

Damien Gayle – *The Guardian*

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Hackney Empire pulls out of Chinese takeaway opera over all-white cast

Venue cites ‘debate aroused by non-Asian casting’ as it withdraws Music Theatre Wales’s *The Golden Dragon* from bill



‘Errors of judgment’ ... *The Golden Dragon*. Photograph: Clive Barda

The London premiere of an opera set in a Chinese takeaway has been cancelled after a backlash over its all-white cast.

Music Theatre Wales were set to stage a performance of [The Golden Dragon](#) at the Hackney Empire in east London on 31 October, until the theatre on Thursday issued a statement saying it would not go ahead and disavowing any involvement in the production.

“The debate aroused by the non-Asian casting in *The Golden Dragon* compromises the Empire’s commitment and position as a champion of diversity and accessibility across the theatre industry, and therefore the decision has been taken to withdraw the forthcoming performance on 31 October,” the Empire’s statement said.

“Music Theatre Wales were renting the theatre for this production and Hackney Empire has not been involved in any part of the production or casting process.”

Written by Peter Eötvös, a Hungarian, and based on a script by German playwright [Roland Schimmelpfennig](#), the opera, which has already toured the country, features a cast of five performing multiple roles, including “Chinese mother”, “Chinese aunt”, “Old Asian” and “An Asian”.

Music Theatre Wales previously defended the all-white casting, saying the play was an example of “post-Brechtian storytelling” and that “quite deliberately, there is no realism”. However, a [review in trade paper the Stage](#) warned that, despite combining “scathingly witty burlesque with an increasingly sombre social drama”, the play trod “a fine line between righteous satire and cultural cliché”.

Kumiko Mendl, the artistic director of [Yellow Earth Theatre](#), which champions British east Asian performers, said the production’s failure to cast appropriately had angered and upset her, her colleagues and the wider community, and that she had written to Music Theatre Wales to raise her concerns. She backed the Hackney Empire for acting in accordance with its ~~stated beliefs~~ [stated beliefs](#) about diversity.

“We’ve had a number of incidents over the years and this is yet another one,” she said. “Obviously this is the opera world, which is notoriously un-diverse, but this play would have been a fantastic opportunity for them to go out and find diverse opera singers, especially east Asian opera singers.”

“It doesn’t make sense that it’s an all-Caucasian cast, particularly when it is about nationalities, ethnicities and the immigrant experience. You can’t say that the immigrant experience is purely just a white experience. That doesn’t make sense at all.”

“Personally I know opera singers of east Asian descent who would’ve been great in this and would’ve loved that opportunity to play all those different parts and work with obviously a well-renowned company.”

Music Theatre Wales responded to the cancellation by acknowledging mistakes, and adding that although the depiction of non-white characters by white performers was widespread within the world of opera, it was problematic.

“We should have reflected more deeply on the implications it had for the kind of production we made,” the company said. “These errors of judgment were ours alone. Our exceptional performers are not to blame.”

It added: “This is a transformative experience for the company and one from which we are determined to learn. We are already in the process of meeting with a number of professionals and practitioners who wrote to us

to raise their concerns, and we will be listening to them as we engage in a thorough review of our approach to equal opportunities and diversity: in our programming, in our casting and across all our activities as a company. We are committed to incorporating this learning into everything we do.”