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The Yellow Jacket (1912): Chinese Opera as Techne in Early Twentieth-Century American Theatre*

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This paper addresses the issue of cultural borrowing by examining *The Yellow Jacket*, one of the first American yellowface dramas inspired by Chinese Opera staging methods. Written by two American playwrights, Joseph Harry Benrimo and George C. Hazelton Jr, it premiered on Broadway in 1912 under Benrimo's direction, and by the 1920s, it achieved phenomenal success as an American avant-garde high-art drama.

Set in an imaginary old China where supernatural magic permeates, the story of *The Yellow Jacket* is undoubtedly a product of American Orientalism. That is, however, not all there seems to be to this play. Paying sufficient attention to the play's local, personal, and international history leads to the understanding that *The Yellow Jacket* was the most original attempt to imitate (though in a limited form) Eastern culture in a way that had never been tried before. The 1910s was the era of early modernism, during which the East and the West influenced each other. Chinese theatres on both sides of the Pacific increasingly adopted Western realism eliminating the extra-theatrical elements such as *Jianchang* (Chinese visible stagehand), for example, from their stages. In contrast, as the case of *The Yellow Jacket* shows, Western theatre attempted to analyze, imitate, or incorporate Chinese (in particular Cantonese) traditional theatrical techne (visible silent stagehands, visible musicians, self-introductory soliloquy, miming, and minimum stage set and props), often deliberately or unintentionally inventing new hybrid, metatheatrical traditions out of creative mis/reading.

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1. Introduction

The Yellow Jacket is one of the first American yellowface dramas inspired by Chinese Opera. Written by two American playwrights, Joseph Harry Benrimo and George C. Hazelton Jr., it premiered on Broadway in New York in November 1912 under Benrimo's direction. As its subtitle "A Chinese Play Done in a Chinese Manner" suggests, it was promoted as the first full-fledged endeavor by American writers to adopt traditional Chinese Opera staging methods. The play received favorable reviews but only lasted a few weeks on its first run. Benrimo, determined to make it a success, immediately took it to Europe.

In March 1913, the European tour began in London. Over the next few decades, *The Yellow Jacket* was translated into more than ten languages and performed in various European and Russian cities. Top-notch directors such as Max Reinhardt (Berlin), Gustav Lindemann (Düsseldorf), and Alexander Tairov (Moscow) participated in the production and direction of the play. The phenomenal success of its European tour led to international acclaim of *The Yellow Jacket* as an American avant-garde experimental drama.[1] Meanwhile, *The Yellow Jacket* had several successful revivals in the U.S. During its first revival run in 1916, the *New York Times* called it "The Play That Went Round the World."[2] By the end of the 1920s, the play had been staged not only in the U.S. and Europe, but in Chile and other Latin American countries and even in Japan and China.[3]

In this paper I will consider the issue of cultural borrowing by examining this American-made mock Chinese drama as a case study. Cultural borrowing includes imitation, mimicry, translation, transplantation, adaptation, assimilation, appropriation, mistranslation, and reinvention of other cultures. *The Yellow Jacket* is a classic example of the West imitating the East and appropriating Eastern cultural capital. But that is not all there seems to be to this play. By paying sufficient attention to the local, personal, and intercultural history of *The Yellow Jacket*, we may be able to view this unique faux drama from a more multifaceted perspective. For better or worse, white performers acting in yellowface or *playing Chinese* on the American stage in the early twentieth century was a way for the West to attempt to engage with (and frequently exploit) the East; and in so doing, the complex, but not necessarily one-way relationship between the two cultures was variously fictionalized. Among many such dramas, *The Yellow Jacket* emerged as a most (if not the most) original attempt to imitate (or even emulate) Eastern cultures in a way that had never been done before.

And as the West chose to engage with the East, the East also engaged with the West (often out of necessity) in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. For example, it was often the case that Asian theatre companies from China or Japan would temporarily or on an ongoing basis adjust their traditional repertoire to promote their culture to foreign and international audiences.

