

If a Mutt barks ....docx

## IF A MUTT BARKS IN THE FOREST ...

By Simon Choa-Johnston

I am a Cauc – Asian (Jewish-Chinese-Malay-Scots) born in Hong Kong and an immigrant to Canada. Because of this, my friend once called me a “mutt”. I had been called a lot of things but none had cut as deeply as that word.

It was about twenty years ago when she made the comment, respectfully and in private. We had bellied up to the bar after the publication launch of my play *Running Dog, Paper Tiger* that had won Theatre BC’s National Playwrights Competition. Although the place was noisy, her soft-spoken remark cut like a cleaver through the boisterous room. I was gobsmacked. After all, she was an important big-brain in theatre circles and one of Canada’s leading playwrights.

A skilled dramatist, she let the moment marinate. She took a sip from her beer bottle. I gulped mine from a glass. Then, to assuage my shock she pointed out that she too was a mutt – Algonquin-Irish. She also said that because I had “outed” myself on the book cover as a multi-cultural writer, I now had the freedom, if not the responsibility to “*tell the stories of all your people*”. I took another sip. Her words echoed in my brain. When I looked up, she was gone, swallowed by a roomful of revellers.

In that encounter, I had received a writing mandate and it led to authoring other plays: *Gold Mountain Guest* an exploration of a Chinese railroad boss who enslaved his fellow countrymen; *Rice Rockets and Yacht People* – a critique of rich “satellite” parents who spend more time in Hong Kong than with their children in Canada; and *Sisters* – an allegory in which a Chinese sister-in-law takes over the mansion owned by her Caucasian relatives one room at a time – my take on “Asian Invasion” of the city of Richmond, BC. Happily, all were produced, some even to critical acclaim.

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But the majority of audiences had been “white” people. While I am grateful for this attention, Caucasian audiences only make up half of those I consider *my people*. I was hoping to connect with an equal representation of the other half. I was also hoping to spur public debate about the challenges of living in a polyglot community. It was for these reasons that I chose to produce my plays in Richmond, BC where I lived. In a city of 190,000 residents, the immigrant population is 60%, the highest in Canada. The majority is from Asia and 47% of this majority is Chinese. Of this demographic, most are English speaking from Hong Kong where I was born and raised and where my “mutt” family have lived for four generations. I also speak Cantonese! I had naively imagined myself opening western windows to show eastern skies or vice versa. But it was not to be. *My* Asian people greeted my plays with a deafening shrug of indifference.

Over the years, I’ve tried to discover the nature of this disconnect. At first the locals I spoke with told me the obvious – not everyone is interested in seeing a play. Then added that those who are would not go to see a play that’s in English. Granted, except that a lot of my plays were in both Cantonese and English, synopses were provided in Chinese and the audience we marketed to were well-educated English-speaking residents. It also did not explain why Chinese newspapers and magazines devoted to promoting immigrant writers rebuffed all efforts to get coverage. I would have thought it was a no-brainer to acknowledge the existence of a new work at a major theatre company written by a Caucasian with roots in Hong Kong where the majority of their readership comes from. I felt like a mutt barking in the forest where there was no one around. I wondered if I was making any noise at all.

Then one day, not long ago, I had a beer with an Asian Canadian writer. “You don’t skew Asian,” he said. What? My bio had always listed my heritage, I speak the language openly and often in my own community as well as with Cantonese reporters and magazine editors. “You don’t get it,” he added, “you look like a white guy and your last

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name is quintessentially Caucasian. There is nothing about you that slants towards Chinese. People think you are pandering, or worse that you are an imposter.”

I looked at my reflection in the window behind him. Staring back at me was a tall, thin guy, white skinned, long faced, straight nosed and sad eyed. I thought about my name – Johnston – one of the most common in the English language. Was it as simple as that? You have to look the part to be the person you think you are? I was outraged and launched a tirade at my colleague. It must have lasted a long time because he kept looking at his watch. Exhausted, I leaned back in my chair. “Problem is,” he said as he left, “You don’t look like a mutt. And your name doesn’t help to explain you.”

Well, I can’t change the way I look. But there is something I can do if I want to continue to tell the stories of all my people. I could add my mother’s name to my father’s - an eastern window opening onto western skies.

Oy, as my other ancestors might say, now what do I do about my Jewish roots?

898 words.

Penguin will publish Simon Choa-Johnston’s latest novel “House of Wives”. He lives in Richmond, BC.

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