

Don't Buy Miss Saigon Toolkit: Organizing In Your City



History of Don't Buy Miss Saigon

- What is Miss Saigon? What's Wrong With It?
- Miss Saigon Lies, Don't Buy it!
- Timeline

Our Organizing Story

- Who We Are
- How We Organized and What We Prioritized
- Outcomes

How to Organize in Your City

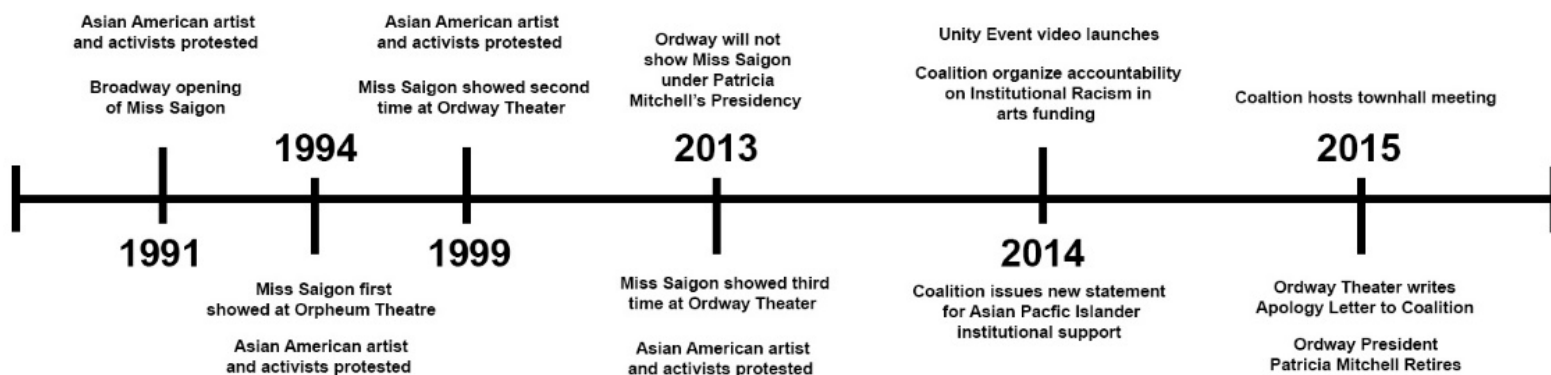
- Strategic Planning
- Counter Argument Fact Sheet
- Lessons Learned

HISTORY OF the DON'T BUY MISS SAIGON COALITION

What is Miss Saigon? Miss Saigon is the longest running and most enduring pop culture representation of Vietnamese people in the Western world – and by extension of racism, it presents a narrow lens through which all Asians are viewed. The play tells the story of Kim, an underage Vietnamese sex worker, who falls in love with Chris, a white American G.I., after one night together. The two conceive a child but are ultimately separated by war. When Chris returns to Vietnam years later, they are briefly reunited until Kim commits suicide so that their son, Tam, can go to America with his father.

What's Wrong With It? The play reinforces stereotypes about the passivity and victimization of Vietnamese, and by extension, Asian women; it romanticizes power dynamics within human trafficking and sex work, portraying the white, male, Western client as savior; it paints Vietnamese, and by extension, Asian men as villainous and subordinate to their Western counterparts; it revises US presence in Vietnam as being about “saving the kids.” Historically, producers cast a white actor in yellowface to play a biracial character, and the “Vietnamese” in the libretto is made up by the white man who wrote it, with no knowledge of the language. Many defenders of Miss Saigon, a play written by two white men based on a photograph they saw, insist that the play is “truthful” and “historically accurate.” Miss Saigon is a lucrative production, and for that reason continues to be performed. The London re-staging broke the record for West End box office ticket sales, making 4.4 million pounds in one day.

Miss Saigon Lies, Don't Buy It! We refuse to buy Miss Saigon—literally and figuratively. We will not pay for tickets to a show that says Asian women need saving by white men, or that we are nothing but objects for sexual gratification. We refuse to believe that human trafficking is a spectacle at which we should gape. We do not support the myth that U.S.-based adoption is the best and only option for Asian children. And we roundly reject a Southeast Asian wartime narrative that ignores colonialism and racial privilege.



