

Where Do We Go From Here?

An Interview With Chay Yew

By Sandra Kreiswirth

"Ultimately, I would rather be known as a playwright, director, producer and dramaturg who is gay, Asian and American. That's all in my blood and under my skin. How can you label that?"

That's what Chay Yew has to say about himself. Others might add that Yew is also poetic, witty, acerbic, self-effacing and serious. On the page, his friends tell him the way to spot one of his scripts is that someone always dies. Now, at 35, he is among the elite second generation of Asian American playwrights.

Cleaning a space in the Taper press office, Yew sits down, grabs a cookie and says "let's gab" as he tells stories about himself and his family, about adapting the work of Federico Garcia Lorca and also about what he's given up to be where he is today.

All these remembrances and ideas seem to spill out in a rush of words, sometimes so fast that when Yew's asked to back up and explain, he laughs and says, "I don't know. Tell me what I said."

Unlike prominent first generation Asian American playwrights David Henry Hwang, Philip Kan Gotanda and Velina Hasu Houston who wrote about being Asian in America and asked how they fit in, Yew, and those he guides as director of the Asian Theatre Workshop at the Mark Taper Forum, instead ask "where we go from here and how do we live with others." For Yew, race is no longer the primary focus. Instead, his Asian characters are part of the American tapestry tackling the issues of life, among them AIDS and homosexuality in *A Language of Their Own*, homicidal passion in *Porcelain*, and the immigrant's myth of the American dream in *Wonderland*.

In 2000, Yew added "adaptation by" to his credits with Lorca's *The House of Bernarda Alba* at the National Asian American Theater Company in New York where he also served as director. "I read several adaptations of the play," he says, "and didn't find myself taken by them. I desperately wanted to experience the same violent and passionate viscera in the play from when I first read it when I was in college."

He also couldn't find the same poetics that filled the adaptations of Lorca's *Blood Wedding* and *Yerma*. "I asked the artistic director Mia Katzbak, to let me take a stab at a new adaptation. It was a unique challenge to adapt the work for NAATCO, an off-off-Broadway Asian American theatre company that was dedicated to producing Western classic plays, as I wasn't interested in directing a production of *Bernarda* whereby Asians merely substituted for the Spaniards. So I deliberately set the play in an imaginary place between Spain and the Philippines whereby this coexistence was plausible, and set the action of the play in one concrete location within the walled confines of *Bernarda's* house.

"While doing the research, I also discovered Lorca deliberately wanted this play to be less lyrical and more psychologically dramatic. However, with this adaptation, I was interested in bringing back some of the lyricism that permeated most of Lorca's plays and poetry."

"I also wanted to breathe more life and color into Lorca's minor characters whom I found a great affinity for. Throughout the writing, the question of why a mother would have to have her daughters under strict lock and key kept haunting me. It was too easy to treat *Bernarda Alba* as a domineering bitch like most adaptations did. And, as cliché as it may sound, I found the answer in my own relationship with my parents: unflinching parental love. And that was when the play became extremely personal for me."

Moreover, Yew saw a parallel with contemporary women in places like Afghanistan, Pakistan, Korea, and sometimes even America, where they abide by rules written by men; yet when they act on their own, they adopt the very rules that held them down and impose them on their own daughters. "And even those children don't break away from it," says Yew. "It's a vicious cycle."

"Then I understood why *Bernarda Alba* existed, why the house is the way it is. And why, when someone breaks free from that, the consequences can be dire."

In Yew's adaptation, the Asian influence comes through the Lorca text. "There are aspects of me that are more Asian than American," he says, "one of them is that I'm embarrassed by big feelings. They belong to Lorca. So in this adaptation I wanted to find different ways of conveying the feelings of a household of repressed women. It's interesting for me to see how the feelings manifest with people who can't articulate their feelings completely - people who speak in interrupted dashes, navigating silences and pauses - and if the feelings are articulated, it flies out like hot missiles hitting everyone and everything. In terms of the Lorca text, I tried to make sure it didn't possess a hysterical wailing tone throughout the play. But that's my style I guess."

"Not wailing" is a characteristic he shares with one of his major influences, Stephen Sondheim.

