CHICAGO PREMIERE

THE CHINESE LADY

來自中國的女人

BY LLOYD SUH

DIRECTED BY HELEN YOUNG

Timeline Theatre Company

BACKSTORY YOUR GUIDE TO TIMELINE PRODUCTIONS

A MESSAGE

FROM ARTISTIC DIRECTOR PJ POWERS

Dear Friends,

Welcome back for the final production of TimeLine's 25th Anniversary season—the Chicago premiere of *The Chinese Lady*.

As longtime fans of playwright Lloyd Suh and director Helen Young, we proudly featured this play in our TimePieces play reading series in January 2020, and based on its tremendous resonance that night, we soon announced it would be included in our 2020-21 season.

That season never came to be, and as we've waited to bring this story to the stage, we've witnessed the disturbing rise in racist attacks and harassment targeted at the Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) community across our country and in Chicago.

The insight of Lloyd's play has only become more urgent.

In a story that spans decades, we meet a teenaged Afong Moy in 1834, reportedly the first Chinese woman to come to the United States—not by her choosing, but brought here as a sideshow to promote the sale of imported Chinese goods. For 25 cents, curious spectators paid to observe Afong—the Chinese Lady—purportedly to learn about her culture, but more as enticement for purchasing decorative objects from her native land.

Taken around the country for years and put on display by P.T. Barnum, she lived under a continual white gaze. In a country of immigrants, she still was billed and regarded as an exotic other.

Beyond 1850, there are no more historical records of Afong, and part of the beauty of Lloyd's play is that he not only gives a voice to this notable yet forgotten figure, but he imagines how her life, wit, and point of view might inform assumptions, perceptions and realities about Asian American culture then and now.

Produced on the heels of TimeLine's world premiere production of *Relentless*, this play continues a conversation about glossed-over periods and peoples—stories that deserve and demand both examination and introspection, so that we can improve our understanding of our country's history and provoke us to further contemplate what it means to be an American today.

I'm delighted to have you join us to cap off our silver anniversary season, rounding out a year replete with so many twists and turns and precarious moments of uncertainty. We're grateful for the unwavering support, financial investment, and belief in the importance of TimeLine's mission that have provided fuel for us to return to the stage.

As we look toward a new season and a return to our current home on Wellington Avenue, I couldn't be more hopeful about what lies ahead.

On page 11 of this *Backstory*, I encourage you to read more about TimeLine's extraordinary new Executive Director, Mica Cole. I'm ecstatic to partner with and learn from such a visionary leader who will raise the bar for what TimeLine is and can become. I've admired Mica for years, and she lights up any room she enters. Her warmth, generous spirit, compassion, depth of listening, and sense of humor infuse all who engage with her.

Working together with TimeLine's Company, Board, Staff—and with you—Mica and I look forward to guiding TimeLine into a new chapter, embracing our role as artistic and civic leaders, furthering TimeLine's commitment to being an antiracist, equitable, and inclusive organization, and leading us into our new home in Uptown.

We're so glad you're with us.

PJ

A NOTE

FROM DIRECTOR HELEN YOUNG

Helen Young.

"We need to remember her singular life as one in a colorful quilt of diverse American stories, each worthy of inspection."

Nathaniel and Francis Carnes brought Afong Moy to the United States by herself in 1834 when she was only 14 years old.

Being the first Chinese woman in America, she had no one to commiserate with, nor is there record of her being connected to any Chinese community in her lifetime. Once she arrived, she probably had no real agency in the selection of what represented "The Chinese Lady, Afong Moy." At least for her most impressionable years, the Carnes chose her clothes, where she lived, and what adorned her rooms.

I wondered how a 14-year-old girl with no ties to a Chinese family or community, chaperoned in this country by white Americans, could hang on to her Chinese-ness. She might very reasonably have taken on more and more American-ness as time went on. And in Lloyd Suh's re-imagining of what such a life may have to share with an audience, I was struck that her life essentially grafted into an American one, burdened with American injustices, infused with deep Chinese roots.

Afong's extraordinary American life generated a legacy that reaches across time, impacting even today's Asian American experiences. And as such, we need to remember her singular life as one in a colorful quilt of diverse American stories, each worthy of inspection. If we do, it can illumine how we got here and help us "see" where we may want to go next.

THE TIMELINE:
EARLY CHINESE IMMIGRANTS IN AMERICA

1784 *The Empress of China* becomes the first American ship to travel the trade route to China.