The 1910s was the era of so-called "early modernism." Asia was a destination in which Western artists and playwrights were seeking what to them would be new forms and ideas that would revolutionize traditional Western stages. However asymmetrical their relationship might be, the East and the West influenced each other from the late nineteenth century onward. The California gold rush that began in 1848 led to increased Asian immigration to the Pacific Rim, and cultural traffic expanded in the late nineteenth century. After the 1880s, even with growing exclusionism toward Asian immigrants, cultural border crossings took place in the U.S. in various forms. *The Yellow Jacket* was one among many such cases. At its 1912 premiere in New York, Chinese theatres in San Francisco, which had inspired the young Benrimo, had an over fifty-year history. On both sides of the Pacific, traditional Chinese theatre tried to reinvent itself by introducing Western realism and female performers to the stage. In contrast, as the case of *The Yellow Jacket* shows, Western theatre attempted to analyze, imitate, or incorporate Chinese, in particular Cantonese, traditional theatrical techne (arts, crafts, and concepts behind them), often deliberately or unintentionally inventing a new hybrid tradition out of creative (mis)-reading.

2. The Mock-Chinese "Property Man": What He Can and Cannot Do

The Yellow Jacket is undoubtedly a product of American Orientalism. Set in an imaginary old "China" where supernatural magic permeates, the drama tells the story of Wu Hoo Git, the eldest son of the Governor (also called the "Emperor" in the play) of this fictional ancient feudalistic society. Wu Hoo Git's growth, or, to use Benrimo's metaphor, his "Pilgrim's Progress," from tragically orphaned babyhood to super-human adulthood, comprises the play's main plot.[4] As is often the case with this type of heroic fantasy, the protagonist's life is anything but easy. Wu Hoo Git is destined to face many ordeals before he attains his goals. He naively pursues true passion and desires to know who he is. His first love with a beautiful prostitute ends up fruitless. He attempts suicide but is saved and

eventually finds his true love in a young woman named Moy Fah Loy (aka Plum Blossom). It is almost at the risk of his life that he wins a series of battles against the fantastic monsters (such as Giant Spider, Human-Tiger, God of Thunder, etc.), supernatural proxies of his aesthetic half-brother-cum-wizard Daffodil (Wu Fah Din). Eventually, the hero regains his stolen birthright (i.e., the throne), banishes his half-brother Daffodil to the flower garden, and marries Plum Blossom; thus, the drama comes to a happy ending. The harsher the ordeals, the larger than life the hero appears in overcoming them.

The play's plotline is typical of many heroic fantasy dramas that can be found in many countries' folklore or legends, not necessarily in China's alone. Thus, what made *The Yellow Jacket* seem exotic and sufficiently "Chinese" to appeal to American audiences in the 1910s was not its story, but its staging, which Benrimo partially "adopted" from Chinese Opera. And Benrimo faced considerable challenges in attempting to adopt Chinese Opera forms to the American stage. First and foremost, acting, reciting, singing, acrobatics, and martial arts (especially sword play)—essentials of Chinese Opera—require talent, years of study, and rigorous training of the actors. Benrimo could not possibly find white American actors with such skills at that time.

However, there are always some aspects of acting and directing methods of one culture that can be studied, imitated, and even partially incorporated by someone from another culture. Stylized miming or pantomime in Chinese Opera was such an element that Benrimo could incorporate into his play. Mime is a universal language, that beginners of the art can at least understand, even if it is difficult for them to execute. Very noticeable in *The Yellow Jacket* is the minimal number of onstage props. The actors must mime situations such as riding horses, opening and closing imaginary doors, moving around the stage to indicate a shift in location, and fighting symbolic combats.[5] The numerous stage directions for mimes in the script of *The Yellow Jacket*, common with or similar to those in Chinese Opera, suggest that *The Yellow Jacket* attempts to imitate or copy at least some of the Chinese figurative acting styles and stagecraft.[6]

Therefore, it is no surprise that the role that attracted the most attention from Western audiences, theatre critics, and the play's authors in the production history of *The Yellow Jacket* is not the lead role but that of the "property man," who communicates through mime. Benrimo and Hazelton maintain that they "borrowed bodily" this role from the Chinese theatre.[7] As inferred from this given name, the property man in *The Yellow Jacket* is a

stagehand who provides and handles props. He performs his job in full view of the audience under the implicit rule of "invisibility." The Chorus explains this rule to the novice audience at the outset of the drama: "Ere departing my footsteps hence, let me impress upon you that my property man is to your eyes intensely invisible."[8]

The property man is silent but mimes much more than the other actors who speak the dialogue. He wears sober worker's clothes of blue denim, in stark contrast to the serene scholars' garments worn by the Chorus and the opulent Chinese Opera costumes worn by the leading actors. Always aloof and indifferent to the drama's storyline, the property man is a jack-of-all-trades who anticipates scene changes and acts accordingly. He and his crew perform several actions very typical of Chinese Opera, such as building a castle in the air, floating a love boat on the River of Love, and making alpine mountains using simple chairs and tables. The property man holds a ladder for the actors to climb in the tearful death scenes. This ladder climbing is probably a mock-Chinese stunt devised by Benrimo to represent the actor's symbolic ascent to heaven, though in reality "heaven" is only four rungs up the ladder. The Chorus refers to the "invisibility" of the stagehands both at the beginning and the end of the drama, thus framing the play within the rules of Chinese Opera represented by the property man.

