

The Trouble with Mary

By Jamil Khoury, Founding Artistic Director, Silk Road Rising
June 11, 2013

For years I have bit my tongue about director Mary Zimmerman. After all, she is much beloved in Chicago theatre and has even been declared a “Genius.” I simply went ahead with my business, voicing the occasional criticism behind closed doors. Not wishing to risk the wrath of calling out a local star on her reckless, unexamined Orientalism. Well, not any more. Not after reading the interview she gave Chicago Magazine’s Catey Sullivan. An interview so shocking and breathtaking in its insensitivity and apologetics that to remain silent would only erode my conscience. So I am calling Zimmerman out, in the hopes that Chicago theatre makers and theatre goers can begin a conversation.

Let it be known that I do not know Mary Zimmerman and to the best of my knowledge, she and I have never met. In the past, I have found her theatricalized Orientalism to be more of an irritant than anything else. On Zimmerman’s stage, Asian and Middle Eastern people were never quite people, we were colorful textiles and choreographed movements and sensualized fables. We were exotic and playful and mysterious. Not quite someone you’d have lunch with, but gilded objects that were amusing and titillating, to be enjoyed vicariously and from ample distance. Of course she’d toss in the occasional anti-war message, which would buy her some “favor.” For a long time I used to “tolerate” her exoticized renderings as an unsophisticated, yet well-intentioned (?) counter portrait to all the stock images of terrorists and religious fanatics that pervade our country’s media. Zimmerman, it could be rationalized, conjured a “better than” scenario. Shame on me for being so tolerant.

In 2006, then Silk Road Theater Project (now Silk Road Rising, the company of which I am Founding Artistic Director) hosted the first ever South Asian American Theatre Conference. Over 25 South Asian American theatre professionals from around the country were in attendance. One of the nights we took the participants to see Mary Zimmerman’s “Mirror of the Invisible World” at the Goodman Theatre. Minutes into the play, my heart sank. Before our eyes was “Orientalism Live on Stage and With a Vengeance!” Or “How To Take Every Stereotype of Asian and Middle Eastern People And Cram Them Into One Play.” At the intermission, we conference organizers faced a near mutiny. Many of the attendees were angry that we would bring them to such a racist play and some were even contemplating a walk out. We pleaded with everyone to stay for the second act. The second act was worse. The next day at the conference, “Mirror of the Invisible World” became the centerpiece in a conversation about how NOT to do “representation.” I guess it had some aesthetic utility after all.

Mary Zimmerman is now adapting and directing “The Jungle Book,” billed as “a new musical based on the Disney animated film and the writings of Rudyard Kipling.” The show is scheduled to begin previews on June 21 at the Goodman Theatre. Let it be known that I have friends in the show and friends at the Goodman Theatre. People whom I respect and adore. The Goodman Theatre has also been a friend and partner to Silk Road Rising. I trust that my colleagues at The Goodman are equally as distressed by Zimmerman’s interview.

In the interview, Zimmerman is specifically questioned about the racism and misogyny in Kipling’s writing. To her credit, she acknowledges that “Kipling’s politics are pretty terrible and pretty undeniable,” providing a faint glimmer of hope that her adaptation is going to be a critique of Kipling’s terrible politics. That hope quickly fades. Interviewer Sullivan notes that “The Jungle Book, and King Louie in particular, has been criticized as playing into racial stereotypes.” Sullivan follows up her statement by asking “Was that a concern when adapting the film?” Zimmerman responds with “Yeah, it was a concern. But I’ve decided to make it not a concern. I know what the lyrics say and how squeamish you can get about that. But we’ve done some things with casting that I’m not going to give away, but that

I think will remove that element.” I have been told what she’s done with the casting and far from removing “that element,” she ratchets it up in a disturbingly heavy handed manner.

Zimmerman then goes on to dismiss concerns about overtly racist lyrics by surmising that “racism is in the eye of the beholder, you know? If you look at that as racist, doesn’t that say more about what you’re projecting on to the character?” Wow! Centuries of structural, systemic, genocidal racism erased in a poof! Didn’t you know? Racism is in the “eye of the beholder.” How much unexamined white privilege and American privilege does it take to reach a conclusion like that? Get thee to an ophthalmologist, Mary! It’s a vision thing, that pesky old racism. And on your way, you may want to take a short leap to blame the victim land.

Gosh, if only we’d all just stop projecting!

But it gets worse. Zimmerman goes on to say, “Look, if you wanted to eliminate every masterpiece or painting created by someone who had moronic ideas about status and race, you’d have to empty the museums. You’d have to tear down the Taj Mahal. That was built by slaves you know. People are so layered—no one is all good or bad. There are parts of them that are better than the other parts. Sometimes I feel like righteous indignation is everybody’s favorite emotion these days.” Hmmm. Reminds me of how our judicial system has historically protected rapists.

