

# 'A Beautiful Country' blooms virtually

Sunday, December 6, 2020 - 5:37pm



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[NINA MOLINA \(/AUTHOR/NIMOLINA\)](#)

Daily Arts Writer



When the cast of *A Beautiful Country* heard the announcement of the suspension of in-person classes in March due to COVID-19, they gathered for one last rehearsal, taped it on an iPhone, and uploaded it to Google Drive. Then, over the summer, Music, Theatre & Dance sophomore Charlotte Um heard rumors of the production moving online.

Finally, this past Wednesday, Dec. 2, “[A Beautiful Country](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H_PsV61Va4A&feature=youtu.be)” premiered on YouTube and is now available for the public.

*A Beautiful Country* was originally produced in 1998 by Chay Yew, exploring 150 years of Asian American immigration and assimilation, and exposing previously untold or erased stories. The word for “America” in Chinese, is “mei guo” which translates to “beautiful country.” Miss Visa Denied, a drag queen played by Music, Theatre & Dance junior Morgan Bo in the University production, leads the audience through a chronicling of the Asian American experience. Vignettes of a variety of experiences tell stories of racism, the American Dream, sacrifice and identity. Most of the cast plays multiple characters, embodying different lives and humanizing their stories.

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Despite the range of characters, Um found her three characters — Mary, Lam Woo and Girl — relatable to her own experience as a second generation Korean American.

“Growing up, I was surrounded by a very specific demographic. My entire worldview and the standard of beauty and everything was very Caucasian,” Um said. “I would get made fun of — small microaggressions that I can now see as I’m older but didn’t understand at the time like how my food smells different or questions like ‘can you see through your eyes?’”

Um found a special connection to the character of Mary with her struggle with the language barrier.

“Both of my grandmothers speak English, but sometimes, growing up, it would be a little bit more difficult to communicate,” Um said. “I definitely really relate to kind of feeling like an outsider growing up, and being afraid to be different from others.”

Music, Theatre & Dance 2020 Graduate Amanda Kuo also found parts of herself and her family in the characters she portrayed.

“I think all my characters are people who grew up in, or were comfortable in one circumstance and either were taken out by war or poverty and forced to adapt to a completely different culture,” Kuo said.

Kuo was originally cast as Nancy, a character based on a real person in California who was interviewed for the 1998 production. But since the play’s revamping, the directors encouraged Kuo to write another testimony if she wanted. So, Kuo wrote the testimony of Elizabeth Tan, her grandmother who had just written a memoir.

“I interviewed her talking about what it was like. What it actually feels like to be here, but kind of an outsider, and I think what’s so fascinating about her is that she sees herself as American. Everyone else who looks at her would be like, ‘Oh, you’re Indonesian’ ‘Are you even a citizen?’” Kuo said.

The play explores the way in which Asian Americans were dehumanized and viewed as cheap labor — Kuo found that those stories like that of her grandmother have been erased from history.

“I think the model minority myth is a big thing to tackle, and the show tackles it really well. There are so many Asian American narratives that we just don’t know about, all the way from the 1800’s hundred’s to the ‘90s,” Kuo said. “Our modern notion of what Asian American is lies on the backs of women who aren’t even really written into history.”

Kuo’s deep connection to her characters was not uncommon in the cast of “A Beautiful Country.” Music, Theatre & Dance and Literature, Science & Arts junior Alexandra Lee saw herself in all three of her characters. Along with Kuo, Lee also wrote her own monologue. Hers was based on another living Asian American woman — artist and activist Kristina Wong.



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“When I was interviewing her, I found that we had a lot of similarities. She talked about this notion that because you’re Asian American you have to fit the certain stereotypes or follow this rubric. As an Asian artist, and as someone who has multiple Asian identities,” Lee said.

Being both Korean and Japanese American, Lee related to not fitting into any of the boxes one is “supposed” to fit into.

“I had a connection to her because I saw that she was working really hard to break the stereotypes and follow her own trajectory, not the one that people had placed on her because of her identities,” Lee said.

According to Lee, the attention paid to the humanity of the characters began back at auditions.

“They brought me in for a callback, and they just sat me down and we just had a conversation about my Asian identity. Growing up, being Asian American, being an Asian American artist and actress. They really just wanted to understand my perspective and my experiences,” Lee said. “They really wanted people to have some sort of connection with the role that they played in the pieces that they were a part of. And it showed through because everybody was so passionate about the roles they were playing.”

Though much of the cast related to their characters’ identities, there was also an entire history to learn, one not often taught in American history. The cast worked with dramaturges to educate themselves about Asian American history.

“A lot of the time Asian racism can be pushed aside. And I think it’s very important for everyone to know the history of Asian American immigration heritage and all the struggles that my ancestors and my classmates’ ancestors have experienced and telling the story of that is really important, because it’s often overlooked,” Um said.

The biggest hurdle was then to rehearse with students at home and some performing in Ann Arbor. Performers on campus filmed in the Arthur Miller Theater socially distanced, having to enforce “room rest,” where students left the room after forty minutes.

“What is very cool about the virtual production is that this scope of audience is much wider. My grandmother can see her monologue and she probably would have never seen that. And so that’s important,” Kuo said.

Though the lives portrayed in *A Beautiful Country* are wrought with hardship, the show is so multi dimensional, balancing dark elements with light-hearted and comedic moments.

“I think one thing that resonated with me is that nobody in the show fits into a box. It’s diverse and that’s kind of the whole point of *A Beautiful Country*,” Lee said. “We are Asian

American, but that doesn't mean that your perception of Asian American is who all of us are. So I think one thing that I left with is knowing that my identity is valid.”

Daily Arts Writer Nina Molina can be reached at [nimolina@umich.edu](mailto:nimolina@umich.edu) (<mailto:nimolina@umich.edu>).

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