As a nonentity on the stage that the audience supposedly cannot see, the property man in *The Yellow Jacket* is similar to the traditional Asian stagehands: the *Jianchang* in Chinese Opera, the *koken* in Japanese Noh theatre, and the *kuroko* in Japanese Kabuki theatre. Simultaneously, however, the property man of *The Yellow Jacket* deviates from his Asian models in that he can turn himself into a comic role that wreaks havoc on stage regardless of what is taking place in the storyline. This trait made him both eye-catching and controversial to Western audiences. Edward Gordon Craig, a prominent British stage designer, saw a London performance of *The Yellow Jacket* and criticized its property man for being too conspicuous and inconsistent with traditional Asian stagehands: "…the English property man is quite contrary to ideas held regarding him in China or Japan. He has been the play's central figure and has quite eclipsed the real actors who interpreted the story. Thus he has produced an effect which is quite the opposite to that intended on the stages of the East."[9]

In cross-cultural negotiations, encounters with the unknown are usually understood through what is already known. If so, were Benrimo and Hazelton, well versed in American comedy clichés, trying to create a mute deadpan comedian out of nonchalant serious Chinese Jianchang?

Or did they find or unconsciously misread Asian stagehands to be funny by nature? Is it possible that it was the actor, not the scriptwriter, who held the key to clowning the role of this property handler? The authors' explanatory foreword to the script of this play does not give us a clear answer: "The purpose of the creators of this play is to string on a thread of universal philosophy, love, and laughter the jade beads of Chinese theatrical convention. Their effort has been to reflect the spirit rather than the substance. To do this, the property man had to be *overwrought*; the Chorus had to be introduced."[10] Even if the actor playing this Americanized property man is "overwrought" so that he can create a parody of the Chinese Jianchang, expected moments of laughter he might induce are not clear from the script of the play. The extent to which the audience knows the traditional theatrical norms for a visible stagehand's behavior would also affect the quality and quantity of the laughs.

Many talented comedians, including the renowned Hollywood goofball jester Harpo Marx, have played the role of the property man in *The Yellow Jacket*. Accordingly, it would be unreasonable to assume the character was written as a wholly serious role without any intention of it being played at least in part as a clown. Yet the extent to which American stagehands deviated from the norms of Chinese stagehands undoubtedly varied greatly depending on who played the role.[11]

At the New York premiere in 1912, Arthur Shaw played the "Property Man" to great acclaim. That he understood the potential (self-)-destructiveness inherent on his part is evident from his comments in a newspaper interview. He emphasized in the interview that what was essential in his playing the role of the stagehand was not so much "what he does" as "what he does not do." If he showed even the slightest excitement about anything other than "his job as a property man," it "blows the whole illusion," and he soon would have been fired.[12]

Arnold Genthe, known for his photographs of old San Francisco Chinatown, took stage photographs of the play. In the photo shown in Fig. 1, three men are onstage. Shaw's property man is in the middle behind the table. Plainly clothed, with a cigarette in his mouth and chopsticks in his right hand, he is leisurely serving tea to the actors seated before him, who are dressed in sumptuous Chinese costumes and heavy makeup. Storywise, the scene depicts two cunning villains plotting the assassination of the Governor's first wife and his eldest son (the main protagonist). This photo contains contrasting and conflicting details, capturing the play's divided and layered worldview (or stage view). The table in the middle separates

Fig. 1. Arnold Genthe, "Scenes from the play called the Yellow Jacket by George C. Hazelton and Benrimo." Genthe Photograph Collection, Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division.

the fictional world of the rich plot in the foreground from the paratheatrical world of the stagehand in the background. Numerous exotic details coexist, but a closer look reveals inconsistencies. For example, Shaw's property man simultaneously plays with a teacup and chopsticks. One might wonder what the odd combination of these two props has to do with serving tea. The photograph alone demonstrates that even Shaw's restrained performance of the property man could easily have disturbed the story and provoked laughter at any time and place, but only if he chose to do so.