1784-1812 American ships make 400 voyages to China, bringing back a small number of Chinese men who are merchants or hired crew members.

1834 Afong Moy becomes reportedly the first Chinese woman to ever come to America.

1842 China loses the Opium War to Britain. The economic hardship following the war will lead to an increasing number of Chinese fleeing from their hometowns to the U.S.

1848 Maria Seise, the first known Chinese woman immigrant to America, arrives. Seise is brought to the United States as one of the servants of Charles V. Gillespie, an enterprising New York trader.

In this same year, the Gold Rush Era begins. The promise of gold brings waves of Chinese men to the U.S. At this time, the population of Chinese women in the U.S. is much smaller; they are mostly prostitutes who are imported to the predominantly male California as indentured servants.

1855 As the California Gold Rush comes to an early conclusion, Chinese men turn to working in the mining counties of Tuolumne, Amador, Sacramento, and Nevada.

1862 The construction of the Transcontinental Railroad starts.

A large number of Chinese migrants will help build the railroads—from 1863 to 1869 alone, approximately 15,000 Chinese workers participate. Despite being assigned to more grueling labor than their white counterparts, the Chinese are paid less and given worse accommodation.

Afong Moy (in the salon of the Obears' Park Place Home), "The Chinese Lady," 1835.

With her hands tightly clasped across her stomach, Afong Moy sits center stage in a room filled with Chinese goods—paintings, lanterns, and teapots. When we look at her in the 1835 lithographic print entitled "The Chinese Lady," she silently gazes back at us. Who was Afong Moy in history?

On October 17, 1834, when Nathaniel and Francis Carne's stock-in-trade cargo ship *Washington* sailed into New York Harbor full of tea and fancy Chinese goods, a special passenger received special mention in the *New York Daily Advertiser*: "The ship *Washington*, Capt. Obear has brought out a beautiful Chinese Lady, called Julia Foochee ching-chang king, daughter of Hong wang-tzang tzee king. As she will see all who are disposed to pay twenty-five cents. She will no doubt have many admirers."

Her lengthy name in the ads combined a series of appellations that sounded "oriental," along with an English forename Julia, as well as an honorific title "king." The next day, however, on the manifest records of the ship, our royal and oriental lady was suddenly renamed as "auphmoy." The only name spelled in lowercase in this list of passengers, "auphmoy" reads like a series of letters randomly strung together, just like a noise. "Auphmoy" was listed as a servant of Captain Obear's wife.

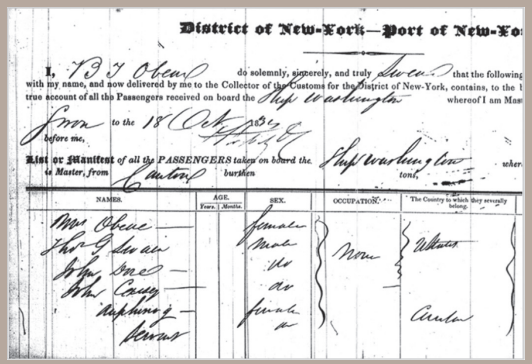
Then, two weeks later, on November 6, our Chinese Lady adopted a simpler new name, "Afong Moy." Well, with the English spellings, it is impossible to reconstruct this name in Chinese characters. But, given its sound, "Afong Moy" was likely only a generic Chinese women's nickname: The character for "Moy" could be a family name, but is more likely just a diminutive suffix that means "little sister" or "girl," whereas the use of "A" as the first syllable indicates that the name is an informal address.

Yes, we can call her Afong Moy, as she was mostly known by this name during her life in the United States, but we must remember: The real name and the real life of Afong Moy is forever lost in history. Who was Afong Moy? What family was she from? All of these questions surrounding her identities are left unanswered. Rather, her life story was pinned down to imagined and generalized Chinese-ness, a foreign other, the Chinese Lady.

As we look for traces of her by flipping through prints and newspapers from 19th century America, we realize that Afong Moy is someone who only lived in the others' gaze—we have no access to her own writings, or anything in her own words. Rather, we can only read her through poems written after seeing her; imagine her through drawings of her in the ads. We can only piece together a shadow image of Afong Moy through historical records that are mediated by a third party who tells her stories for her.

Our play *The Chinese Lady* seeks to break her 200-year-long silence, and imagine her with a voice of her own. Here, playwright Lloyd Suh brilliantly imagines her as a lively and witty spirit, affording us a chance to look at her as a real person with thoughts, ideas, humor, and emotions.