OUR ORGANIZING STORY. **Who We Are.** We've had three generations of protest that took place in the span of 24 years. The first time Miss Saigon came to the Twin Cities in 1994 and the second time in 1999, local Asian American artists and activists protested with supporters outside of the theaters that showed Miss Saigon. The two messaging focused on deterring theatre-goers from attending the play, and because social media didn't exist yet, most of the messaging was done on the ground interacting with theatre patrons and passed out leaflets. In 2013, the third generation's protest were more equipped by developed language on racism, colorism, colonialism, capitalism, and organizing skills coupled by the power of online mass media organizing.



HOW WE ORGANIZED AND WHAT WE PRIORITIZED

When word got out Spring 2013 that Miss Saigon was returning a third time to the Twin Cities, the Don't Buy Miss Saigon Coalition (DBMSC aka the Coalition) engaged a broad base of community members and allies to use a variety of organizing methods. We prioritized: assembling a coalition, community conversations, online organizing, a media press kit, and importantly, working towards creating a Unity event as a form of protest on opening night of Miss Saigon.

Assembling a Coalition

The DBMSC drew on artists and activists' experiences from the previous two protests, and brought their organizing experiences and relationships with them. The Coalition collectively decided to center on the fact that the Asian American community has a voice of its own and can speak for itself.

Media Press Kit

In organizing, we use the term "earned media" to describe news articles, radio pieces and blog posts that we do not create ourselves or pay for as advertisement. Earned media can be extremely useful, because it's where a lot of people get their information.

- Media Outreach - By writing op-eds, letters to the editor, and reaching out strategically to the media, the DBMSC ensured that our narrative around Miss Saigon was already loud and clear, before the play even opened.
- Endorsement Letter - In order to raise awareness and build support in the community, the DBMSC asked funders, elected officials, organizations, and community members to sign on an endorsement letter. The DBMSC followed up with a contact person from each organization, and compiled statements from representatives.

Community Conversations

By hosting our own events with allied arts organizations, we were able to set the stage and engage the community in spaces where we controlled the narrative and conversations.

- Mu Performing Arts - a Twin Cities Asian and Pacific Islander (APIA) theatre, hosted a series of conversations around Miss Saigon. The first was exclusive to APIA in theatre, the second open to the APIA community, and the third was open to all which brought in artists, activists, and the CEO of the Ordway theatre. The conversation transcription is available in its entirety on the Mu website: www.muperformingarts.org/conversation-around-miss-saigon/
- Panel at Macalester College - Coalition member Juliana Hu Pegues organized a panel at Macalester College to engage students in the discussion. This provided another avenue to mobilize, generate energy, and get buy-in from students. It provided a space for Coalition members to articulate their arguments and drew on the relationships and existing organizing tools.