Brander Matthews, a professor of drama studies at Columbia University, was one of the most respected drama critics in early twentieth-century America. He wrote an "Introduction" to *The Yellow Jacket* at the request of the authors, in which he extolled the dual appeal of an exotic story presented in the exotic manner of the play. It is worth noting that he approved of *The Yellow Jacket* as a Chinese play. Without hesitation, he asserted: "They [Benrimo and Hazelton] give us a Chinese drama, dealing with Chinese motives, and presented in the Chinese manner." To appreciate this exotic play, he continues, the audience goes through a kind of psychological back and forth from laughter to tears, and from tears to laughter: "With a firm reliance on our appreciation of the exotic, they invite us to smile at conventions which seem to us ludicrous in the extreme—and then, a moment later, they summon us to use our imagination to curb our laughter, and to let ourselves be taken captive by the sad plight of the human beings who people their play."[13] Although there is no direct reference to the property man here, it is reasonable to assume that the visible stagehand in question is among what Matthews calls the

"conventions which seem to us ludicrous in the extreme." Here Matthews implies that Chinese theatrical conventions repeatedly caused audiences to be both drawn away from, and attracted to, the play's story.

According to the Chinese Opera historian Tohru Kato, the Chinese Jianchang developed as a "necessary evil" to bring props to the stage when there were no such devices as stage curtains or revolving sets. Unlike Japanese kuroko or koken, Chinese property men carried tea to the actors and handed them towels to wipe their sweat during stand-up routines. Moreover, it was common for the Jianchang to appear in plain clothes and sometimes even half-naked because he was supposed to be invisible to the audience. When Mei Lanfang gave his first performance of Beijing Opera in Japan in 1919 at the Imperial Theatre in Tokyo, Japanese audiences were captivated by his exquisite female impersonating performances. Still, they were duly shocked and perplexed to see a property man in a thin shirt walking around on stage throughout the performance.[14] It is known that Mei did not use stagehands during his famous U.S. tours in the 1930s, "lest the audience's attention be distracted."[15]

Often described as a "symbol of the backwardness and sloppiness of Chinese theatre," Jianchang was also a role whose duties required years of specialized training and effort. Like famous actors and musicians, many Jianchang masters left their names in history. To Japanese and Western audiences of the early twentieth century, Jianchang could be disturbing or comically expendable; but to Chinese audiences who, through what Kato calls "negative imagination," knew how to avoid paying attention to extraneous people or objects on the stage, Jianchang was an essentially invisible presence.[16]

Differing historical circumstances in Western and Chinese theatre at the time of productions of *The Yellow Jacket* further complicates our understanding of the role of the property man. Around the same time the stagehand of *The Yellow Jacket* was celebrated for his fictionality in the West, the unrealistic Jianchang was banished from the stage in favor of realism in China. Starting in the late nineteenth century, the influence of Western realism on Chinese theatre intensified during the period of the Republic of China (1911–1949), taking the form of eliminating non-theatrical elements from the audience's view. Along with visible stagehands, visible musicians and non-theatrical communication between actors and audiences during performances were also eliminated from the stage. Thus, regardless of whether the property man in *The Yellow Jacket* was played as a parody of a Jianchang, a parody of himself as a Chinese

stagehand, or even a twisted American copy of the Chinese original, his culturally mixed presence evoked the days gone by of the cosmopolitan Chinese theatre in nineteenth-century San Francisco, that no longer existed in China itself. It was there in San Francisco that the young Benrimo had his first experience of crossing cultural borders that piqued his lifelong interest in Chinese Opera. The mock Chinese stagehand that Benrimo created remains a reminder of how Chinese actors in the late nineteenth century were perceived by "foreign" audiences in the old theatres of San Francisco Chinatown as bewildering, mesmerizing, absurd, or simply enjoyable.

3. A Phantom of the Chinese Opera

In a 1923 letter to a newspaper reporter, Benrimo attributed his writing of *The Yellow Jacket* to a particular theatre that left a strong impression in his childhood memories. It was the Old Chinese Theatre (also called the Royal Chinese) on Jackson Street in San Francisco Chinatown, which he said he frequented in his youth: "*The Yellow Jacket* is a reflection of my wandering in San Francisco Chinatown as a boy, and of many hours spent in the old Jackson Street Theatre."[17] From its opening in 1867, the Old Chinese Theatre did such lucrative business (as did other Chinese theatres in the vicinity which opened in the 1870s) in the international tourist city of San Francisco that it became the flagship Chinese theatre in America. It became a cultural symbol of both the cosmopolitan city of San Francisco and the ethnic Chinese immigrant community within the city. The theatre boasted 1,200 seats, with an architecturally hybrid interior incorporating Western-style seating and galleries, while the stage was specially designed for Chinese Opera performances.[18] In this theatre, the young Benrimo first saw "the actors creating mountains from chairs," his property man's Asian prototypes or role models.[19]

