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Critical analysis

US-based S'porean playwright Chay Yew explores the meaning of theatre amid globalisation

By
Aaron Lye

AT age 36, US-based Singaporean playwright Chay Yew is hardly qualified to talk of being "old", but talk of it he does - and it is through this thoughtful analysis that a simple interview turns into a broad, in-depth look at all things from the cyclical nature of theatre to Kumar at the Boom Boom Room.

Produced by the Toy Factory Theatre Ensemble, *The Morning People* is an adaptation of Anton Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard*, taking the production away from its native Russia in the 1900s and placing it in 1930s China, awaiting communist uprising.

Says Yew: "It was really (director Goh) Boon Teck's idea. I've always enjoyed Chekhov, but I felt I wasn't right to do it. Chekhov seemed like something older people appreciated. But when you get older, you look at things differently, and when he asked, I said yes immediately, because I admire his work, and I find it wonderful to work with the next generation of Singapore theatre artists."

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The adaptation, while true to the original in that it follows *The Cherry Orchard's* structure, does take some liberties with the script, incorporating elements from other Chekhov plays such as *Three Sisters* that share similar messages, among other things, as Yew elaborates: ""People in the early 1900s had a weight of words that sounded a little awkward. I wanted to maintain that potency but I gave it a little heightened poetic sense. The Chinese are also more distanced - the Russians hug each other, they're boisterous and the physical space is closer. I had to change that (so) that the characters are people you would believe lived in China during that time."

Comparisons between the adaptation and the original are inevitable, and Yew acknowledges that, calling it a little different in spirit and culture, and a little more political as well: ""Chekhov wrote it before the Russians had their revolution. But we know the history of China, and that the country is going to change, and everything becomes more ironic."

This is what Yew feels makes the play's message relevant today in a world beset by globalisation. Citing the original where former serf Lopakhin buys the cherry orchard, he asks an important question: ""So what? Four years from then, the country's going communist anyway. What is permanence? How much can you buy? Do these things fulfill us? Are these objects going to be worth it five years to come?"

Accordingly, Yew feels theatre needs to ask these and other questions. The

alternative, he pointedly remarks, is to have ""dead" theatre: ""That's why I think theatre is very dangerous for governments ultimately, because it expresses its environment from an oppositional point of view. If you don't, you become propogandist, and what's the point? People smell it a mile away."

Citing his visit to the Boom Boom Room, Yew waxes lyrical: ""I found (Kumar) to be one of the best local theatrical sensations I've ever seen. He entertains, and it's campy, but he talks about race, sex and politics... and I was shocked, because I thought "oh, it's risky to go into that territory'."

But Yew feels these art forms are important, as are the works of people like Kuo Pao Kun and Alfian Sa'at: ""We have to self-criticise. If we don't do that, we're living in a bubble. If you don't have (that), and start doing light and frothy plays, Singapore theatre won't exist. I'm more than happy doing *Cherry Orchard*, but a play about China? I don't give a ****. As a Singaporean, don't you want to say something about Singapore?"

The Morning People ends tomorrow. Performances are at Victoria Theatre at 8pm. Tickets at \$42, \$32, \$22 and \$16 available from Sistic.

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