



Dun DUN: Talking with BD Wong about "Orphan of Zhao"

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Kevin Berne

Tony Award winner BD Wong stars as Cheng Ying in American Conservatory Theater's production of 'The Orphan of Zhao'.

Therapists and priests belong under a character type BD Wong's got down pat -- most notably in his TV roles as forensic psychologist Dr. Huang (*Law and Order: SVU*) and Father Ray Mukada (*Oz*) -- and he's well aware of it.

"I've always had a sensibility for playing people who listen to other people, whose life's work is about listening to other people," says Wong. He takes the stage this month to play, yes, another doctor, but warned me: "My character does not fall into that 'listening type' as much as you may think."

The Broadway veteran returns to his home city of San Francisco to star in A.C.T.'s production of beloved Chinese legend "The Orphan of Zhao". The historical drama was the first Chinese play to be translated in the West and has spawned countless stage and screen adaptations. Artistic director Carey Perloff brings an all Asian American cast, astonishing set and costume design, and a Bay Area state of mind for the U.S. debut of poet and playwright James Fenton's adaptation.

Fenton's "Zhao" had a controversial English run after the Royal Shakespeare Company cast its production almost entirely with Caucasian actors in 2012. According to Wong, Perloff's decision to cast Asian-American actors was "partly in response (to RSC) but also Carey's aesthetic and cultural specificity."

Wong, who speaks regularly around the country about his experience as a gay, Asian-American actor has always been very conscious of the effects of the roles he takes on the greater landscape of opportunity for often-sidelined actors:

"It's one of the main reasons I wanted to do it, her enthusiasm for casting this way. I do feel that I'm representing any number of groups of people and that I have to act a certain way. It informed my decision to go into the field knowing there's a lack of opportunity, to go into it with a desire for change. I have weighed opportunities, exposure, the quality of the role from a racial perspective."

But if any opportunities to really drop the therapist/priest/doctor's moral compass came up? (Or as I phrased it, "Are you ever like, I'd really like to play that perp!")

"It always fun to play the really bad dude."

"The Orphan of Zhao" runs through June 29 at the American Conservatory Theater (415 Geary). Admission is \$25-\$150. Visit act-sf.org for more info.