Benrimo's experiences at the Old Chinese Theatre may also have influenced his decision to become an actor who played Chinese roles in yellowface dramas. Benrimo played a few minor Chinese roles in Francis Powers' *The First Born*, a drama that realistically portrays family life in contemporary Chinatown. When David Belasco, the eminent stage producer famous for his realism, purchased the play, Benrimo moved with him to New York.

However, Benrimo's childhood memories of the Old Chinese Theatre on Jackson Street and actually his critique of Belascoesque realism were his

inspiration for writing *The Yellow Jacket.* Benrimo explained:

> I was with Belasco, who was a master of detail and realism, every manager was endeavoring to copy him, and productions became more and more extravagant in costumes and furnishing….I determined to write a play in which the audience would have some scope for their imagination; remembering many hours spent in the old Jackson Street Theatre with the Chinese actors creating mountains from chairs etc... the idea occurred to me to write a play in which the story depended on the actors, and pay the audience the compliment of using their imagination.[20]

Indeed, the anti-realistic aspects of *The Yellow Jacket* influenced later generations of playwrights. For example, without *The Yellow Jacket*'s property man and his spokesperson Chorus, there would have been no stage manager playing the role of the stagehand-cum-narrator in Thornton Wilder's experimental anti-illusionist (but non-Orientalist) play *Our Town* (1930). And the role of the interpreter-cum-foolish-sage Sakini in the neo-Orientalist play *The Teahouse of the August Moon* (John Patrick's 1953 dramatization of Vern Snyder's novel of the same title) would have been much smaller role, as it was in the original novel.[21]

Yet when *The Yellow Jacket* premiered at the Fulton Theatre in New York under Benrimo's direction, its stage was, albeit in hindsight, full of eerie realism. As a poster for the 1912 performance of *The Yellow Jacket* clearly states, the Fulton stage was set up to replicate the stage of the Old Chinese Theatre on Jackson Street: "The Scene Represents the Stage of a Chinese Theatre, Modeled After the Old Jackson Street Theatre, San Francisco."[22] The basic structural similarities are apparent when one compares a photo of the Fulton stage with a stage photo of the actual Old Chinese Theatre in the late nineteenth century (Figs. 2 and 3). In both pictures, we find an alcove in the back center (for musicians to play in), an entrance and an exit to the stage, and above the alcove, a vacant square hole which Benrimo explains represents heaven. There are no wings to the stage, which looks quite bare, with minimal props. The wall tapestries are general decorations, not specifical to any particular scene. In the case of the Fulton stage, one can see tableau curtains added, which, although not visible in the photo, were symbolically decorated with a dragon pattern, one on each side, further adding a Chinoiserie effect.

The 1913 London production of the play used similar scenery but

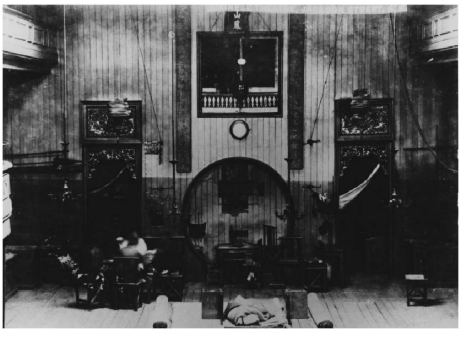

Fig. 2. The Stage of the Royal China Theatre on Jackson Street in San Francisco (ca. 1880–1890). Digital Archive of Chinese Theater in California

Fig. 3. The stage of T*he Yellow Jacket* at the Fulton Theatre 1912. From Walter Prichard Eaton, *Plays and Players, Leaves from a Critic's Scrapbook* (Cincinnati: Stewart & Kidd Company, 1916). Pdf. https://www.loc.gov/item/16025167/. Library of Congress

described its origin differently as "an exact reproduction of one of the Principal Theatres in Canton."[23] And in Europe and Russia, the Chinese elements of the staging were not presented realistically but instead in accord with new anti-realistic aestheticism of the avant-garde theatres.[24] It is interesting to consider possible reasons that Benrimo decided to decorate the stage for the New York premiere in the very realistic way that resembled the Old Chinese Theatre in San Francisco. Did he think that the interior of the San Francisco theatre would give a frame of ethnographical authenticity to his mock "Chinese" drama? Was Benrimo engaging in a type of *architectural yellowface*? Was Benrimo paradoxically expressing non-realism through realism? Or, as Benrimo often stated in newspaper

interviews, did he want to express his lasting adoration for Chinese Opera by literally replicating the Old Chinese Theatre which was one of his inspirations for writing the play? Perhaps, the answer to all of these questions is yes to varying degrees.

