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November 11, 2019

Stephanie Weisman, Executive Director and board member, The Marsh
David Hirata, Artist

Dear Stephanie Weisman and David Hirata,

The Berkeley Chapter of the Japanese American Citizens League (Berkeley JACL) is deeply offended by the title of your show, "The Jap Box." It revives a hateful racist slur that causes deep pain for us and recalls a tragic period within the living memory of our community, when 120,000 Japanese Americans were torn from their homes during WWII because of racial hatred, war hysteria and greed. We were put behind barbed wire and guarded by armed sentries for years. Some 1,300 Berkeley citizens and immigrants, including members of our chapter and the parents and grandparents of board members, were rounded up and moved by the military to the Tanforan racetrack from the First Congregational Church, one half mile from your theater. There, they were placed in horse stalls before being moved 800 miles to the Topaz concentration camp in Utah. These Berkeleyans lost their businesses, homes, life savings, their basic human dignity. Their education was interrupted, their friendships and community relationships were halted.

The word "Jap" is at the epicenter of this experience because it was used not only as a racist epithet by strangers, but in newspapers and by the government itself during this horrific time.

By marketing this performance, printing programs, selling tickets online, and posting a sandwich board sign in front of the Marsh theater with this slur, you normalize it. In an age when swastikas and nooses are revived among white nationalists, it now joins the permanent digital traces on the Internet along with "Japs Keep Moving -- This is a White Man's Neighborhood" (1923), "A Jap's a Jap," (Gen. John L. DeWitt, 1943) and the "Jap hunting license" (WWII). The normalization of this vicious term signals a disturbing lack of regard for our history and our community.

Three members of the board saw the show Saturday night. We met with David Hirata afterward and had a discussion with him about the title. He explained his intent in using what he considers a historical term -- the racist renaming of what was originally called the "bottomless box" (soko nashi bako) by its originator, the accomplished late-19th century Japanese magician Namigoro

Sumidagawa, who toured the U.S. in the late 1800s. A white magician later appropriated the signature magic box and tricks, changed its name to “The Jap Box” and performed the show in yellow face.

We appreciate Mr. Hirata’s sincerity and willingness to listen. We suggested that his mesmerizing performance, his lifelong interest in magic and the story of how his identity as a Japanese American became intertwined with a Japanese magician’s object represents an opportunity to further interrogate his family and community history. We also suggested he take this opportunity to better understand why the title he chose is painful and a dangerous revival of a deadly term. His family history includes his grandfather being held in the notorious military stockade at the Tule Lake Segregation Center and an uncle who served in the 442nd Regimental Combat Team.

David Hirata also spoke about this issue with the Executive Director of the JACL, David Inoue, last week. We are aware of other outraged Japanese Americans who have contacted the theater to protest this title, some of whom received no response. We are heartened by Mr. Hirata’s statement that he plans to change the name of his show.

We fully understand and appreciate that art can and should raise difficult issues and make us uncomfortable -- that is not what this is. The cavalier use of the word “Jap” in the title of this production, without historical context, signals a disturbing lack of concern for the trauma of a group of people and normalizes a tragedy that, now of all times, should be highlighted as a serious cautionary tale.

As Japanese Americans, residents of Berkeley, defenders of civil rights and supporters of the arts, we look forward to prompt action by The Marsh to begin to repair this harm.

Sincerely,

Board of Directors
Berkeley Japanese American Citizens League