"Yes, Sondheim," he says. "By, allowing the gaps to be filled by the people who come in touch with the words, he gives the gift of writing sparsely and emotionally. And that gives it all a kind of elevation. For example, compared to someone who says (he delivers the following in a big voice) 'I Am Feeling Like This' while Sondheim says, 'The sun comes up, I think about you; the coffee cup, I think about you.'"

"See, the efficiency and the subtlety of the words and its spare use connote more emotional value. And I think as a result of that I've always felt close to him."

Feeling close, especially feeling close to family and home, has presented a problem to Yew since he emigrated to America in the 1980s. "I've always had the wonderful opportunity of being in an environment that's hostile and oppressive to my well being. That's why *Bernarda Alba* was a perfect play for me to adapt," he laughs. It's a theme that runs through his verbal bio.

Born in Singapore, the eldest of two children, he was raised in a middle class home by his father, a corporate manager, and his mother, a civil servant. "My parents said the only thing we can give you is an education, which I thought was a great legacy," says Yew. "And the other invaluable thing they gave me, which I've only learned to appreciate in recent years, was the sacrifice they made to let me leave home and country at an early age." After graduating high school at 16, Yew was accepted at Pepperdine University in Malibu. "To me it was the closest I could get to Hollywood and Mary Tyler Moore," says Yew.

Although his father intended for his son to pursue a management career, young Chay took up acting. He found out early on, however, that his only chances of getting cast in college productions were in *The King and I* kinds of roles so he switched to writing for television and film before ultimately finding his niche in theatre, much to the chagrin of his father.

"I'll tell you a story about my father," he smiles. "When I was a kid, I saw a performance of 'What I Did For Love' from *A Chorus Line* on television and immediately asked my dad to buy me the cast album. I learned all the songs and played it for over a year figuring out in my head what the musical would be like. So when the family came to New York on a visit, I dragged my father to see the show."

"Of course, it was a great musical and my dad was bowled over," says Yew. "And at the end, we walked out onto Broadway and I said, 'Dad, wasn't that great? 'What I Did For Love?' And my father said, 'Yeah. I know where you're going with that. But that's not the point of the musical. The point of the musical is there were 16 people auditioning for parts. Only four got them, and none of them were Asian.'"

"See? That was the kind of nurturing that makes me who I am today. My dad is my dad," says Yew. "What can I say?"

He adopted the same attitude years after he'd become a successful playwright when his father told him, "You know, I've never seen one of your plays. I hope you don't mind."

His father was, however, keeping a scrapbook of his son's news clippings, saying it was for Chay. "I said I didn't really need it, that I don't read them. But he said, 'No, I'm keeping it for you' and I understood and kept quiet."

When Yew returned to Singapore last year after a 12-year absence, he found little pictures of him clipped from articles framed on the wall. "For me, that's more than enough," he says. "My father articulates things very differently. I've never heard 'I love you.' But it doesn't mean he doesn't love me. He just cannot say it. And these 'rules' should be second nature to me now. So it's fine."

That trip also validated something he'd been feeling for a long time. "In Singapore, I didn't feel Singaporean. Even though I speak the pigeon English, eat its food and understand everything, I felt like I missed out on something, for 12 years of my life I had amnesia."

So, ironically, instead of having two homes, he found he had neither, that he hadn't assimilated nor could he ever totally. "When you leave a place, that place only lives in memory. And you always return there in most unexpected moments or when you feel most alone. The Singapore I remembered as a child was the weekly night markets filled with bustling hawkers and street merchants; there were Chinese street operas that my grandmother dragged me to which ultimately brought me to fall in love with the theatre. And my mother would take certain days off during her workweek and drag me to Rodgers and Hammerstein musicals in the Odeon Theatre.

"Now, the night markets have disappeared and those buildings are gone. There's nothing crueler than going back to the same places where you spent your youth and find they've been demolished. The roads are paved differently and their direction changed. It still smells like home, but it's not home anymore. So what you have is nostalgia. What you have is memory really."

Yew admits he gave up a lot - family and friends - to come to America to do his art, but adds, "I think going back to Singapore after 12 years was the great indication that said, 'You see, it was worth it.'"

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