



The Horrific Story Of Korean Sex Slaves Is Now A Musical In DTLA

by [Josie Huang](#) in [Arts & Entertainment](#) on [August 13, 2019 4:24 PM](#)



Abigail Choi Arader, center, plays Gouen, a Korean woman who is forced into sexual slavery after being tricked by the businessman Mr. Komino (Tim Jim Lim) and his assistant (Brandon English). (Andrew Cullen/LAist)

A young Korean woman is lured away from her village on the promise of a factory job — only to later discover it was all a ploy to turn her into one of thousands of sex slaves brutalized by Japanese soldiers during World War II.

It's a heavy topic that could fill history books. It's also the plotline of the musical, "Comfort Women," opening at the Los Angeles Theatre Center in downtown L.A. on Thursday.

Steve Chun, who put in \$50,000 of his own money to produce the 10-day-run, called the musical a perfect medium to deliver a history lesson to both non-Korean audiences and younger Korean Americans unfamiliar with their ancestral past.

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During rehearsal for the musical "Comfort Women," performers act out a scene where Korean women are corralled by Japanese soldiers to a "comfort station." (Andrew Cullen/LAist)

"Our next Asians are getting too Americanized — which is good. My kids are like that too," said Chun, who normally works as an L.A.-based Korean food distributor. "But you got to leave something and tell them history correctly."

A DIASPORIC EFFORT

Chun grew up in South Korea, and recalled how it felt to see his country try to bury the past.

"They'd be ashamed about letting that kind of thing happen to us. We're so weak," said Chun, who moved to the U.S. as a teen. "Why talk about it, right?"

As many as 200,000 women — mostly from Korea, but also from other countries in Asian and Europe — had been forced or lured to provide sex for Japanese soldiers. Many tried to forget their experience.

But starting in the 1990s, a few former comfort women started to speak out. Anger surged in South Korea, and carried over to the diaspora in the United States, especially in places with large Korean American populations like California.

Inspired by efforts to remember the Holocaust and the Armenian genocide, Korean American activists have set up monuments in [Glendale](#) and San Francisco to honor comfort women, whose known numbers in Korea have dwindled to less than a couple dozen.

They've successfully led a campaign to have comfort women included in California textbooks. And they've developed a 40-page resource guide about comfort women that's been distributed to schools over the last year.



Steve Chun, the producer of the Los Angeles run of the musical off-Broadway production *Comfort Women*, worked for several years to bring the play to the city. (Andrew Cullen/LAist)

The issue of comfort women remains controversial. The U.N. says Japan employed a widespread system of sexual slavery, and the Japanese government has apologized to the comfort women. At the same time, the Japanese government has fought efforts around the world to memorialize them. Some Japanese nationalists have asserted that the women chose to become prostitutes.

A spokeswoman for Akira Chiba, Consul General of Japan in Los Angeles, said last week he was not available to comment for this story because of scheduling conflicts. But Chiba's office provided a statement Friday after the publication of the LAist story:

The Government of Japan recognizes that the issue known as comfort women is one that severely injured the honor and dignity of many women. The Government of Japan has extended its sincere apologies and remorse to all those women known as comfort women who suffered immeasurable pain and incurable physical and psychological wounds.



Phyllis Kim, executive director of Comfort Women Action for Redress and Education, led the campaign to install a monument in Glendale. (Josie Huang/LAist)

The statement goes on to say that the Japanese government "will also continue its effort to ensure that Japan's views and efforts on the comfort women issue are properly recognized by the international community based on an objective understanding of relevant facts."

Activists in Korea and beyond say the Japanese government has not properly apologized for the harm done to comfort women.

"Sexual violence against women during wartime is a universal human rights issue that needs to be addressed," said Phyllis Kim, executive director of the Glendale-based Comfort Women Action for Redress and Education, or CARE. "The perpetrators need to be held accountable."

Advocates have rallied around the musical's L.A. run. CARE invited some cast members to perform songs at their gala last month. Meanwhile, dozens of people, including Chun's fellow church members, have donated to the show's \$200,000 budget.

IT ALL STARTED WITH CATS

Chun first got the idea to put on the musical in Los Angeles after watching the 2018 production of "Comfort Women" in New York.

Like Chun, the musical's director and co-writer Dimo Kim came over to the U.S. as a young man — with his eyes set on Broadway.

Kim has been obsessed with musicals since he saw "Cats" in Seoul at age 4. The following year, he caught a "unlicensed" version of "Cats" and was disgusted.

"I was like, 'Oh, they disrespect 'Cats!'" Kim, who is 28, said. "At least, I can make better than that. After that I was like, I'm going to make a musical."

But it wasn't until his sophomore year in the theater department of The City University of New York that he landed on the idea of comfort women. He was talking about them in class, and was startled to hear that no one knew their history.

"Classmates, friends, professors don't know about the issue at all. I mean not even the term itself," Kim said.

Finding inspiration and characters was the easy part. Kim turned to real-life accounts. But settling on the right tone was a challenge.

"You can not go too high or too fun because of the topic issues, but you can also not go too low because then it's boring and nobody's going to watch it," Kim said.



Dimo Kim, the director and co-writer of the musical off-Broadway production Comfort Women, will open the show in Los Angeles for the first time this week. (Andrew Cullen/Andrew Cullen for LAist)



Goeun (Abigail Choi Arader) commiserates with fellow Korean Minsik (Lyndon Apostol). (Andrew Cullen/LAist)

In trying to strike that balance, the show features the tragicomic figures of two orphaned sisters — mischievous young women who are duped into going to work as comfort women in Indonesia.

Actress Jennifer Sun Bell portrays the older sibling, Namsoon, who makes an enormous sacrifice near the tear-jerking conclusion of the show to save her sister.

Bell said playing a comfort woman has been a life-changing experience in more ways than one. As a sexual assault survivor and someone who is half-Korean, she feels incredibly connected to her character.

"It just breaks my heart, because their voices aren't being heard," Bell said. "Their stories aren't being told."



Jennifer Sun Bell plays Namsoon in the musical *Comfort Women*, whom she relates to deeply because of her own experiences. (Andrew Cullen)

During rehearsal, Bell's face was anguished as she performed her character's final song.

"Shooting star, tell the whole world who we are," she sings. "Tell the rest, we'll burn fast, but we'll shine far, shooting star."

The musical "Comfort Women" opens Thursday, Aug. 15 at the Los Angeles Theatre Center and runs through Aug. 25. [Tickets](#) range from \$29.99 to \$44.99.

UPDATES:

Aug. 16 at 6:01 p.m.: This article was updated with a statement from the Consulate of Japan in L.A.



I tell the stories of recent immigrants from Asia and the families who have been here for generations.

JOSIE HUANG
COVERING ASIAN AMERICAN COMMUNITIES

✉ jhuang@scpr.org



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