National Archives and Records Administration, Passenger Lists of Vessels Arriving at New York 1820–97, M237, roll #25, October, 13, 1834–March 25, 1835.



District of New-York—Port of New-Yo

I, T. B. Obear do solemnly, sincerely, and truly swear that the following with my name, and now delivered by me to the Collector of the Customs for the District of New-York, contains, to the true account of all the Passengers received on board the Ship Washington whereof I am Mas

before me, to the 18 Oct 1834

List or Manifest of all the PASSENGERS taken on board the Ship Washington whereof is Master, from Canton burthen tons

NAMES.	AGE. Years. / Months.	SEX.	OCCUPATION.	The Country to which they severally belong.
Mrs Obear		female		
Thos G Obear		male	Mer	U States
Wm Jones		do		
John Carey		do		
Auphmoy		female		Canton
Servants				

A plaque noting the accomplishments of the Chinese on the Southern Pacific Railroad.

1860s-80s Railroad work brings the Chinese to nearly every region under development in America. Thousands of laborers leave California for work in the Pacific Northwest, the Southwest, and the South, in fishing, farming, factories—any manufacturers that need workers. Many workers save their earnings and initiate small businesses.

Meanwhile, the number of Chinese prostitutes decreases drastically as many prostitutes marry Chinese laborers, merchants, grocers, and restaurant owners.

Cartes-de-visite photos of Chinese women and men. (Carl Mautz collection of photos created by California photographers, Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Yale University, 1860-1880)

1868 China lifts its ancient ban on emigration to foreign countries.

1871 The Chinese Massacre, as it will become known, takes place on a cool October afternoon in Los Angeles. The mass lynching is fueled by propaganda that Chinese Americans are "barbarians taking jobs away from whites."

During the massacre, 19 Chinese people—10 percent of L.A.'s Chinese population—are murdered, and Chinatown is looted for cash and valuables worth an estimated $40,000.

On November 12, 1834, New Yorker Philip Hone wrote down his impression of Afong Moy in his diary: "Her appearance is exactly the same as the figures on tea chests—a large head, small features and a countenance devoid of expression."

Through the eyes of Hone, Afong Moy was seen as nothing more than a two-dimensional image on a tea chest. The Chinese body was objectified to a mere façade, "a countenance devoid of expression."

In fact, most Americans in the early 19th century encountered China not through human interactions, but through Chinese imports: china ware, fans, lacquer, and wallpaper. Images of Chinese on tea crates, as well as statues of Chinese, were particularly popular in tea stores. As we see in Hone's example, the association of the Chinese body with a flat and static image was, at times, projected onto a living human body.

Intriguingly, the objectification of the Chinese body, and broadly of the Asian body, remains an issue in current-day America. Anne Anlin Cheng, in her seminal work "Ornamentalism: A Feminist Theory for the Yellow Woman," argues that Asiatic femininity is often "constructed through fabrics, ornaments, and skins that never enjoyed the fantasy of organicity; one populated by nonsubjects who endure as ornamental appendages." Drawing on the Metropolitan Museum's 2015 exhibition "China: Through the Looking Glass," as well as the story of Afong Moy, Cheng calls our attention to the persisting racial reduction of Asian flesh to ornament:

"This sumptuous collection rehearses for the twenty-first-century audience the basic tenets of nineteenth-century Orientalism: that opulence and sensuality are the signature components of Asiatic character; that Asia is always ancient, excessive, feminine, available, and decadent; that material consumption promises cultural possession; that there is no room in the Orientalist imagination for national, ethnic, or historical specificities. Most of all, the show reminds us that *China* (conflated throughout the show with Asia at large) equals *ornament.*"

– Anne Anlin Cheng, Ornamentalism: A Feminist Theory for the Yellow Woman"

Exhibition hall of China: Through the Looking Glass *(2015), The Metropolitan Museum of New York.*

A Chinese Export Porcelain Initialed American Eagle, late 18th century/early 19th century.

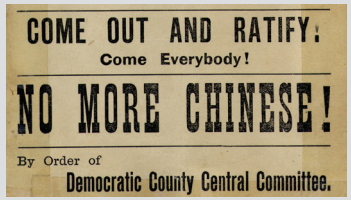
In the play *The Chinese Lady*, Afong Moy exhibits a passion for cultural exchange, which explains her reasons behind coming to the United States.