Zimmerman then assures us that “Having been in India I realize most of the stuff we know about India is from books written by Westerners.” Well, perhaps, if you’re not reading books written by Indians! They too have “stuff” to tell about themselves, shocking as it may sound. Oh, and who’s “we,” I might ask? Would that be us white folk? But wait, now comes the whammy. “But you go over there and you see that the British occupation was so short in the history of the country. No one is sitting around moping about the raj. You have to remember the past, but you don’t have to live in it.” Oh dear. No, I guess you don’t have to live in it, except of course if it impacts your everyday reality. Except of course if you have no way of escaping it. But at least it’s heartening that Zimmerman feels confident enough to tell us what people in India are and are not thinking about.

Zimmerman's flippant, aloof dismissal of the brutality and cruelty of the British Raj is as astonishing as it is infuriating. Human injustice of such epic magnitude simply shrugged off, shooed away like some sort of pest. Let’s see, partition, a nation ripped into three pieces, the forced “transfer” of millions of people, the untold numbers who died, the wholesale destruction of property, the loss of identity and security. But who has time for details? Then again, the Third Reich was “so short” in the history of Germany. The atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki took but minutes to explode. African Americans aren’t sitting around “moping” about the legacies of slavery. Apartheid doesn’t jog their memories. Never! You see, apparently we’ve been wrong all along. History informs only the past, not the present. Gee, book me on that luxury cruise liner!

For years I've been tempted to send Zimmerman a copy of Edward Said's “Orientalism” with a note describing it as literary criticism, not a director's manual. Now I want to send it along with a note asking that she adapt stories about her native plains states and leave the Silk Road alone!

When asked what she hopes audiences take away from “The Jungle Book,” Zimmerman says, “I feel like it’s enough for shows to be experiences. There is no object that you take. I hope what audiences have at the end is a sense of the incredible wonderment of being a child. Children have one foot in reality and one foot somewhere else.” It is of course Zimmerman’s First Amendment right to de-contextualize the story from the ugly legacy that surrounds it. But from what I gather in the interview, her “wonderment of being a child” is far from the ideas I’d like to impart to children (not to mention our “inner-children”).

Yes, I know, we will be told that Zimmerman’s intent in the interview was not to be insensitive. I’m sure we will be told that she has nothing but the best of intentions. She loves India! She loves

Indians! Some of her best friends...But intent and impact are two very different things. The impact of this interview is hurt and anger. Maybe not for all who read it, but judging from emails I've been receiving today, for a good many of us. I am hurt and angered by it.

Mary Zimmerman, my father is from Syria. He came to this country in 1951. Syria gained its independence from France in 1946. I grew up hearing from my father stories about the brutality and humiliation and devastation of French colonial rule in Syria. His experiences under French occupation have shaped much of my own political consciousness and inform the work that we do at Silk Road Rising. Syria's French occupiers treated the Syrians like third class citizens in our own country. Imagine being treated like garbage in your own country by a foreign occupier. Imagine what that does to your psyche and your dignity and your entire sense of self. The French told the Syrians that our culture was inferior, our language was inferior, our religious traditions were inferior (which extended to us "primitive" Eastern Christians as well), and that our history was one of barbarism. They routinely told the Syrians that we were "uncivilized." My father grew up seeing French soldiers beat up and humiliate people. Public hangings were quite routine. Don't tell me the nightmare we are seeing today in Syria is not, in part, a product of that French occupation. Mary, I will give you my father's phone number. I want you to call him and tell him that the French occupation in Syria, his experiences, his pain, is not a concern of yours. Better yet, I want you to look him in the eyes and tell him that.

The trouble with Mary. December 2003. Pacific Philosophical Quarterly 84(4):384 - 393. Specifically, he (1) criticizes attempts to defend the intuition; (2) devises variations on the Mary case to illustrate how a deduction from physical information of what it's like to see in color might actually proceed; and (3) defends his arguments against objections. He affirmatively answers the question: could a proper understanding of phenomenal concepts/knowledge show that there is or is not an epistemic gap? See more of The Trouble With St Mary's on Facebook. Log In. or. Create New Account. See more of The Trouble With St Mary's on Facebook. Log In. Forgotten account? Don't miss out on the world premiere of The Trouble With St. Mary's at the Brisbane International Film Festival, this Thursday, with a second screening this Sunday at the Palace Barracks cinema http://tix.biff.com.au/session2_biff.asp; WORLD PREMIERE Same-sex marriage. Questioning the Pope. De-virginising Mary. This is the story of a rogue Brisbane priest, Fath. tix.biff.com.au. Under pressure from King and Council, Mary decided that she must flee the country for the safety of the firmly Catholic Empire. See acast.com/privacy for privacy and opt-out information. 393 episodes. Signup to sync subscriptions across devices. Download the App! Start listening to #The History of England on your phone right now with Player FM's free mobile app. Your subscriptions, bookmarks & playlists will sync across web and mobile apps. Similar to The History of England.