The Chinese stage set at the Fulton Theatre as depicted in the photo (Fig. 3) appears both unrealistic and realistic. It looks unrealistic because the stage looks bare without scenery, curtains, and wings—or even a couple of chairs and a table to help actors mime. But it also looks genuine and realistic because it is as if the Old Chinese Theatre had moved to Broadway. This realistic representation found in the 1912 New York staging might have appeared eerie to some, because the original Old Chinese Theatre in San Francisco was no longer extant, having been destroyed by the 1906 earthquake, six years before. The possibility that the Broadway staging might be a replica of the Old Chinese Theatre that existed only in Benrimo's childhood memories and not in actuality, might have enhanced the sense of mystery surrounding it.

Benrimo (and Hazelton) must have carefully studied the original Old Chinese Theatre to create such a replica. With little knowledge of Chinese (let alone Cantonese), he (or they) needed to learn about the Chinese theatres by reading English books and magazine articles. Fortunately, there were numerous writings about Chinese theatres in San Francisco in the latter half of the nineteenth century. The Chinatown theatres advertised their programs in English-language newspapers, invited socially influential figures both in and out of Chinatown as guests of honor, and employed interpreters as needed, all as part of a series of deliberate efforts to open its venues to white and international audiences. As a result, ethnographic accounts, journalistic reportage, tourist guides, and comments on theatrical traditions of Chinese Opera spread. In these texts, Chinese Opera was often compared to Elizabethan theatres in terms of bare stage sets with minimal props and all-male casts. Henry Burden McDowell also mentioned these two points in his *Century Magazine* article "The Chinese Theater," which Benrimo read and clipped for future rereading. He called McDowell's article "the actual genesis of 'The Yellow Jacket.'"[25]

Productions of *The Yellow Jacket* featured both actors and actresses and thus did not have all male casts as was traditionally the case in Chinese Opera. But besides its barebones setting, it also had one more thing in common with Shakespeare's plays: the soliloquy technique, in which the actors speak directly to the audience. Not only did the Chorus speak directly to the audience, but individual characters also introduced themselves to the

audience upon their first appearances. For instance, when the Governor first appears on the stage, he speaks in the following manner:

> I am the most important personage in this play. Therefore, I address you first. By your gracious leave, with many apologies, I will state in all modesty, for your edification only, for of course I know who I am and how great and august I am, while you are not so favored, that I am Wu Sin Yin, the Great.[26]

This soliloquy form of self-introduction is a well-known way for characters to express themselves in Chinese Opera, as well as in Japanese Kabuki and Kyogen theatres. The first sentence clearly shows that the Governor knows he is a character in the play. And this self-conscious soliloquy derived from Chinese theatrical tradition, with a world-as-drama perspective is reminiscent of Shakespeare's famous phrase, "All the world's a stage." The line "I know who I am and how great and august I am" reveals the self-direction of the Governor. The line "you are not so favored" to an audience indicates that he is an actor playing the Governor in front of audiences he treats as his subjects. The eminent playwright and critic Lionel Abel would later call this form of theatre, in which the actor is entirely self-aware of his participation in self-dramatization, "*metatheatre*." In Abel's words, metatheatre is: "the necessary form for dramatizing characters who, having full self-consciousness, cannot but participate in their own dramatization. Hence the famous line of Jaques, Shakespeare's philosopher of metatheatre, 'All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players.'"[27]

If metatheatre is defined as theatre that is conscious of its being theatre, then one of the first embodiments of (intercultural) metatheatre in the U.S. may have been *The Yellow Jacket* at the Fulton Theatre in 1912. Looking at the photos of the Old Chinese Theatre on Jackson Street and the Fulton Theatre on Broadway, one wonders if the stage Benrimo wanted to create then was not just an authentic replica or memento but a mirror stage of his intercultural metatheatrical frame of mind. *The Yellow Jacket* is a drama of cultural borrowing of theatrical and architectural techne over racial, geographical, and historical borders. And Benrimo's 1912 New York production of the play shows us how extraordinarily difficult yet excitingly rewarding that can be to realize.

