

Asian Stereotypes in *Thoroughly Modern Millie*

I know we had a problem when I wanted to preface this production with: "The opinions expressed in this musical do not necessarily reflect the views of Newton North High School." We've all seen the classic television disclaimer alerting the audience that controversial, and even offensive, attitudes remain present within the program. Without question, *Thoroughly Modern Millie* contains extreme negative stereotypes and offensive attitudes when depicting Asian men and women in the 1920s. However, instead of simply flashing a disclaimer along the stage before the opening number, Mr. Brown, Ms. Leong, Ms. Beh, and I worked together with the Office of Human Rights to figure out a way in which to maintain the integrity of the production, while addressing these negative images head on with the community and our students. Over the past few months we have participated in discussions regarding stereotypical images of Asian men and women in the media. We participated in panels that spoke out against stereotypes and damaging images of cultural experiences within the media. We learned about the Geisha image, and the overtly sexualized Dragon Lady. We learned about the submissive Asian male stereotype, and the Kung-Foo warrior image. Consequently, some of these images will appear within our production this evening, such as Mrs. Meers' portrayal of the Geisha girl, as well as Bun Foo and Ching Ho's sometimes submissive male natures. Our hope was that awareness around these caricatures would allow us to dig deeper in rehearsals and find the true, human complexities of these previously flattened characters.

While we set out to find the authentic human complexity behind the Cantonese speaking Bun Foo and Ching Ho, we also addressed the wildly offensive Mrs. Meers and discussed the potential reasons for her racism. Mrs. Meers must be understood as the villain of the production. She is a racist and covers her own insecurities and life failures with hateful attitudes and behaviors. As director, I am extremely proud of the socially conscious work that our cast and community have carried out over these past few months. I believe that in doing this production, the cast, crew, and school community have become aware of the dangerous images within *Thoroughly Modern Millie*, and the lack of truthful portrayals of Asian and Asian-American men and women within the media today. I encourage you to continue this necessary dialogue at home with your families, using our musical as an effective conversation starter.

So please be advised, "The opinions expressed in this musical do not necessarily reflect the views of Newton North High School...in fact they strongly oppose the beliefs and attitudes found within our school culture. Furthermore, we have worked hard to analyze and revise these images in order to align them with our socially conscious mission of acceptance and open-mindedness."