Online Organizing Efforts

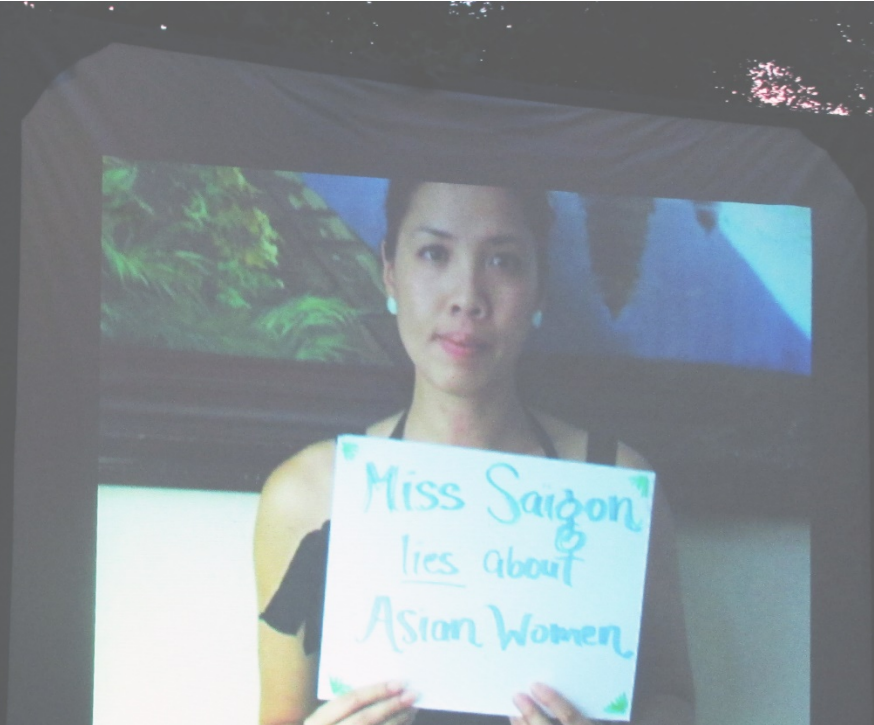
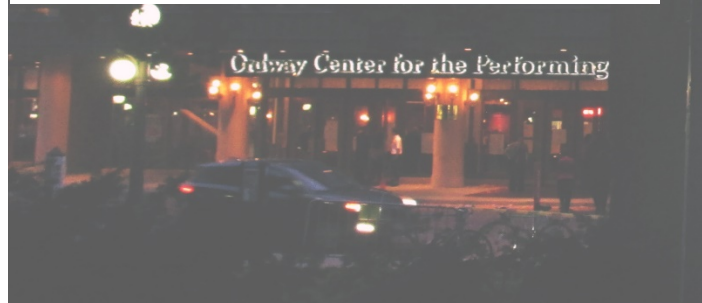
The DBMSC used both earned and social media to build the online campaign and petition, and to engage the community. Our strategy was to create counter-narratives.

- Tumblr - "Don't Buy Miss Saigon: Our Truth Project. One of the crucial social media strategies developed by coalition member Bao Phi, which invites people affected by Miss Saigon to submit their story: dontbuymiss-saigon.tumblr.com/
- Petition - DBMSC partnered with 18 Million Rising to create a petition, Don't Buys Miss Saigon. You can sign the petition, and contact 18MR to check if there are petition signers in your area to organize with: action.18mr.org/misssaigon/
- DBMSC Facebook Page have also been helpful in creating meetings, events and sharing updates and information with our Coalition members and supporters: fb.com/DontBuyMissSaigon

Assembling Your Coalition and Organizing Tips

- Relationships are the best way of bringing people into a campaign and especially because someone asked them.
- Potlucks bring people together to plan, organize, and donate funds for a budget.
- Choose a space that's accessible and has Internet access!
- Miss Saigon and build power to mass mobilize.
- Coalition members took care of themselves throughout process, acknowledged the pain and need for community healing.

UNITY EVENT! The DBMSC culminated in an event celebrating unity in the APIA community outside the opening night of Miss Saigon. A diverse selection of artists from the APIA community and allies from other communities of color performed, showcasing the diversity of talent by and for People of Color (POC) communities. The event transitioned from celebratory to agitation and back. Supporters chanted and marched in front of the theatre, handed out flyers to theatre-goers, and then re-grouped to hear poetry and see dancers. Watch the video here: <https://youtu.be/hxLb7EyQEMo>



OUTCOMES. The tactics used, such as the Our Truth tumblr and the Unity Event, stressed that individuals and communities have many stories and truths, and that Miss Saigon perpetuates the dominant, White supremacist, patriarchal narrative surrounding Southeast Asia. The protest also engaged communities of color speaking out against institutional racism in the Twin Cities who signed the DBMS petition, endorsement letter, and performed at the Unity Event.

- Efforts against institutional racism. Coalition members supported the Native American community campaign to “Change the Name” and marched to protest the NFL team, Washington R-words’ playing at the Minnesota Metrodome.
- Theater community initiated conversations on producing plays that might have racism and sexism connotations.
- Ordway will not produce Miss Saigon. President and CEO of Ordway, Patricia Mitchell wrote a letter, stating in Fall 2013, “the Ordway will not produce Miss Saigon as long as I remain President of the Ordway.”
- Institutional accountability - Coalition members such as author and poet, David Mura have been instrumental in on going, one on one conversations with Patricia Mitchell to work towards meeting our demands.
- Apology letter - April 22, 2015, Ordway Theater/Patricia Mitchell sent an apology letter to DBMSC acknowledging and apologizing for the hurt Miss Saigon has caused, and Ordway staff and board are in positions of artistic and administrative leadership to do good stewards of their institutional memory.

