

Theatrical Reviews

Soft Power. Dir. Leigh Silverman. Play and lyrics by David Henry Hwang. Perf. Francis Jue, Conrad Ricamora, and Alyse Alan Louis. Center Theatre Group (Los Angeles), 2018.

Imagine a future in which the United States is no longer a global superpower but, instead, China is, and the rest of the world comes to understand American culture through highly-visualized, -verbalized, and -physicalized gestures generated by Chinese musicals. Commissioned by Los Angeles' Center Theatre Group for their 50th anniversary season in 2018, David Henry Hwang's *Soft Power* asked audiences to do just that, displacing those who are primarily used to, perhaps even unquestioningly comfortable with, the deep-seated stereotypes and assumptions that American popular culture continues to produce about Asia – if only for a few brief hours. In response to the frustrating orientalism and misappropriations found specifically in “Asian” musicals like *The King and I* and *Miss Saigon*, Hwang's work functions as a loving critique of the broad strokes and generalities about Asian countries and cultures that Western musical theater has generated. Through a metatheatrical framing device, color-conscious casting and acting choices, and the excess and exaggeration highlighted by its set design and musical numbers, *Soft Power* flips the Americentric worldview upside-down to present a complex, farcical representation of America, embracing musical theatre's form while simultaneously pushing back against the very sociocultural and political power system(s) that produce knowledges about other cultures.

In a series of metatheatrical moves, a dramatized version of Hwang named DHH (Francis Jue) serves as the show's protagonist who meets with a Chinese producer (Xue Xing, played by Conrad Ricamora) about his

script; DHH, although Asian American himself, is guided by American-produced ideologies and perspectives about Asia, unable to understand Chinese customs and values and butchering the pronunciation of the language. DHH soon meets Xing's girlfriend, Zoe (Alyse Alan Louis), a political artist who presents a brief diatribe about the orientalist nature of American musical theatre. Importantly, Zoe suggests that musicals are an incredibly effective "delivery system," a medium that shrouds a text's actual ideologies and messages—often distorted and dangerous—within emotional and poignant aesthetics, such as beautiful musical scores and eloquent dance numbers. Also, presented as the recent-past, characters continually assert and assume that Hillary Clinton will win the 2016 presidential election, marking the American characters we meet thereafter with a sociopolitical complacency. The main substance of the show is initiated when DHH is stabbed (a real incident that Hwang experienced in late 2015); passing out, DHH's subsequent dream is presented to audiences as the primary frame for the show: a world-renowned, beloved Chinese musical called "*Soft Power*" which depicts Xue Xing's visit to a crime-filled, outlandish, and farcical version of America (NOTE: The production of *Soft Power* will be indicated with italics, whereas the show's musical-within-a-play will be indicated as "*Soft Power*" with quotation marks). Taken as truth by the rest of the world, "*Soft Power*" thus exploits the delivery system—visually, verbally, and musically—to cloak an otherwise eccentric and absurdist portrayal of America.

Reiterating this metatheatricality, the opening scene of Act Two is staged as a Shanghai television station's interview with Xue Xing's granddaughter and the children of "*Soft Power*" creative team members. Now seen as the experts on US culture, the Chinese characters are joined by a professor of US folklore, who continually struggles to interject his American perspective throughout the interview, politely accusing "*Soft Power*" of musical appropriation and mis-representation of America. The discussion, though brief (roughly seven minutes long), is a palpable reversal

of global power and position, imagining what it would be like if the US were colonized and constructed via stereotypes, as well as commenting on musical theatre (and cultural texts in general) as a form of power that produces false knowledge about other countries and cultures.

