



## Bondage

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David Henry Hwang's 1992 play *Bondage* explores human identity but moves away from the playwright's earlier concerns about immigrant cultural integrity and toward questions about the validity of ethnic identities in general. In the play, a solitary actress portrays various races, including Caucasian, Asian, and African American, as does her male partner. Because she wears a mask and is clad head to toe in leather, as is he, skin tone is never an indicator of their ethnic allegiances.

Set in a sadomasochism parlor in the San Fernando Valley of Los Angeles, the play probes the construction of racial stereotypes as Terri, the dominatrix, and Mark, her longtime willing submissive, role-play their way through a series of sexual games that are more philosophic than erotic in nature. Like children, they dress up, but the costumes that they select are racial, a fabrication of a different cloth. In the first sketch, Terri announces herself a blonde and Mark a Chinese man. In the second scenario, Terri is African American and Mark Caucasian. In a third matrix, she declares herself Asian as well as he. Each fantasy fails to materialize because the players interrupt the script with conversational queries of a decidedly ordinary nature, such as when Mark asks “You feeling OK today?”

Each racial shift allows Terri and Mark to expose stereotypes associated with a particular race, revealing to the audience the arbitrary nature of supposedly innate racial traits; blondes as bimbos, Asians as geeks, and African Americans as sexual beasts exist only in the realm of pretend. Throughout the play, the shifting racial identifications have proven a barrier to intimacy between the couple, and it is only when they are willing to strip themselves of their costuming to reveal their true skin that communication is possible. Having cleansed themselves of racial stereotypes through role-playing, Terri and Mark—who, it is revealed, are of different ethnic backgrounds—vow to leave fantasy behind and encounter each other in the real.

## Suggested Readings

Hwang, David Henry. Introduction to *FOB and Other Plays*, by David Henry Hwang. New York: Plume, 1990.

Skloot, Robert. “Breaking the Butterfly: The Politics of David Henry Hwang.” *Modern Drama* 33, no. 1 (March, 1990): 59-66.

Street, Douglas. *David Henry Hwang*. Boise, Idaho: Boise State University Press, 1989.

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