HOW TO ORGANIZE IN YOUR CITY

STRATEGIC PLANNING. In the next pages, answer the questions, check off the lists, and write them down to help you shape and achieve a successful campaign. Preparation is key.

We are hoping the background of Miss Saigon Lies, Don’t Buy It and our organizing story will help serve as guidance to your organizing initiative in your city. It took us 24 years of organizing ‘to not bring back Miss Saigon to Minnesota.’ It may or may not happen in a short time of your organizing efforts, but we also want to note that creating change, shifting consciousness and holding big institutions accountable takes time, commitment and lots of conversations. Don’t give up and pass the torch on to the next generation of Asian American artists, activists and organizers.

Date, time and location Miss Saigon is coming to your city? Who is hosting the musical? Is this the first time?

What’s the timeframe to organize, 2, 4 or 6 months? Create a timeline

How to Identify Supporters. Miss Saigon is just one example of the cross-community organizing efforts against institutional racism happening in the Twin Cities. Consider reaching out to multiple groups to strengthen your coalition:

- Individual artists and activists who can be part of coalition, write op-eds, and sign on to your campaign.
- Allied institutions who can host community conversations, and sign onto your campaign.
- Groups from other communities who can support your work and who you can support in the future.

Get to Know the Institutions Involved

- What kind of institution is this; is it a community organization, theater or school? What is their organizational history with the Miss Saigon musical, and with People of Color productions, roles, funding and conversations on race, class, sexism, and colonization?
- Who are the institutions’ funders, how much are they funded, and for how long? Does anyone in your coalition know the funders or have connections to the funders?
 - Create a contact information list of their funders
- How moveable are they--are “diversity” or “equity” central to their image? Does this determine their public stance?

List individual activists, artists, organizers, students, family and friends who have experiences in organizing actions or are interested in supporting the efforts of Don’t Buy Miss Saigon and your coalition.

Name	Email/Phone	Contacted
1.		<input type="checkbox"/>
2.		<input type="checkbox"/>
3.		<input type="checkbox"/>
4.		<input type="checkbox"/>
5.		<input type="checkbox"/>

List local institutions and foundations who have had conversations about and advocates for, but not limited to racial and gender justice. The ally institutions would be interested in supporting the efforts of Don’t Buy Miss Saigon and your coalition.

Name	Email/Phone	Contacted
1.		
2.		
3.		
4.		
5.		

Mu Performing Arts ‘Conversation around Miss Saigon’ | Photo by Anna Min

DMBS Unity Event October 8, 2013. Photos by Anna Min.



Media Outreach Examples and Templates

	Finished
Campaign Sign-On Letter. Download, read, and use or edit our campaign sign-on letter as relevant for your community and relationships: https://docs.google.com/file/d/0B2ir6vIKWpdjamo3M01TMFJBShM	<input type="checkbox"/>
Ally Institutions and Foundation Outreach and Statements. Download, read and use or edit the following template for tracking outreach, and recorded statements: https://docs.google.com/spreadsheet/ccc?key=0Av-NppZP1_vYdFIIVjhNcENYeHhLV05XQIJfcDAYM3c#gid=0	<input type="checkbox"/>

Here is an example of our partnered ally Asian arts institution, Mu Theater, who hosted conversations for transparency:

- Transcript: mupperformingarts.org/conversation-around-miss-saigon/
- Video: <https://youtu.be/WlgRJ1Yf06o>

What is Your Coalition’s Campaign About? Ask your coalition: what are the goals of your campaign or of individual actions within the campaign? Brainstorm 2-3 goals that are relevant to your coalition and community needs addressing institutionalized racism, sexism and colonialism, and demand institutional accountability. Plan to achieve some or all of the goals within timeframe of planned Unity Event date. Below are examples of our campaign goals that you can also use.