NOTE

[1] Regarding *The Yellow Jacket*'s change of genres from popular entertainment to avant-garde high art, see Ju Yon Kim, *The Racial Mundane: Asian American Performance and the Embodied Everyday* (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 25–70. Kim examines the play's double veins of symbolic (unrealistic) stagecraft and Chinese "racial mundane" realistically enacted on stage. See also Dongshin Chang, *Representing China on the Historical London Stage* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 140–79. Chang points out London audiences found in *The Yellow Jacket* another "Chinaface novelty" despite its attempts at innovation. Erika Fischer Lichte examines the play's European productions focusing on the rule of the supposed invisibility of the property man. See "What Are the Rules of the Game? Some Remarks on *The Yellow Jacket*," *Theatre Survey* 36, no. 1 (1995): 21–36. doi:10.1017/S0040557400006463. Regarding European reception of the play, see also Min Tian, *The Poetics of Difference and Displacement: Twentieth-Century Chinese-Western Intercultural Theatre* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2008), 27–30.

[2] "The Play That Went Round the World," *New York Times* (26 November 1916): X7.

[3] There are records of Asian performances in Shanghai in 1914 (by professional and amateur actors), as well as Beijing in 1916–17 and Yokohama in 1917 (the latter two by amateur actors, whose racial and ethnic identities to date are unknown as are other production details). "The Record of *The Yellow Jacket,*" in George C. Hazelton and Benrimo, *The Yellow Jacket: A Chinese Play Done in a Chinese Manner in Three Acts* (New York: Samuel French, 1940), 116–17.

[4] Benrimo, "Legend and Truth: The Facts About 'The Yellow Jacket,'" *New York Times* (4 November 1928): 118.

[5] Instead of the acrobatics and swordplay of Chinese Opera, *The Yellow Jacket* uses dancing in slow motion to represent the battle scenes.

[6] For example, detailed stage directions for mimes using "a whip, a banner, and a fan" (in the scene of the villainous Tai Fah Min coming to the Governor's Palace) read: "Loud crash of cymbals: curtain on door left is lifted and Tai Fah Min enters followed by two men; he carries a whip and does pantomime of riding and driving a horse; one of the men who follow him carries a banner inscribed with Chinese characters; this banner is red; the other carries a large fan on a stick; he comes down to left, then crosses right, then to center; goes through business of dismounting his horse, throwing his leg high in the air; the property man assists him and helps his man hold his supposed horse; he lays his whip on the ground behind him; during all this, music." George C. Hazelton and Benrimo, *The Yellow Jacket: A Chinese Play Done in a Chinese Manner in Three Acts.* Illustrated with Photographs by Arnold Genthe (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1913), 10.

[7] Benrimo, "Legend and Truth," 118.

[8] Hazelton and Benrimo, *The Yellow Jacket*, 1913, 4.

[9] "Puppets in Japan," *The Mask* 6 (1913–1914): 217; cited in Olga Taxidou, *The Mask: A Periodical Performance by Edward Gordon Craig* (Amsteldijk, Netherlands: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1998), 109. Taxidou maintains that Craig had his own personal reason to criticize the property man in *The Yellow Jacket*, that is to justify himself as an "Artist of a Theatre." Craig additionally criticized *The Yellow Jacket*'s "Chinoiserie," cynically remarking that it made a "nice parody of the Chinese theatre." See also Min Tian, "Gordon Craig, Mei Lanfang and the Chinese Theatre," *Theatre Research International* 32, no. 2 (2007): 172–73.

[10] Hazelton and Benrimo, "Foreword" to *The Yellow Jacket*, 1913, n.p. (italics added).

[11] The 1941 production of *The Yellow Jacket* by the North Shore Playhouse in Massachusetts starred Harpo Marx as the property man. Marx was known to have turned

the role into slapstick comedy in the final performance. During the run, Marx had become increasingly frustrated with the limited and tiring work of the stagehand and sarcastically referred to *The Yellow Jacket* as a "Straight Jacket." Near the end of the final performance, Marx chose to play the property man as a typical Harpo Marx character, and he boasted in his autobiography that he created great laughter by inserting a long improvisation in which he poured tons of confetti from his pocket and a bucket one after another over an actor playing dead on the stage. See Harpo Marx with Rowland Barber, *Harpo Speaks!* (New York: Limelight Editions, 1985), 410–14. Min Tian finds in *The Yellow Jacket* a case of "intercultural parody" of Chinese Opera. See *The Poetics of Difference and Displacement*, 27–30. By contrast, Krystyn Moon sees *The Yellow Jacket* as the first American work that was not a parody of Chinese theatre, both musically and in its introduction of Chinese Opera staging into early twentieth-century American theatre. See Krystyn Moon, *Yellowface: Creating the Chinese in American Popular Music and Performance, 1850s–1920s* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 95–96.