During the late 18th and early 19th century in China, the foreign trade—albeit limited to only one port that was located in Canton, Afong Moy's hometown—brought about lots of fascinating cultural exchange. From the extant import/export goods produced and traded in the southern port of Canton, we can still observe some "exchange of ideas and practices around the globe," to use Afong Moy's words. To name a few exciting transcultural fusions from that time: export china teapots adorned with American eagles, local paintings that adopted a Western perspectival method, and European glass mirrors framed in traditional wooden frames.

Seen in this light, the "hopeful exchange around the globe" that Afong Moy wished to see was already happening, albeit rather implicitly, in her hometown Canton (present-day Guangdong Province). But Afong Moy's merchant managers, despite being a part of the transnational exchange of things and ideas, deliberately left out the cultural exchange component in their publicity of the Chinese curiosities, as their business was dependent upon the image of a pure and absolute Chinese culture.

1875 The Page Act of 1875 effectively prevents Chinese women from immigrating to the United States. In the early 1870s, there are roughly 78 Chinese women per 1,000 Chinese men in the U.S. After the law's passage, that number will drop to 48 women per 1,000 men.

1882 In what widely will be considered the country's first major immigration policy, the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 bans Chinese laborers from immigrating to the United States and effectively ends all Chinese migration to the U.S. Born out of thinly veiled xenophobia and paranoia over Chinese people stealing jobs, the Act also prevents Chinese migrants already in the U.S. from being granted citizenship, banishing them to the legal status of "resident aliens."



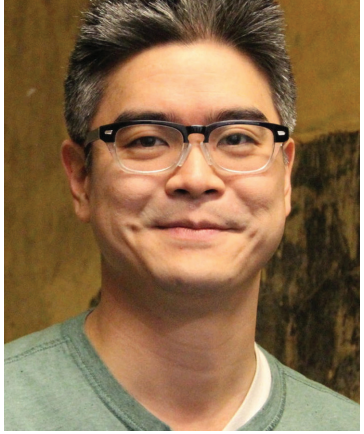
Poster announcing the democratic passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act.

1882-1892 Massacres of Chinese miners continue to happen throughout the U.S., including the Rock Springs Massacre (1885) and The Snake River Massacre (1887). These racial tensions have been long brewing: Many white miners blame their poor working conditions on the influx of Chinese miners, who are willing to work under worse conditions for less money.

1892 The Chinese Exclusion Act is renewed.

1902 The Chinese Exclusion Act is made permanent.

1943 When China becomes an ally of the U.S. against Japan during World War II, the Chinese Exclusion Act is repealed by the 1943 Magnuson Act.



Lloyd Suh. (Karin Shook Photography)

As rehearsals were gearing up for *The Chinese Lady*, dramaturg Yiwen Wu (YW) posed a few questions to New York-based playwright Lloyd Suh (LS) about the reverence he has for Afong Moy, the value of interrogating social constructs, and how he thinks about his connections with a broader cultural conversation.

(YW) What first attracted you to the story of Afong Moy?

(LS) I was doing research on a different play—a play that was about, in many ways, the history of stereotyping—when I came across Afong Moy and her story. It just stuck with me. I wasn't even thinking about a potential play at the time, it was just something that I wanted to know about personally, and try to find out as much as I could.

It resonated with me on the level of conversations I've had with other peers in the performing arts around the performance of ourselves, really. What does it signify when I do this? What do people see when I do this? What is the perception, and what are the ways in which I don't even know how I'm communicating something when I'm on stage or going through life? The more I started thinking about that, the more I started thinking about how it might be a play, because of the performative nature of it. That's where it all began.

(YW) Could you tell us a little bit more about the resonance you felt with Afong Moy?

(LS) My initial impulse was the performative aspect, but then it changed. As I was going through it, there was a point where I felt like, oh, I don't know how to end this. I don't know if this play has an ending, because the history of Afong Moy was lost to us. She disappeared, she was forgotten, she was discarded. But I had begun to revere her, to see her as a very important part of American history, of history in general, world history, human history. I didn't want to be in a position of making stuff up, so I put it away for a little while.

But Afong Moy continued to haunt me. I sat with the question of, why was she forgotten? And then I started to think about the reasons she was forgotten being still with us today.

(YW) What are your thoughts on the term, Asian American?

(LS) My relationship with that term is evolving, and it changes. I'm totally self-aware of the fact that it is a social construct, but I also think that lots of social constructs are valuable.

I'm a playwright. I deal in fiction. I'm interested in social constructs. I'm maybe more interested in the things we socially construct than the things that are naturally constructed, or whatever.

