaborate swindle, they are talking about a production in which only Asians appear.

[2] “If we can't find a concert hall full of fabulous Asian-American actors, director-slash-choreographers and a musical director to perform some of our favourite songs from some of our favourite musicals in the next 90 minutes, I'll eat my hat!” vows Max, played by Eurasian actor Herman Sebek.

10 [3] “But Max, you're not even wearing a hat!” quips Leo, played by Korean-American Raymond Lee.
The audience laughs. The music starts. Max begins to sing *We Can Do It*, a hit song that has never before been sung by an Asian actor on a Broadway stage.

15 [4] *Changing the Stats: Asian Americans on Broadway* was staged in November at Symphony Space, on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, in New York. Over 90 minutes, the audience enjoyed a mosaic of Broadway numbers, including *The Light in the Piazza*, *Company* and *Gypsy*, all performed by actors and actresses who are rarely cast for such “mainstream” roles.

20 [5] The title of the show came from a survey conducted by the Asian American Performers Action Coalition (AAPAC) in 2012. It found that in the previous five years, Asians had been cast in only 3 per cent of all roles on Broadway and in major nonprofit theatres in New York. Asians, then, accounted for 12 per cent of the population of the city. But when the curtain rose on *Changing the Stats*, the title sounded more like a factual statement than an expression of hope. Another survey is expected to be released in the spring but it is already clear that Asians have been getting a lot more work on New York stages in the past couple of years.

[6] It's hard to pinpoint when things began to change. In the summer of 2011, when David Henry Hwang's bilingual comedy *Chinglish* hit Broadway. Singaporean actress Angela Lin was amazed by the make up of the cast and called it “a rare opportunity on Broadway that made me feel like I had come home”.

25 [7] At the beginning of last year, however, the bitterness from being long ignored was still palpable. In February, when *The World of Extreme Happiness*, by young Eurasian playwright Frances Ya-Chu Cowhig, opened at New York's City Centre Stage with a completely Asian cast, one of its actors, Chinese-American Francis Jue, joked, “I am glad there is a play out there in which someone like me doesn't have to turn into a snake. For me, that is very usual.”

30 [8] Once, there were only a handful of Asian stories in theatres in the US, most written by white playwrights. The handful of roles open to Asian actors were mostly one-dimensional, and white actors were sometimes coloured yellow and cast in Asian parks. There were not many opportunities for genuine “yellow-face” talent.

[9] “Those parts always seemed to exoticise or stereotype Asians,” says actress Tisa Chang, who was born in Chongqing and moved to the US in the 1940s. “For women, it was always a beautiful girl in a not-so-reputable

35 profession. I played more prostitutes and Vietnamese bargirls than any other roles.” But when faced with the stark reality in theatres in the US, Chang decided to tie her own career to a broader mission. In 1977, after playing yet another Vietnamese bargirl, in *The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel*, Chang invested the money she made on Broadway in her own Pan Asian Repertory Theatre, a place for Asian talent. “We have so many more people in the mix of performers, writers, designers, directors. It’s very interesting to have this kind of energy,”

40 says Chang.

[10] The energy itself, however, may not have been capable of achieving much without being welded to collective power. Ethnic minorities now make up almost 40 per cent of the population in the US, compared with 25 per cent in 1990. And they are almost completely responsible for the population growth in the country; white numbers have been stagnant for years. The Census Bureau estimates that by 2044, minorities will be in

45 the majority. The rapid growth of the Asian population has also been a catalyst. That demographic makes up nearly 6 per cent of the nation’s population and is the fastest growing ethnic group. By 2055, Asian immigrants are expected to surpass their Hispanic counterpart in number, to become the largest foreign-born group in the US.

[11] However, to Asian theatre professionals, the increasing influence of their own kind brings with it a new set of frustrations.

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[12] Part of the challenge comes from China’s growing influence in US show business. The rising number of Chinese students and tourists coming to the US as well as the 1.3-billion-strong mainland market have created significant opportunities for the American entertainment industry. Writers who have the emotional connections, such as Hwang, have increasingly written Chinese themes into their drama. The Chinese, though, are not

55 necessarily interested in shows created by Asian-Americans. “When Chinese tourists come to see a Broadway show, they want to see something they consider to be American. When they think of America — they are a little behind — they tend to think of white America,” says Hwang.

[13] If the Chinese in China are not to be relied upon, Asians who have settled in the US are proving to be even more disappointing. Many don’t go to the theatre at all. “The shows I did in the US were all Asian stories. I

60 thought there would be a lot of Asians in the audience. Every time, I was wrong,” says Chinese-American director Chen Shi-zheng. “Asian people work hard,” says Lily Fan, a Broadway producer from Hong Kong. “they are not necessarily available at 7.30 pm to go to a show. But unless our own people come out to support us and buy the tickets, it’s hard for us to argue that Broadway needs to increase its Asian representation.”

[14] The challenges don’t end when you do manage to get Asians through the door. Asian audiences tend to be

65 sensitive to their own image on the stage and often disagree with the portrayal — even when it is by those of the same ethnicity. A case in point is that in 2010, when the Pan Asian Repertory Theatre staged Chinese-American playwright Lauren Yee’s *Ching Chong Chinaman*, it drew vehement criticism from older Chinese who were appalled to see the derogatory words in the title of a show, despite the obvious satire.

[15] The process is further complicated by the fact that American performing arts are not yet as post-racial as

70 the trend on Broadway may have us believe. Since last January: Dallas Summer Musicals cast a Caucasian as King Mongkut in its production of *The King* and *I* before switching to an Asian actor after a stern letter from AAPAC; British actress Tilda Swinton was chosen to play the Ancient One, a Tibetan mystic, in Marvel’s *Doctor Strange*, prompting an outcry from Asians against the Hollywood “whitewash”. Furthermore, for the second year in a row, Academy Award nominations have all gone to white actors.

- 75 [16] To Hwang, who played a substantial role in the protest in 1991 against the casting of white actor Jonathan Pryce in the role of a Eurasian pimp in *Miss Saigon*, these developments represent a disturbing undercurrent. "After *Miss Saigon*, I felt it'd stopped for maybe 10 or 15 years. In the past few years, I have actually started to see racial exclusion coming back," says Hwang. "A lot of people are feeling like we are in this 'post racial age': if an African-American can play George Washington in *Hamilton*, doesn't that mean white actors can now play
- 80 minority characters, too?"

[17] Hwang doesn't buy that argument. He points out that the proportion of minorities on the stages of Broadway is still much lower than that in the general population. "The bottom-line issue is equal opportunity in casting," he says. "The goal is to increase minority casting." And that, despite the progress, may still be a long way off.

- [18] Some, however, remain positive. "I don't know why we are made in different colours. There must be a reason," says Nancy Kwan, the Hong Kong-born actress who won worldwide fame in 1960 by playing the protagonist in *The World of Suzie Wong*. "There will always be bias and racism; it's part of human nature. But America really is a melting pot. For anyone here, if they work hard, they get lucky and the timing is good, they can make it."

END OF READING PASSAGE