

How To Fight Against Stereotypes in Theatre: Skyler Chin's "Illegal" Dream Come True

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DRAMATICS



Yale graduate Skyler Chin has taken the fight against stereotypes in theatre personally. Inspired by his internship experiences at Angel Island, Skyler wrote *Illegal*, a creative and powerful rap-rock musical about the history of Asian-American immigrants. He hopes *Illegal* helps shine the light of understanding on the often untold history of Asian immigrants. The expressive lyrics and dynamic score of *Illegal* does what theatre does best: educate while entertaining!

Skyler was initially inspired by his grandparents' stories of immigrating to the U.S. during the Chinese Exclusion era in the late 1800s and early 1900s. ([Discover more about the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882](#)). Plus, his late father had a deep kung fu practice that influenced him, so Skyler combined these experiences with his self-taught musical skills to create *Illegal*. The final impetus to the musical's creation was Skyler's experiences at Angel Island combined with his passion to fight against stereotypes in theatre. Skyler's historical-fiction narrative on immigrants detained on Angel Island has come into the world at an ideal and critical time.

USING IMMIGRANTS' OWN WORDS TO FIGHT AGAINST STEREOTYPES IN THEATRE

During his internship with [the Angel Island Immigration Station Foundation \(AIISF\) in San Francisco](#), Skyler read the book *Island* by Judy Yung (1980, University of Washington Press). *Island* is a compilation of poetry originally found carved into the walls at Angel Island by Chinese immigrants detained there to try and uphold U.S. exclusion laws. Skyler says, “[The poems](#) had such moving and emotional lyrics, but what stood out to me was that they weren’t limited to sadness and grieving. These immigrant poets also expressed determination, perseverance, and even the furious desire to exact revenge and burn the immigration station down. Their words conveyed a fighting spirit that I was never taught about in American history. I was moved to write them into a song, which became the opener of the musical.

“*Illegal* is based on just one family’s story, but I hope to tell a piece of Asian-American history through songs that capture the spirit and resolve of those who went through Angel Island. Given the anti-Asian hate we’ve experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic, I hope shows like *Illegal* can help humanize us, instill empathy, and help to dismantle [the perpetual foreigner myth](#) as well as [the model minority myth](#) that fuel the attacks.



“I also want to inspire other kids to tell their stories. I met a class of 3rd-grade students in Oakland’s Chinatown who performed our uplifting song “Keep Dreaming” as part of their Martin Luther King Jr. Day festival. I was so touched by their rendition! I told them I hope they are inspired to keep dreaming, to write shows of their own, and to tell their stories.”

TAKING ACTION WHEN HISTORY REPEATED ITSELF

“I originally wrote *Illegal* at Yale in 2019, in response to the previous federal administration’s family separations, Muslim ban, border wall, attempts to repeal birthright citizenship...the list goes on. These policies echoed the anti-Asian immigration laws from 140 years ago, especially the Chinese Exclusion Act. For instance, my grandfather was separated from his parents at age 10 years, despite being a legal immigrant. He was detained in bad conditions on Angel Island for months during 1923. I saw these kinds of detentions happening again to immigrants in 2019. I felt like history was repeating itself!

“Maybe part of why this was happening again was because people weren’t taught about these same kinds of events in our country’s past? I wanted to help educate others by telling my family’s story. And even now in 2022, we’re seeing states banning real history education and critical race theory, both of which I needed to understand to write this musical.”

CHARACTERS DRAWN FROM REAL LIFE

“I relate most to the ‘paper son’ character Slim Chin,” Skyler says. “He’s inspired by one of my grandfathers, who was an illegal immigrant living in NYC Chinatown under the paper name Wong. Originally, he did not want my last name to be his real name Chin because he thought it would endanger our family. Writing the character Slim Chin helped me reclaim that history and shine light on my grandfather’s life and secret identity.



Skyler Chin and Nick Leung performing at Carnegie Hall.

“I also really relate to the Chinese American interpreter, Carter Lee, as she struggles with her identity being pegged as a perpetual foreigner even though she was born in America. And there’s our heroine Kee Lin who loves kung fu and is always fighting for what she believes in. Her rap style is influenced by **Wing Chun**, and I identify with her the most musically.”

WHAT’S NEXT & HOW READERS CAN HELP

“My collaborators, Olivia Facini and Sita Sunil, and I are rehearsing with a professional all-AAPI cast to tour high schools and organizations in the NYC area and around the nation to perform *Illegal*. So far, we’re planning visits to Manhasset School District, Flushing Town Hall, Angel Island, The Chinese Historical Society of America, Queens Public Library, and more! We were named semi-finalists for the Eugene O’Neill National Musical Theater Conference, and have been working with our community partners, the Angel Island Immigration Station Foundation (AIISF) and Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund (AALDEF) to plan exciting educational programming this year.

“We are building interest and raising funds for a professional production in 2022 of *Illegal* in recognition of the 140th anniversary of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. We deeply appreciate any help with fundraising, performance opportunities, donations, connections to organizations and/or people who would be interested in getting involved. Please reach out to us with the contact information below!” ♦

Rosanna Gao is a **2022 International Thespian Officer** and a passionate advocate of BIPOC representation within the arts. She is currently a rising senior at Great Neck South High School and is excited by the prospect of combining her passions for musical theatre, social impact, civic engagement, and entrepreneurship through opportunities within the performing arts industry.

Connect with Rosanna.

Brayden Chein, is currently a junior at Great Neck South High. He loves being a part of theatre at his school and has performed in *A Chorus Line* (Richie Walters), *Grease* (Roger), and is part of the production of *Così fan tutte* (Guglielmo). In his free time, he explores data science and manages the ChamberDischord server. Connect with Brayden at bchie2023@gmail.com

To learn more about Skyler Chin and how you can help, connect with him at skylarchin.com/links.