

THE  **+ THE PUBLIC.**

CHINESE LADY



WRITTEN BY **LLOYD SUH**
DIRECTED BY **RALPH B. PEÑA**

ORIGINALLY PRODUCED BY MA-YI THEATER COMPANY & THE BARRINGTON STAGE COMPANY

FEBRUARY **23** – MARCH **27** 2022 | **THE PUBLIC THEATER**
425 LAFAYETTE STREET

SUMMARY.

Inspired by the true story of the first Chinese woman to step foot in America, **Lloyd Suh's** critically-acclaimed play, **THE CHINESE LADY**, is a tale of dark poetic whimsy and a unique portrait of the United States as seen through the eyes of a young Chinese girl. In 1834, 16-year-old Afong Moy sailed into New York Harbor and was immediately put on display for a paying public who were mesmerized by her exotic ways and horrified by her tiny bound feet. As audiences follow Moy's travels through America as a living exhibit for decades, **THE CHINESE LADY** reveals centuries of America's shameful colonial history.

WINNER
2020 HORTON FOOTE PRIZE
FOR PLAYWRITING



“ **AN
EXTRAORDINARY
PLAY.** ”
THE NEW YORK TIMES

FOR INFO & TICKETS, VISIT PUBLICTHEATER.ORG & MA-YITHEATRE.ORG

Photo by T. Charles Erickson from
the Long Wharf Theatre production
of THE CHINESE LADY.

The New York Times

REVIEW



The teenage Afong Moy made headlines when she arrived in New York by ship in 1834. It's impossible to prove that she was the first Chinese woman in the United States, but it's true that she was a rarity, brought here to be displayed before paying crowds of gawkers.

"It is human nature to be curious," she tells us in Lloyd Suh's piercing and intimate new play, "The Chinese Lady," skipping, gently comical drama inspired by the story of the real Afong Moy.

Chattel in a two-year deal struck between her family and some American importers, Afong (Shannon Tyo) is just 14 when the play begins. Aided, and sometimes foiled, by her translator, Atung (Daniel K. Isaac), she spends her days performing a distorted version of Chinese identity.

Inside a little room decorated in chinoiserie, she is a breathing museum exhibit: price of admission 25 cents, 10 cents for children. Dressed in a silken costume (oo!), she eats with chopsticks (ahh!) and — here comes the highlight — even walks around the room on her tiny bound feet.

"I have noticed that my feet are a source of constant fascination," she muses as she takes her little stroll. Afong likes her feet, and she can't help noticing, too, that some practices in the West are at least as barbaric as her binding is purported to be.

"Such as corsets," she says lightly. "Or the transatlantic slave trade."

Dexterously directed by Ralph B. Peña for Ma-Yi Theater Company, this quiet play steadily deepens in complexity

the idealistic Afong and the more know-it-all through the decades, bickering with each other all the way. Ms. Tyo and Mr. Isaac have gorgeous chemistry, and their support they cast a spell that Fabian Obispo's moody Oliver Wason's lighting unobtrusively fortify.

The set (by Junghyun Georgia Lee, who also designed the costumes) begins as a shipping container, which she moves the room in the museum. These are the very box in Afong and Atung's cultural identity, as seen through white American eyes.

When the gaze that infuses this beautifully acted play with pathos and sorrow — so it is both practical and humane. Mr. Suh has softened his script with humor. Because it is also human nature to look on difference with suspicion.

That has been a wounding part of the experience of Chinese people in this country, which barred them citizenship — and severely restricted legal immigration for many years.

Though Afong didn't come to the United States voluntarily and didn't mean to stay, "The Chinese Lady" is an intimate tale. We watch her slowly acclimate to her new country, more distant from the nation of her childhood.

Throughout, she retains the palpable loneliness of a someone who, by virtue of being so outnumbered, is as a stand-in for an entire population. But by the end of Suh's extraordinary play, we look at Afong and see centuries of American history. She's no longer the lady. She is us.