



Sab Shimono (left) plays a Beijing Opera star and Jeanne Sakata is a writer researching his life in Chay Yew's "Red" at Portland Center Stage.

'Red' dawn

Playwright Chay Yew talks about the origins of one of this year's hottest plays

By MARK DUNDAS WOOD
Special writer The Oregonian

NEW YORK — "I am not a regional theater playwright," claims Chay Yew, author of "Red," which will open Saturday at Portland Center Stage.

That's an interesting assertion, given that "Red" opened at Seattle's Intiman Theatre in September and that a January production at New Haven's Long Wharf Theatre is coming up before the show gets its New York debut in March.

But Yew notes that his work is normally seen by young fringe audiences at cheap-ticketed venues in London or downtown Manhattan. He's comfortable with audiences who are used to postmodern, nonlinear fare.

"My audience is MTV — they're the point click computer culture."

Still, the Singapore-born playwright's "Red" has attracted considerable attention on the regional theater scene. The Portland production is a slightly altered version of the world premiere, which played at the Intiman Theater.

"Red" is the tale of Sonja Wong Pickford, a Chinese expatriate to America who has become a popular writer — a sort of Asian American Danielle Steel. Sonja revisits her homeland to interview Hua Wai Mun, a famous Beijing Opera star. During Chairman Mao's Cultural Revolution in the 1960s, Hua was forced by the government to modify his decadent artistry to fit a more spartan Marxist aesthetic.

Yew's play scrambles time and eschews a literal depiction of events, but its themes will be familiar to mainstream audiences. Yew explains that the play is about the "constant invention of oneself" and the masks people

choose or are required to wear.

Originally commissioned by New York's Public Theatre, "Red" was inspired in part by Yew's colleague, actress Tsai Chin, who appeared in the film "The Joy Luck Club." Chin's father was known as the "Olivier of Chinese Opera."

But the play was also written in response to what Yew perceived as censorship in the American arts scene — particularly the reluctance of Congress to grant National Endowment for the Arts funding to controversial artists. The parallels were not exact (Chin pointed out to Yew that no lives were actually lost in the NEA battle). But Yew found the analogy to be a useful tool.

"Americans hate polemic theater," he maintains. Making his point through a sort of parable was more audience-friendly.

Yew thinks the Asian American literary scene has lately become invigorated with a generation of fresh young voices. Ironically, though, he's not sure "Red" really can be classified as Asian American, since it deals primarily with Chinese living in China. However, his newest, as-yet-unproduced script, "Wonderland," focuses specifically on family life among Chinese Americans.

Yew describes himself as "pretty bicoastal." His home base is Los Angeles, in part because he runs the Asian Theatre Workshop at the Mark Taper Forum. But he visits New York regularly, staying with friends.

His pre-"Red" plays, which include "Porcelain" and "A Language of Their Own," have won awards. But he has also supported himself working as a director and dramaturge

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coming up

Red

COMPANY: Portland Center Stage

WHERE: Newmark Theatre, 1111 S.W. Broadway

WHEN: Previews 8 p.m. Friday, opens 8 p.m. Saturday, continues 7 p.m. Tuesdays-Wednesdays, 8 p.m. Thursdays-Saturdays, 2 and 7 p.m. Sundays, through Nov. 21

TICKETS: \$10-\$36, 274-6588

'Red': Play has 'regional' success

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(literary consultant).

Yew finds skilled and sensitive directors to be a rare commodity. American directors, he thinks, are particularly apt to misunderstand and even fear the written text. Consequently, they impose their own stamp, which may not serve the playwright's vision.

Yew thinks some playwrights do well directing other writers' scripts — and he hopes he is among this camp. However, he has only directed his own work once — an experience he found to be uncomfortable.

He gives high marks to Lisa Peterson, who directed the Intiman and Center Stage versions of "Red." And he is also impressed with Center Stage's artistic director Elizabeth Huddle's commitment to new, untried work.

"I think Liz is taking a leap with this play. How many brave, adventurous artistic directors are there who would do that?"

Yew acknowledges that "Red" may turn out to be his one and only "regional" play, but also notes that regional theaters have shown interest in "Wonderland."

Nevertheless, at all costs he will avoid tailoring his plays to the tastes of a mainstream audience. "If I have to give them 'product,' I think I could make more money at Banana Republic."