

A few weeks ago, Theatre Bay Area (TBA) announced publicly that they were giving their annual Directing Luminary award to Chris Wong. The Directing Luminary award is a prestigious accolade awarded to a visionary director each year. TBA, the Bay Area's theater services organization, has been giving this honor to directors for the past ten years and it's well-regarded as a highly lauded national theater award. The candidates are nominated by theater leaders in the field after which TBA convenes a panel to choose the winner. In addition to the prestige, the award comes with a \$30,000 cash prize. The news was announced in a press release that was sent out to the local press, published on social media, and featured prominently on the TBA website.

The news was met with great excitement in the Bay Area, as well as nationally. Chris Wong (Chinese-American, he/him, 43) is the first director of color to receive the award in its history. Originally from San Jose, he's made the Bay Area his home as a director and has directed at theaters all over the Bay, at companies of all sizes consistently for his entire career. In the past few years, he's started to become known more nationally after a production he directed at Berkeley Rep moved to New York for an Off-Broadway run. Just last month, Chris was named the incoming artistic director of Ferocious Lotus, the Bay Area's beloved Asian-American theater company, located in San Francisco.

In the same week that Chris was announced as the award winner, he was also featured in an article in American Theatre magazine (the theater field's major industry publication) with the headline "Directors to Watch." The article praised Chris highly, calling him "one of the leading and most influential API (Asian & Pacific Islander) directors working in the US today." The article also mentioned that he is the recipient of TBA's Directing Luminary award, stating "Chris is from the Bay and *about* the Bay. He uses every opportunity to cultivate and support our future leaders and emergings artists. He demonstrates what every leader should be by the way he invests in his community."

The week after this press was released, Chad Fredericks, Executive Director of TBA, received a phone call from Alex, a former student of Chris's. While Chris is known primarily as a director, he has worked a lot as a teaching artist and mentored many young artists. Over the phone, Alex (black, she/her, 28) told Chad that ten years ago—when she was 18 and Chris was 33—Chris started a coercive sexual relationship with her that ended in sexual assault. He was teaching her acting class at Berkeley Rep's School of Theater. She had just graduated from Berkeley High and signed up for an 8-week long summer acting class before she headed off to college at UCLA in the fall.

"Looking back," she said, "the relationship was manipulative from the start and I knew enough to end it when things started to not feel good. I would definitely call it assault now, but at the time, I didn't even really know what assault was. I was so young and I thought he really cared about me. He was a mentor to me." Before she left for school, she'd told the director of education at BRT about their relationship, but only reported that Chris had been flirtatious with her and that they had been "dating" and that it ended badly. The director of education at the time assured her

that she would bring the issue to the attention of the human resources department and executive leadership. Alex had a phone call with the Director of HR right before she left for UCLA and shared the same information. A few months into her freshman year she received a letter saying that BRT had closed the issue and that they had put Chris on probation for a year. It wasn't very satisfying because no one had kept in touch with her or let her know what was going on, but she tried to put the whole thing behind her and has spent the past decade suppressing the memories.

Fast forward to a couple of weeks ago when she saw the article about Chris receiving the award posted on social media, all of the memories came flooding back. She knew that the media attention and the national recognition for Chris were just beginning, and she felt that this story everyone was telling about him being a model citizen leader and mentor just wasn't true. She knew that he had abused his power and taken advantage of her. She was compelled to reach out to Chad, and share the experience she'd been hiding for a decade.

On the call, Chad asked her what she wanted him to do. She said, "I need to tell someone, so people know this happened, and so something can be done." He asked her if she wanted to be involved in whatever came next, and she said no. While she hoped that someone could take action, she didn't want to be involved herself. Alex wished to wash her hands of this experience and didn't want to become the face of a movement. But she felt like she had to tell someone.

Not knowing what exactly was the right next step, Chad reached out to Berkeley Rep to inform them of this phone call and also to find out how they handled the issue when it first arose 10 years ago. Over the phone, Berkeley Rep's General Manager, who had been working there at the time, said that they had undergone a full investigation as soon as the issue was brought to their attention. Chris had been incredibly responsive when the issue was brought to his attention. He understood that he shouldn't have acted the way he did. He was "regretful, sincerely apologetic, and expressed a strong resolve to commit to changing his behaviors." He was given a year's probation and over the course of the year participated in different trainings and worked with a therapist.

"We were really impressed with how Chris handled the situation-- he seemed to want to make things right." BRT's GM said on the phone, "We've hired him to teach other classes at the School since then and haven't had any issues."