Like, how do you define American? What does it mean to say you're an American? Where is there solidarity? I'm interested in that both as a citizen and as a writer. I'm interested in where is there solidarity and where is solidarity possible, and how does that affect our day-to-day life? How does that affect our citizenship?

I think as citizens, we strive to identify the ways in which we have solidarity with other Americans. And in that, Asian American is useful insofar as it allows us to consider the ways we have a different kind of solidarity.

Cast members Mi Kang (right) and Glenn Obrero at first rehearsal of The Chinese Lady *in April.*

Shannon Tyo in Ma-Yi Theater Company's production of The Chinese Lady. *Ma-Yi premiered the play in New York in 2018 and returned it to the stage earlier this year at The Public Theater. (Joan Marcus)*

(YW) What are some of your biggest artistic influences?

(LS) Here in New York, I've been part of an extended community. Early in my writing life, I felt like part of a community of other Asian American playwrights. Over the past 10 years, it became just a wide diversity of playwrights from all over the world. It's given me this feeling that my work is in conversation with a broader ecology of writing. I'm not just writing purely out of my own impulse, in my own ego, but I'm part of a larger cultural, global conversation of what we're trying to express as an art, but also what we're trying to express as just a collection of voices.

I worked for 10 years in new play development, and I was able to develop really lasting relationships with hundreds of other writers, and a lot of them are some of my closest friends. I think about how my work is in conversation with theirs and how our work collectively is in conversation with a broader cultural conversation that's happening politically, globally, all that.

(YW) In an interview in 2019, you said that this play is about empathy and how valuable it can be to strive for understanding. Since then, has the key message changed?

(LS) I'll be honest, I haven't thought about it in those terms. As I think about it now, I would frame it a little differently. I would say that what I'm really interested in is, what does it mean to be an American? There's something *that* urgent about it.

It feels like at this moment, this country is really seriously reckoning over our history. I think it's still true what I said before, but what's going on in the world right now makes me feel like there's something a little more urgent on the table right now, that it goes deeper, or is becoming more specific, somehow.

I genuinely think Afong Moy is an important figure in human history. As we reckon with what it is to be an American living in this time, we have to reckon with the ways in which history erased her, but also just add her in general to our understanding of history.

(YW) Do you have upcoming projects we should keep an eye out for?

(LS) I have a few other plays. The biggest one is called *Exclusion*, on the legacy of the Chinese Exclusion Act and in particular, the experience of migrants who were detained on Angel Island. Another play, *The Heart Sellers*, is rooted in more contemporary history—the 1970s around the legacy of the immigration reform Hart-Celler Act. That play, which focuses on two recent immigrants, one from South Korea and one from the Philippines, as they attempt to find unexpected solidarity with each other in a small American city, will be at Milwaukee Rep in the early spring of 2023.

On April 20, TimeLine announced that we are welcoming Mica Cole as our new Executive Director!

A Chicago native raised on the South Side, Mica brings nearly two decades of experience as an arts administrator and changemaker. She previously served for eight seasons as the Repertory Producer at Oregon Shakespeare Festival, and in Chicago as Executive Director of Free Street Theater and Director of Education and Engagement at Writers Theatre, among numerous other leadership achievements.

Mica's appointment is part of a planned leadership expansion for our company, as former Managing Director Elizabeth K. Auman takes on the new role of Director of New Home Development, focusing on managing TimeLine's new home development project in Uptown.

Everyone at TimeLine is beyond thrilled that Mica has chosen to join the company at this transformative time, and we want everyone to get to know her better!

Please check out some of Mica's responses in a conversation with Director of Major Gifts Chelsea Smith below, then visit *timelinetheatre.com/blog* to read an extended version of this interview plus more details about TimeLine's leadership expansion.

Chelsea Smith (CS): Your new role as Executive Director is actually not your first time working with TimeLine. You appeared on stage in 2008 in *Weekend* by Gore Vidal. Can you recall what that experience was like?

TimeLine's new Executive Director Mica Cole.

Mica Cole (MC): *Weekend* was the perfect beginning to my relationship with TimeLine. It was a smart 1960s political comedy about race—precisely the type of work that I was drawn to. The dramaturgy of the play was fascinating and the conversations it spurred were, well, timely to say the least. President Obama was leading in most polls and yet we were all quite uncertain about whether or not this country was ready to elect a Black man as President of the United States. Just weeks after *Weekend* closed, I was standing in Grant Park watching President-elect Barack Obama deliver his acceptance speech. My first experience working with TimeLine is forever tied to that life-changing and history-making moment.

