Can Theater Save Minority History in U.S. Classrooms?

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Cast of Hamilton at curtain call following the opening night performance at Richard Rodgers Theatre in New York

Charles Sykes / AP

Earlier this spring, the students at Palms Middle School in Los Angeles gathered in their school’s auditorium, their eyes fixed on the stage before
them as a *Hamilton*-inspired rap battle played out.

“My ancestors had a Central Asian persuasion, came to India in what was called the Aryan invasion. This light-skinned group of people would be known as Caucasians when they left to settle down in European locations,” rapped Vinny Chhibber, 36, the actor portraying Bhagat Singh Thind, an Indian American Sikh who fought for U.S. citizenship after serving in the U.S. military during World War I.

“Your honor, we don’t debate ancestral unity. And yet we must condemn the way that Thind speaks with impunity,” Steve Humphreys, 43, responded, playing the immigration and naturalization examiner V.W. Tomlinson (among other roles in the two-man cast).

The students at Palms Middle—80 percent of whom are Latino, African American, or Asian American—laugh as Chhibber and Humphreys throw down. Singh, as the dialogue between the two actors later shows, would eventually gain citizenship after having it granted and rescinded two times in a case that went to the Supreme Court.

*The United States vs. Bhagat Singh Thind* is a production of the Los Angeles-based Asian American theater group East West Players (EWP) and its Youth Arts Education program. Since 2005, East West Players has commissioned a playwright each year to produce a work centered on significant Asian Pacific Americans in U.S. history. Past subjects include the Filipino American novelist Carlos Bulosan; the first Chinese American aviator, Katherine Chung; and the first female gunnery officer in the U.S. Navy, the Korean American Susan Ahn Cuddy.

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The program was started by Marilyn Tokuda, an actress and EWP’s arts education director, who felt theater was an effective conduit for Asian Pacific American history to be presented in classrooms.

“It came out of a need and almost an anger of, “Where are we? Why aren’t we represented?” It’s our history,” said Tokuda, who estimates up to 15,000 students—many of whom attend schools in disadvantaged neighborhoods—see the plays annually.

Mayank Keshaviah, who wrote The United States vs. Bhagat Singh Thind, said the goal is less about changing the hearts and minds of middle-school students and more about exposing them to the history of minority groups that they may not be getting in the classroom.

“It’s not like brown and non-white faces appeared on the scene recently. It’s been there for a while and it’s been part of the building of this country, which is similar to the point of Hamilton. You’re part of America, you’re part of the history,” said Keshaviah.

How minorities are or aren’t represented in U.S. history classes—across all grade levels—continues to be controversial, with some officials not seeing the point of investing in ethnic-studies programs despite evidence that such programs boost students’ academic performances and attendance. Campaigns for including minorities in U.S.-history textbooks have popped up around the country. But Eurocentric narratives have persisted, like when a controversial version of the U.S. slave trade popped up in a high-school
textbook published by McGraw Hill.

Vinny Chhibber and Steve Humphreys in The United States vs. Bhagat Singh Thind (Audrey Yap)

Bias and stereotyping against minorities have also become points of contention, like in Texas where one proposed Mexican American studies textbook includes descriptions that link Mexican Americans to illegal immigration, drug trafficking and a desire to “destroy” U.S. society. Other examples highlight politics from abroad, like the current battle over proposed edits to California’s middle school history books that would replace “India” with “South Asia” and tie Hinduism to the caste system.

Whose version of history makes it into textbooks—and, ultimately, classrooms—can have negative consequences, especially on minority students, as one graduate-level study about textbooks used in suburban high-schools in New York suggested. When minorities are inaccurately or
stereotypically portrayed, minority students themselves question the validity of the source material and, at times, the teachers themselves. The study cites research conducted with Japanese American and Mexican American students, among others, in other parts of the U.S.: “The main conclusion which the authors were able to draw was that when minority students become aware they are not being presented with accurate and unbiased information, they will begin to resent the topic, the text, and the teacher.”

Theater, then, has become one avenue through which non-profit groups in California—a state with a 62 percent minority population and one of the most diverse make-ups in the country—ensure students learn about minorities in U.S. history, both past and present. The ramification of pushing a white-dominant historical narrative, argues EWP’s Tokuda, is erasure of minority voices: “The consequences are that no one will care, and we become invisible again.”

Similar initiatives have emerged around the country, like Red Eagle Soaring Native Youth Theatre in Seattle, which, following the murder of a Native American woodcarver by a police officer, produced a play in 2011 about the violence Native Americans have historically faced at the hands of law enforcement. Silk Road Rising, a theater group in Chicago that focuses on Asian American and Middle Eastern stories, organizes a 16-week writing program for area schools that emphasizes cultural sensitivity, at the end of which students produce an original 10-minute play.

But whether these lessons stick is debatable. Many programs, like EWP’s, parachute into schools once a year, making stories about marginalized groups an event rather than endemic to students’ educations.

Administrators of the three programs I examined for this story could only cite anecdotal evidence and surveys—self-reported by teachers and students—about the efficacy of their programs. It’s unclear what lasting effect, if any,
the programs have had on white students.

Brent Blair, an associate professor of theatre practice at the University of Southern California, sees the potential shortcomings of these initiatives. He specializes in Theatre of the Oppressed, a set of techniques developed by the Brazilian director Augusto Boal that emphasize audience-performer interaction to promote messages of social change.

