

I was sitting at home, minding my own business--well, I guess that's not true because I was scrolling on Facebook, which is the ultimate in minding other people's business. Anyway, I was sitting at home, minding other people's business when I saw this:

"An all-white production of The Wiz...should it be done?"

My friend posted the question because a production at Stage Door Fine Arts in Hinsdale currently features a White cast of The Wiz.

According to The Guide to Musical Theatre, "The Wiz is a black version of the perennial Wizard of Oz. The characters and storyline are largely faithful to the 1939 movie version of L. Frank Baum's 1900 story." Produced in 1975 on Broadway, it went on to win 7 Tony Awards.

Wikipedia states that The Wiz "is a retelling of L. Frank Baum's classic 1900 children's novel The Wonderful Wizard of Oz in the context of modern African-American culture.

My friend's question got a flood of responses from theatre makers along the lines of:

"Hell no."

"Nnnnnnnnope!"

"It's called The Wizard of Oz."

And some hilarious GIFs:

Of course, some felt compelled to defend the choice. I jumped into the fray in response to one of the defenders, who stated that her daughter's school also produced The Wiz with an all-white cast because of the "lack of diversity in their community." The defender expressed

that even though it was "a bit weird" to have an all-white cast, she was happy that the kids got to experience the music.

Then, because Defender was trying to kill me, she explained that her daughter's school also produced *In The Heights* by Lin Manuel Miranda (*Hamilton*) with an all-White cast. Wikipedia states that "The story is set over three days, involving characters in the largely Hispanic-American neighborhood of Washington Heights in New York City."

This was my response:

"With respect, I am an actress, writer, and director. A White production of *The Wiz* or *In The Heights* is cultural appropriation and teaches White children that they are entitled to everything regardless of who it is for and who it represents. The students could have experienced the musicals by listening to them, not being in them. Please consider speaking with your theatre director about the choices they are making and the messages they are sending."

Here was defender's response:

"My white child CAN do anything. Doesn't mean she believes she is entitled to anything. With all due respect, I have encouraged her to embrace All works of art and all people. That is not to say I don't think an All white anything is appropriate, if that is the criteria. In our town, much to my dismay, we don't have much diversity, that's just what it is...but I still, just like all mothers, want to subject her to All and any works of art. I won't tell her she can just listen but not touch...just not what I believe in. Personally, I don't see why a theatre director chooses an All Latino show, followed by an almost all Asian show, but it's not my choice and I would never

discourage my daughter from participating. Perhaps they are looking to expose these kids to other cultures, through theatre? We are not divisive and appreciate all people experiencing the culture of all others, in fact, I think this may help make us appreciate each other at a greater level. I don't believe any work of art is "for" a specific "people," even though it may indeed "represent" a specific people. As a Jew, I welcome any Christian to play any role in Fiddler on The Roof. I hope it broadens their understanding when they submerge themselves in the culture and understand the conditions that drove my people from their homes."

Hold on to the above exchange for a moment, and let me tell you about how The Hungarian State Opera is currently presenting a White production of Porgy and Bess. The New York Times says that Porgy and Bess is "This landmark 1935 opera, based on a novel and a subsequent play... set in the fictional African-American community of Catfish Row in Charleston, S.C." The estates of George and Ira Gershwin, the show's creators, stipulate that the opera be performed only by black casts.

The Wiz in Hinsdale, Illinois, and Porgy and Bess in Hungary exist on a continuum. You can't have Porgy and Bess in Hungary if you don't have The Wiz in Hinsdale, Illinois. And the common thread is White entitlement.

Now, back to the defender's statement:

"My white child CAN do anything. Doesn't mean she believes she is entitled to anything."

And therein lies the very core of entitlement: the crux of privilege. If a White child is told they CAN do anything, they are simultaneously being taught that they are entitled to everything. The

Hungarian State Opera was required to add to all printed materials that the production is "taking place without authorization and "is contrary to the requirements for the presentation of the work." That is a brazen display of privilege and entitlement.

Entitlement and privilege don't take "no" for an answer. Entitlement and privilege don't think words like "stop" apply to them. Entitlement and privilege will be printed on a poster with no shame that what they want to do is more important than what was intended.

Here's my response to a defender who claimed that kids weren't "taking roles from professional actors" on Stage Door Fine Arts Facebook page:

"They may not be "taking roles," but they are being taught a lesson of entitlement, that everything is theirs for the taking whether it is meant for them or not. It teaches them appropriation and ultimately perpetuates supremacy. I get that's not your intent but please consider intention vs. impact and the fact that actions speak louder than words."

The fact is, defender-lady, it's okay that there are some things that your White child can "listen" to but not "touch" as you describe. In these cases, "listening" is cultural appreciation, and "touching" is cultural appropriation. There is no loss if your child simply listens to an authentic expression of a culture. Instead, she stands to gain more by standing back and realizing she can value something and honor it without owning it.