(CS) Wow, what a fascinating correlation and a truly remarkable moment! Another correlation is the fact that you attended the same school as TimeLine's founders —The Theatre School at DePaul University. What does that connection mean to you?

(MC) It's kind of romantic, isn't it? I remember everyone talking about TimeLine when I was at The Theatre School—they were these cool kids who started a theatre company and everyone wanted to audition for them.

When you grow up in Chicago theatre, the idea of starting a company is romanticized. You're told that only a brave few actually have what it takes to do it, and they did.

We weren't at TTS at the same time, but we walked the same halls and had many of the same professors, so we're part of a similar era. For me that creates this deep sense of belonging and a sense of pride in the work at TimeLine.

(CS) You've worked extensively across the country and for many years at Oregon Shakespeare Festival. What led you back to Chicago?

(MC) Honestly, it just felt like it was time for me to come home. I missed the vibrancy of the city, the art, the food, the people, the practical Midwestern sensibilities. Most importantly, I missed my Mom. I'd like to think that the universe conspired to bring me home so I could find my way back to TimeLine. I feel like we should go with that.

(CS) We're happy, and grateful, that you answered that calling! So, why were you interested in the Executive Director role at TimeLine?

(MC) I was incredibly impressed with how much the company has grown over the past decade. Not just in terms of size and scale but also the depth and reach of its mission. From the expansion of the company of artists, to the creation of TimeLine South, to the new home in Uptown —all of these developments represent a bold expression of the company's commitment to everyone's history. And I think that's exactly the kind of unequivocal dedication to core values that this social moment demands.

(CS) You're stepping in at an auspicious moment. We're emerging from a pandemic, celebrating a 25th Anniversary, and moving toward a new home in Uptown. What's your vision for TimeLine over these next few years?

(MC) This moment is a true testament to the thoughtful stewardship that precedes me. My hope is to build upon this solid foundation with the same steadfast commitment to sustainable growth that has gotten us here. We're expanding that commitment to ensure that we grow in ways that are also equitable.

As we continue to move through the phases of opening a new space in a new community, my hope is that we'll use this opportunity to ask defining questions about this next chapter of TimeLine's history. This promising and exciting moment is unfolding against a backdrop of profound social reckoning and dissatisfaction with systemic and structural inequalities. I'm curious about what we've learned about who we are and what decisions we've made or have yet to make about the kind of civic and cultural organization we aspire to be. And how will those decisions shape our approach to moving into a new community? These conversations have already started and they will continue to evolve as we sharpen our analysis and awareness of our role as a civic organization.

BACKSTORY:
THE CREDITS

Dramaturgy & Research by Yiwen Wu, Alisa Boland *and* Wenke Huang

Written by Yiwen Wu, Alisa Boland *and* Wenke Huang, *with contributions by* PJ Powers, Helen Young, Chelsea Smith, *and* Lara Goetsch

Editing and Graphic Design by Lara Goetsch

The Chinese Lady *promotional image design by* Michal Janicki

Backstory is published to accompany each production during the season

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Our Mission: TimeLine Theatre presents stories inspired by history that connect with today's social and political issues.

Our collaborative artistic team produces provocative theatre and educational programs that engage, entertain and enlighten.

Visit TimeLine's website for a Chinese translation of *Backstory.*

本期《背后的故事》亦有中文翻译版本，您可以访问剧院官网来解锁翻译文件。

THE NEW HOME

A WELCOMING GATHERING PLACE FOR THEATRE, EDUCATION, AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

IT'S TIME

THE CAMPAIGN FOR **TIMELINE'S NEW HOME**

Design rendering by HGA

CREATING A NEW CULTURAL ASSET FOR CHICAGO, IN UPTOWN. LAYING THE FOUNDATION FOR TIMELINE'S NEXT ERA.

Even a pandemic can't deter TimeLine's progress toward establishing the first home of our own. Located at 5035 N. Broadway Avenue (near the corner of Broadway and Argyle) in Chicago's Uptown neighborhood, we're creating a space to grow and innovate. It's time to uplift everything that you love about TimeLine while supporting new artistic possibilities. **Read more about our new home in *The Chinese Lady* program book or via the webpage below!**

To learn more about ways you can support, please contact Chelsea Smith, Director of Major Gifts, at *chelsea@timelinetheatre.com* or 773.281.8463 x16.

TIMELINETHEATRE.COM/ITS-TIME