He likens the programs to students reading a play about someone who is bullied for being gay, the proposed lessons of which can be limited, even entirely ineffective, depending on how students interact with the material. “There’s no indication that reading that inclusive story in the classroom is going to shift anybody’s perspective except possibly make the class, en masse, collectively grateful that they themselves are not gay,” said Blair.

Per the pedagogy of Theatre of the Oppressed, the theater experience, he says, has to be more participatory for the audience in order to generate a lasting sense of empathy for the “oppressed” party, e.g., gay cast members act out a scene then invite audience members to imitate the cast members’ roles onstage and attempt to fight against the bully. “Then the audience members, students in the classrooms, [put] themselves in the shoes of the person and fail against a strong antagonist. The hearts have to be changed in attempting actions before the mind has a strong shift in perspective.”

“When you’re not a DREAMer, you don’t realize the challenges you’re not facing”
Blair points to several case studies where Theatre of the Oppressed techniques were used, including a community theater project engaging at-risk youth in South Africa and another one with homeless women in New Haven, Connecticut. But he acknowledges that measuring the efficacy of Theatre of the Oppressed techniques is difficult. The case studies, for example, do not show how these productions impacted the community around them and whether they had influenced lasting change.

Homero Rosas, 20, is one actor who is directly connected to the experience he portrays on-stage. The San Francisco-based student is a cast member of *In and Out of the Shadows*, a musical about the Bay Area’s undocumented youth, sometimes known as “DREAMers.” Written by the Chicano poet and novelist Gary Soto and based on hundreds of first-person interviews, the production is the brainchild of the San Francisco Youth Theatre director and composer Emily Klion. A third of the cast is made up of undocumented actors from an array of backgrounds, including Mexican, Filipino, and Guatemalan. The show is performed at middle schools, high schools, and colleges.

“When you’re not a DREAMer, you don’t realize the challenges you’re not facing,” Klion said. Klion first took notice of those issues—including not being able to travel, attend school, or retain work permits—when she tried hiring several students as interns, only to learn that they did not have social-security numbers. Rosas was one of them.

“I definitely didn’t know what I couldn’t do because I wasn’t born here, but I knew I wasn’t born here,” said Rosas, who came to the U.S. at age 6. He says his undocumented status has made him fearful of traveling outside of California; in the past 14 years, he says he has only gone as far as Oregon.

Growing up, he was astutely aware of his family’s status. “It was more cautionary tales like, ‘Watch out for immigration,’ or ‘[Don’t get in trouble]
‘cause if you get in trouble, they’ll send you back to Mexico and you can’t come back.’ It was very direct.”

In the production, Rosas plays “Juan #2,” a light-hearted high-school senior who loves to skateboard. While initially hesitant to share his own story with Soto and Klion, he ultimately found the experience cathartic and hopes to humanize the plight of undocumented young people like himself. “People sometimes forget that we are normal human beings that are not documented. That’s the only difference between me and my neighbors, between me and my classmates.”

Rosas sees the play as a launching point for discussing the legal purgatory DREAMers find themselves in; Soto does, too. “I would ask our government to answer the question of undocumented youth. What is their legal status? How are we going to weave them into our country?” said Soto, the playwright. “They’re not going anywhere. They’re here. So how are we going to possibly welcome them in a legal manner? That would be the highest goal [of this production].”

California’s immigrant history was also central to L.A. Opera’s in-school residency program this year. Adapting the music from Giacomo Puccini’s *Turandot*, *The Legend of Cannery Row* is an original operetta set in Monterey, California, and depicts the story of Chinese immigrants as they built up the area’s fishing industry in the 1850s.

Stacy Brightman, the senior director of education and community outreach at L.A. Opera, says she saw parallels in *Turandot*—about a prince who travels to China and falls in love with a princess—with the Chinese American experience of discrimination and rejection.

“The unknown prince is a stranger in a strange land. He comes into the kingdom and falls in love with the princess who disdains him. It’s sort of like
all the stories of immigrants and all the different ways they heard, ‘I might want your money, I might want your labor, but I don’t want you,’” Brightman said.

Opera professionals teach the 10-week program to select L.A. county elementary schools, with students concluding the program by performing the play as chorus singers. Brightman says she deliberately picks works that can resonate with the history of minorities in California to not only reflect the student body of Los Angeles Unified School District—the second largest school district in the country, almost 90 percent of whom are minority students—but also to change the stereotype that opera is an art form exclusively accessible to the old, rich, and white.

Next year’s play will be *The White Bird of Poston* about the Poston War Relocation Center, a Japanese internment camp housed on the Colorado River Indian Reservation between 1942 and 1945.

The stage, then, has become one place where minority history is not only acted out but also remembered as part of a larger U.S. historical narrative, something history textbook scribes may want to consider since students of color account for more than half of today’s public-school population—and that minority-majority shift is expected to take place for the entire U.S. population within the next few decades.

It also highlights the ways history sometimes repeats itself: Bhagat Singh Thind fought for the right to wear his turban during his military service in 1918. A Sikh U.S. Army captain was engaged in—and won—a similar fight in April.

After the showing of the *The United States vs. Bhagat Singh Thind* at Palms Middle ended, the students peppered the actors, playwright, and director with questions about how they learned their lines, whether they could “feel”
what the characters were feeling. They ask about whether the rap battle actually took place. The answer? It didn’t—at least according to the history books.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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