With a keen understanding of the delivery system and framing device that is “Soft Power,” audiences experience a future representation of America through an Asian lens, which is reinforced repeatedly by the production’s color-conscious casting and the acting choices pertaining to accents. All but one cast member (Louis, who doubles as Zoe and Hillary Clinton) is Asian American, subverting the continued practice of casting non-Asian actors in “Asian” shows. In this future America, the Asian American actors perform Caucasian roles, wearing blonde wigs and applying exaggerated versions of “white” accents to their cartoonish characters. Significantly, the stereotypical American accents reverses the long-established practice of yellowface (traditionally achieved via makeup as well as offensive, made-up accents), such that the cast performs a verbalized “whiteface” during the musical portion of the show. These choices also stand in contrast to *Soft Power*’s opening scenes, in which Jue speaks in an unaccented voice while Ricamora speaks in a Chinese accent. Notably, Ricamora adopts a realistic Chinese accent rather than the more absurd, stereotypical accents that typically gesture towards Asian characters on stage, television, and film; most importantly, Ricamora drops the accent altogether once “Soft Power” begins, creating a marked difference between the “regular” accents (performed by Xing, now the Chinese protagonist) and the exaggerated “American” accents. In addition, Ricamora’s subtle choices intensify the fact that Xing in “Soft Power” serves as the Chinese hero, arriving in the US and teaching American politicians how to best run their own country—a complete inversion of white savior trope frequently found in American popular culture.

In addition to the nuanced approaches to casting and acting, David Zinn’s larger-than-life scenic design and Sam Pinkleton’s flashy

choreography help add to the charade and spectacle of “Soft Power.” Throughout the show, scenes are accented with brilliant blues and reds, alluding to the hyper-patriotic and nationalistic tendencies of America. Particularly noteworthy designs occur during elaborate musical numbers (crafted by Hwang and Jeanine Tesori) and scenes (directed by Leigh Silverman) that take place at McDonald’s, the proverbial ballot box, and the White House. In each case, Zinn’s designs and Pinkleton’s dances are visually loud and large: in China’s version of an American McDonald’s, giant gold arches appear in front of a deep red curtain, and chandelier-wearing, fries-holding manikins greet visitors—gaudy visuals surpassed only by roller-skating restaurant servers and Louis (as Hillary) performing an upside-down twerk on an enormous hamburger, with a choreographic nod to *The King and I*’s “Shall We Dance.” In a later number about the US voting process, rows of large metal stars outlined in lights meet a throng of smaller white stars painted across the blue walls of the stage, visually gesturing towards the American flag, while the cast performs “Election Night”—a song led by a Harold Hill-evoking Chief Justice (Jon Hoche, also evoked by the music) that celebrates the country’s blind loyalty to the electoral college system—all of which is further emphasized by the jazz hands and strong flashy movements made of the ensemble “voters.” And at “The White House” (spelled out in large letters outlined by bright white lights), tall statues of Budweiser cans surround the stage as a Veep character (Raymond J. Lee) sings atop a giant Budweiser six-pack—plus cheerleader-esque dancing females join gun-toting male politicians who proudly dance with and protect their large guns.

The final moments of *Soft Power* bring audiences back to the present, with DHH waking up in the hospital and breaking the fourth wall to present an autobiographical monologue wherein he elucidates the stabbing incident, which is believed to be racially motivated (as reflected on by Hwang in a *New York Times* piece in 2016). Subsequently, the finale song (“Democracy”) takes place on a semi-bare stage (only the blue walls and

now-unlit stars remain) with the entire cast, all dressed in regular street clothes that feature lighter blue, red, grey, and white tones, thus implying an embodiment of their off-stage, real selves rather than any characters or caricatures. “Democracy” is performed with full house lights, a final optimistic gesture and invitation to the audience to hold onto hope and create positive change for the future.

In all, the show persistently demonstrates a heightened awareness of the ways in which Asian Americans have been stereotyped, marginalized, and oppressed by popular culture, carefully upending the harmful traditions and history of musical theatre while also pointing out and calling attention to the flaws of America’s political system, questioning—but not throwing away—the efficacy of democracy. Although “Soft Power” presents as an Eastern depiction of America in the future, *Soft Power* is ultimately a critical commentary about present-day America made *by and for Americans*.

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Works Cited

Hwang, David Henry. “The Time I Got Stabbed in the Neck.” *The New York Times*, 5 January 2016.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/08/fashion/mens-style/the-time-i-got-stabbed-in-the-neck.html>.