[12] "Acting, Acting, All the Time, But Not a Word to Speak," *New York Times* (1 December 1912): 119.

[13] Brander Matthews, "Introduction" to *The Yellow Jacket*, 1913, n.p.

[14] Tohru Kato, *Kyogeki:* "*Seiji no kuni*" *no haiyu gunzo* [Beijing opera: a group of actors in the "political country"] (Tokyo: Chuokoron-Shinsha, 2002), 129–32, 148–58.

[15] Tan Ye, *Historical Dictionary of Chinese Theater* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2020), 202. This may also be related to the Chinese theatrical movement to "purify" the theatre in the period of the Republic of China (1911–1949).

[16] Kato, *Kyogeki*, 151. Kato maintains that "Chinese audiences were skilled not only in imagining what was not on stage but in exercising *negative imagination* of not-seeing the visible superfluities on stage." (My translation into English, emphasis added.) He also refers to some old rare episodes in which a clown uses the stagehand as a surrogate for other characters in the story, making the "invisible" stagehand appear comical to the Chinese audience.

[17] "How Benrimo Wrote 'The Yellow Jacket,'" *San Francisco Examiner* (6 January 1924): 4E.

[18] See Nancy Yunhwa Rao, *Chinatown Opera Theater in North America* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2017), 46–59.

[19] "How Benrimo Wrote 'The Yellow Jacket,'" 4E.

[20] "How Benrimo Wrote 'The Yellow Jacket,'" 4E.

[21] *The Yellow Jacket* was further adapted into *The Legend of Wu Chang* by Tisa Chang, a Chinese American actress and director. *The Legend* was presented by the Pan Asian Repertory Theatre at La Mama in New York in 1977. There were no major changes to the storyline, but the production incorporated more elements of Chinese Opera, such as acrobatics, martial arts, and ribbon play. All roles were played by Asian or Asian American actors. A few musicians played drums and cymbals, and they also worked as stagehands as needed on stage. See Mel Gussow, "Off Off Broadway: Pan-Asian Troupe Visits La Mama," *New York Times* (October 14, 1977): 57. Regarding the Pan Asian Repertory Theatre and their production history of intercultural theatrical works, see Esther Kim Lee, *A History of Asian American Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 82–91.

[22] A poster for the Fulton Theatre production of *The Yellow Jacket*. Joseph Harry Benrimo Papers, New York Public Library.

[23] Ashley Thorpe, *Performing China on the London Stage: Chinese Opera and Global Power, 1759–2008* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 75. Thorpe maintains that imperialist subjugation is implicit in this change of descriptions of the scenery.

[24] Max Reinhardt, perhaps the most influential director of *The Yellow Jacket* in Europe,

built a more abstract stage set at the Kammerspiele in 1914. Tairov's 1913 production did not attempt to recreate Chinese theatrical settings realistically either. See Min Tian, *The Poetics of Difference and Displacement*, 27–30.

[25] Benrimo, "Legend and Truth," 118. *The Yellow Jacket* borrows the Chinese opera history summary from Henry Burden McDowell's "The Chinese Theater," *Century Magazine* Vol. 29, no. 1 (November 1884): 27–44. See also Daphne P. Lei, *Operatic China: Staging Chinese Identity across the Pacific* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 68–75, for a comparative reading regarding the intercultural analogy between Chinese Opera and Shakespearean plays discussed in typical theatre critics' articles, including McDowell's (in the period from the 1850s to the 1940s). Analyzing these texts, Lei points out that the analogy in stage convention between Chinese theatre and Shakespearean theatre does not give equal ground to the former; hence, "Shakespeare becomes a tool of an internalized xenophobia" (75). See also Rao, *Chinatown Opera Theater in North America*, Part I, chapter 2.

[26] Hazelton and Benrimo, *The Yellow Jacket*, 1913, 5–6.

[27] Lionel Abel, *Metatheatre: A New View of Dramatic Form* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1963), 78.