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'Red' seems color of success

By BARRY JOHNSON ⁵⁰⁴⁹
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Chay Yew is a 32-year-old playwright, born in Singapore and on a roll in America.

His "Red," a play of self-discovery set in the Beijing Opera as the Cultural Revolution hits China, is playing at Portland Center Stage right now. And its run at Seattle's Intiman Theatre earlier in the fall was promising enough to earn a tryout on the East Coast. A new production opens in January at the Long Wharf Theatre in New Haven, Conn., and then moves to the Manhattan Theatre Club in New York in March.

But such success seems somehow fated for Yew, who has made himself a central figure in the more progressive precincts of American theater. His work as director of the Asian Theatre Workshop at the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles has put him in touch with some of the most progressive writers in the country, including Maria Irene Fornes, Philip Kan Gotanda, David Henry Hwang and Constance Congdon. And it has situated him in the middle of the feminist, gay and multiculturalist currents that are providing most of the energy in contemporary theater these days.

The sheer energy of his conversation is an indicator of how he has taken such impressive steps since coming to the United States at the age of 16. He jumps from topic to topic mercurially, passionately, and he refers frequently to words of wisdom he's gotten from his friends in the theater world — Tony Kushner, Paula Vogel, Suzan-Lori Parks, a who's who of theater's cutting edge.

Yew has strong feelings about the drift of American theater, which he



Sab Shimono (left) and Michi Barall star in Chay Yew's "Red."

sees as too conservative and too elitist. "The theater must always be a part of its community," he said while he was in Portland doing last-minute rewrites of "Red." "It can't be a cultural-social icon. It's a service organization that speaks to and represents the community."

Yew thinks that theater, especially regional theater, has become entirely too comfortable and self-satisfied: "Those nice cushy evenings where you feel affirmed — I question that aspect because it doesn't make us realized as people."

And he thinks that this attitude keeps it from being as vital as it can be, dealing with subjects not taken up by other media and putting them directly in the audience's lap.

"The problem with the theater is subscriptions," Yew says about that staple of nearly all major regional theater companies. "Theaters need subscriptions to survive, so they

think they must appeal to more conservative audiences. What about plays about my generation? They don't say anything to them."

This generation gap is widened by high prices and by an aesthetic style that excludes the less linear, shorter episodes of film and MTV.

Yew's kind of theater owes a lot to his experiences in Singapore. "When I was a kid in Singapore, I'd go to the street theater with my grandmother," he remembers. That form of Chinese opera was staged in the middle of a busy street, surrounded by merchants, food stands and people talking. He recalls walking around the stage and watching the actors preparing their makeup and conversing with friends around them before heading to the stage. The traditional stories were broken up with arias. "The people would be talking, and then they would stop to listen to an aria," Yew says. "They

hear it and then ask the singer to sing it again, maybe even four times; the play would stop again, and they would retalk."

Yew feels a constant sense of displacement as a result of his location in the United States, but one that is not necessarily unpleasant. "I like the floating quality, hovering, which allows me to examine the world I came from and the world I'm in now, never really belonging to either."

Yew appreciates the chance he had to develop "Red" at Intiman Theatre in Seattle and at Portland Center Stage, productions that have given him a chance to see how theater grows, what works and what doesn't. He hopes it will, in the eyes of the audience, be a "substantial change" in stage work and to text work.

And Yew predicts that it will be "vastly evolved by the time it reaches the East Coast."

"Red" continues 7 Wednesdays-Thursdays, Fridays-Saturdays, 2 and 7 p.m., through Nov. 21, at Intiman Theatre, 1111 S.W. Broadway, 536; 274-6588.