Campaign Goals:

- ☐ “Educate” play goes during Unity Event right before show opens? Such as letters to the editor or leaflet
- ☐ Create tension/make the venue look bad? Protest outside or disrupt the play
- ☐ Raise awareness to broader APIA community? Social media or community events in APIA spaces
- ☐ Celebrate APIA stories, voices, and resilience? Hold a counter event or submit to DBMS Truth Tumblr
- ☐ Reach funders? Petition, letters or strategically have community members reach out
- ☐ _____
- ☐ _____
- ☐ _____

What are the goals of your campaign? Interests of individual actions within the campaign?

What are your resources: people, time, money, legality, different levels of organizing experiences, etc? *These should drive actions and how you leverage resources.*

What are your campaign demands? In order to measure the success of your campaign and hold accountable the institution producing Miss Saigon, your coalition should have demands to move the institution towards acknowledging ‘what’s wrong with Miss Saigon’ and ‘not showing Miss Saigon again’. Create 2 demands that the institution(s) should and can take action publically. Below are examples of our coalition demands.

- ☐ Make a public apology
- ☐ Never bring back or produce Miss Saigon again
- ☐ _____
- ☐ _____
- ☐ _____
- ☐ _____



Unity Event Check Off List. Below is a list to help prepare for your Unity Event. Use all, some or add to the listed items relevant to your event.

Equipment and Materials	Finished	Legality, and Safety	Finished	Volunteer Team	Finished
Mics, megaphones and speakers		Parks and Recreation Permit		Trainer	
Projector and Screen		Sound Permit		Chanter and march leaders	
Power Generator		Street Blockades		Equipment Team	
T-shirt, signs, banners	<input type="checkbox"/>	Police Liaisons		Art Show Curator/Emcees	
Tables and chairs		First Aid kit		Greeter/Info Table	
Flyers and leaflets		Community Lawyer		Police Liaison	
Chants and dances	<input type="checkbox"/>				
	<input type="checkbox"/>				
	<input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/>		

Unity Event – Peaceful Protest Chant Examples: 1) Stop this play, Stop this show, Miss Saigon has got to go!
 2) We can’t ston we won’t ston un-til this play’s dropped! 3) No more lies no more pain! Miss Saigon infects your brain!

Counterargument FAQ Sheet

A list of the frequent arguments we encountered, and our responses. This is also useful to have when having conversations with folks who might be on the fence.

- The narrative that “this gives a platform for Asian American actors”/if you are against the play, you are against the actors
 - This is not about the actors, this is about the money makers
 - There should be more opportunities for Asian American actors and Miss Saigon is symptomatic of racism in the arts industry
- The narrative that “this educates the white American community about the Vietnam war/Vietnamese people”
 - The play is factually inaccurate. The “Vietnamese” words in the libretto are not actually Vietnamese---they are actually gibberish.
 - This play recycles dominant narratives about the war in Vietnam. It does not expose American audiences to new viewpoints.
- Protesting the play is censorship
 - Censorship implies institutional power to control the narrative. We are asking our institutions, if they reflect the community, to choose a different play. We are not using political power to make the play illegal.
- The play gives a voice to Vietnamese people, Asian people, or Asian American people that would otherwise not be heard
 - There are many Asians and Asian Americans telling their own stories, there is just a lack of access/acceptability in mainstream/white venue
- Why are you protesting? Can’t you use other, less confrontational tactics?
 - This play has been protested since 1991. There have been many discussions, both public and private, with the decision makers, and they have not listened to the community.

LESSONS LEARNED

- Social Media Organizing helped spread the message quick and widely.
- Host our own community conversations with Ally organizations so we control the narrative(s).
- Address the Institution and their role in Institutionalized Racism.
- Ongoing conversations with the Institution to hold institutional accountability
- Ongoing community conversations for transparency, accountability, and build coalition to address Institutional Racism in the arts and funding.

Coalition Members’ Testimonies

Self-care, without exception, coalition members aid that being involved in the Coalition is a form of care. People were longing for an Asian American activist space, a place to heal and to build community.



Unity Protest | Oct 8, 2013 | Photo by Anna Min

Acknowledgements

We wanted to give a huge thank you to all our supporters, volunteers, donors, grantor and the Don't Buy Miss Saigon Coalition members for all their commitment towards ending Institutional Racism by holding accountable institutions and foundations. This could only happen through their endless efforts, research, knowledge, skills, creativity and continuous accountability conversations.