Chad offered that this phone call seemed to provide new information to the story, and reiterated that the former student wanted people to know and wanted something to be done.

"It's awful that it happened, it's not something we'd ever condone or gloss over happening in our programs. No way. But we took due course, and that's that. Chris has done the work to recover from this, and we've done everything we could. There's no use in stirring up something that's already been put to rest."

Feeling stuck, Chad called Lina Miranda, artistic director of Crowded Fire Theater (CFT). Lina, another prominent Bay Area artistic director, is well known for her commitment to and work in equity, diversity, and inclusion. She often speaks on panels and participates regularly in the national conversation regarding ED&I. Although Crowded Fire is a relatively small company when it comes to budget size, it's regarded as one of the few companies that is authentically engaging with and practicing ED&I values. Lina is often the first person that came to mind when it comes to conversations around equity, so Chad hoped that she'd be able to provide some advice and support on what to do next.

In their conversation, Lina said that she'd ask around, and also suggested that Chad reach out to you, knowing that you are a part of a local cohort of theater makers studying and practicing transformative justice work. Lina offered to make the connection and sent an email that night connecting you with Chad. You spoke with Chad the following day and agreed to bring the issue to the TJ cohort.

Lina also reached out to a friend, Marisa Bates, who'd recently been in a show that Chris directed at Cal Shakes. Lina wanted to hear about her experience, confidentially, and if she'd noticed anything unusual about him. Marisa said he was very charismatic and at times bordered on flirtatious. He ended up hooking up with one of the other actors in the show, Kaitlyn Suarez-Eckles. But not a lot of people knew about it, and the two of them dated for a few weeks and then stopped soon after the show was over. According to Marisa, it was a little strange, but this stuff happens sometimes, and it didn't seem to come into the rehearsal room.

Back to you and the TJ cohort. You don't know Chris Wong that well, other than from seeing his work at various theaters around town. You reach out to some folks to get a sense of other people's experience with him:

- Blue, (white, trans lighting designer, 30) said that they worked on a show of his about 5 years ago at SF Playhouse and that he ended up hooking up with the lead actress in a short-lived romance.
- Jackson says he remembers a story of Chris working on a play at Shotgun that didn't end well. He had started dating one of the cast members during the rehearsal process and it messed everything up. Totally interrupted the vibe and apparently created a lot of tension in the rehearsal room. He totally forgot about it because it was just a bit of gossip from a while ago, but when prompted, he remembered.
- You reach out to Holly at Shotgun Players, and she doesn't comment on the issue other than saying, "Yeah, we don't really work with Chris anymore. It's just not something we want to do," and leaves it at that.
- Other folks who've worked with him have had perfectly fine experiences-- enjoyed the process and work together. Appreciated him as a person and artist.

- When you share the story with an older actress—Leslie Shimizu—who’s been at Ferocious Lotus for a long time and knows Chris well, she agrees that he’s had some growing up to do but that his work for the Asian American theatre community is invaluable. Plus, come on, why are we picking on Chris? This is nothing compared to what some of the horror stories she’s heard about other directors in the Bay. So Chris dated some actresses, and maybe they both made bad choices, it happens. That doesn’t make him a bad person. It would feel cruel to interrupt his moment with this right now.

The more you ask around, the more you realize that Chris has had many “show-mances,” where he’s connected sexually and romantically with other artists working with him on shows. A lot. It seems to be younger female actors working on a show he is directing. The relationships take many forms and only last for a short time-span. There’s a general sense that women should be careful around him because he’s charming and affectionate, and flirts with everyone.

You reach out to the outgoing artistic director at Ferocious Lotus, Shannon Li, to see what she thinks about Chris. You tell her the story about his former student. Shannon is surprised and concerned, but praises Chris for his work in the community. Together the two of them worked to organize a town hall called “Beyond Orientalism.” “Without Chris’s leadership, we wouldn’t have been able to pull it off,” Shannon said, “He really rallied the community around the issue and advocated for the conversation.” Shannon spoke about Chris’s past history of show-mances and his many relationships with actors and her confidence in his ability to make lasting change. “I wouldn’t have been okay with Ferocious Lotus hiring him if I wasn’t confident that Chris is a different person than he was 10 years ago,” she said.

At a meeting with the TJ cohort that weekend, you recount the conversation that you had with Chad and the information that you gathered from other sources. The group sits down to discuss what next steps should be.