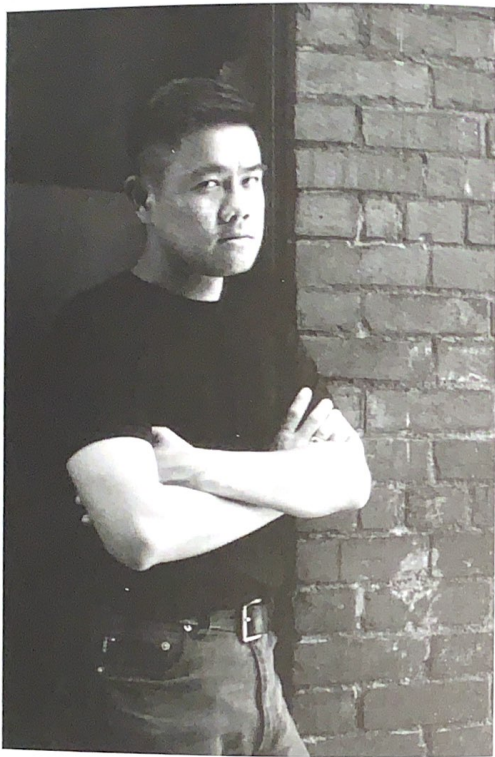


The Color of Theater

Race, Culture, and Contemporary Performance
EDITED BY ROBERTA UNO WITH LUCY MAE SAN PABLO BURNS




continuum



Chay Yew

Photo courtesy of Northwest Asian American Theater

Los Angeles intersections: Chay Yew

David Román

Chay Yew and I met in his West Hollywood home on January 16, 2000 to talk about his work in the theater. I first met Chay when I was living in New York and his production of *A Language of Their Own* was playing at the Public Theater in 1995. That production, which was directed by Keng Sen Ong and performed by a quartet of excellent actors – B. D. Wong, Alec Mapa, Francis Jue, and David Drake – marked the first time I had seen one of Chay's plays staged. I've been lucky enough to see various productions of Chay's work since the New York performance of *Language*, including Tim Dang's intensely powerful staging of Chay's *Whitelands* trilogy at East West Players in 1995. *Whitelands* comprises *Porcelain*, *A Language of Their Own*, and *Half Lives* and was staged by East West Players in repertory to mark their 30th year anniversary season of producing and presenting Asian American theater. The three plays in *The Whitelands Trilogy* are lyrical and dramatic meditations on the nature of desire and sexuality, on the fragmentation of identity and community, and on the often dangerous friction between our private and public selves. Together these plays significantly shifted the poetic and political landscape of both Asian American theater and gay theater.¹ This trilogy was followed by three new plays: *Red*, which premiered in 1998 at Seattle's Intiman Theater and was directed by Lisa Peterson, *A Beautiful Country*, which was produced in 1998 in Los Angeles by Cornerstone Theater Company and was directed by the playwright, and *Wonderland*, a complete reworking of the earlier *Half Lives* play, which premiered at La Jolla Playhouse in 1999 and was also directed by Lisa Peterson.

Chay's work is distinguished for its poetic meditations on difference, for its haunting ruminations on home, for its aesthetic innovations on tradition. Chay's plays have been produced by a diverse range of venues, from established regional theaters, such as those mentioned above, to community-based theaters throughout the United States such as Northwest Asian

American Theater, Theater Rhino, and the Group Theater. Since the premiere of *Language at the Public*, Chay has emerged as one of the most significant new playwrights in American theater.² However, what most people don't realize is that he is also a producer and director of Asian American theater. We spoke just before the opening of his latest directorial undertaking, a revival of David Henry Hwang's *Golden Child* at East West Players. He was also in the midst of moving the successful run of Alec Mapa's solo *tour de force*, *I Remember Mapa*, which Chay directed, from San Francisco to Seattle. I asked him to begin by talking about his work with other Asian American artists.

DAVID ROMÁN: We know you primarily as a playwright but you are also a Resident Artist at the Mark Taper Forum and the Director of the Asian Theater Workshop there. You're also the Resident Director at East West Players. Tell us a little about these roles. Let's begin with the Asian Theater Workshop at the Taper. How would you describe it?

CHAY YEW: The Asian Theater Workshop's genesis was five years ago when the Taper offered me an artistic residency through the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation fellowship they had received. At first, I felt it in my skin that it was simply an affirmative action gesture to include an Asian American in their artistic staff. In our initial meetings, I told them I was only interested in being a part of the Taper if I was able to found a theater lab that developed Asian American theater. To my surprise, they readily agreed. The grant has since expired. However, the Taper has continued its steadfast support to the lab. I designed ATW to develop new work and plays by emerging and established Asian American playwrights. Our program includes commissioning new plays, developing and workshopping plays and performance pieces, and producing new work. I also mentor young playwrights and directors who intern with me, and dramaturg emerging writers' new plays. We have a public reading series where we showcase new Asian American plays written by Han Ong, Alice Tuan, Diana Son, Sung Rno, Elizabeth Wong, and David Henry Hwang. Their plays have ultimately gone on to be produced at Seattle Rep, Public Theater, East West Players, and many theaters in the country. We also produce the Black Box Series where we have free-to-public workshops of performance work. Past participants included performers Leilani Chan, Justin Chin, Noel Alumit, and Dawn Akemi Saito, theater composer Nathan Wang, and poets Chungmi Kim and Russell Leong, to mention a few. This series allows the performer an opportunity to incorporate audience response into their works-in-progress. Inversely these workshops allow audiences to understand the creative process of theater artists. Once in a while, we hold the Lounge Conversation Series where we invite Asian American theater artists to speak about their craft and process. Guests have included set designer Loy Arcenas, playwright Philip Kan Gotanda, and actors Tsai Chin and Sandra Oh.

DR: Aside from developing new work, does the Asian Theater Workshop also mount its own productions?

CY: It was not my original intention for ATW to produce. The Taper does have a mission to represent the diverse communities of Los Angeles on its main stage. However, like any other theater institutions without a second stage, the economics and aesthetics of the theater rarely afforded more Asian American plays to be given productions. There had not been any Asian American representations on the Taper main stage for many years, and that is a poor record.³ Part of my mission at ATW is to develop a pipeline of potential Asian American plays for the main stage. I was also unwilling to be held hostage by the dreaded regional theater play development machinery. I didn't see the point of it and didn't have the patience for it. I strongly felt that creating and developing all this work only to see it languish on the shelves of my office was an utter waste of my time and the artists'. I decided to produce some of these works via ATW and to forward the work to other theaters around the country. Hence, I produce Asian American work on the periphery of the Taper. We try to. One every year at least. And given a very small annual budget, I try to be entrepreneurial by partnering with the smaller 99-seat theaters and East West Players to produce new theater work.⁴ This allows ATW to produce new work cost efficiently, and in turn, gives the partnering theater a new production enhanced technically and financially with help from the Taper. In 1996, we produced *Hymn to Her*, a celebration of the voice of Asian American women in the theater. That festival included performance, a reading of monologues written for Asian women and music. Margaret Cho, Lauren Tom, Jude Narita, Jennifer Paz, and Jacqueline Kim were some of the participants. The following year we produced *Two at the Too*, a double-bill of solo works from Sandra Tsing Loh and Alec Mapa. The year after that, we collaborated with Cornerstone Theater and East West Players to produce *A Beautiful Country*, a documentary theatrical project that explored the 150 years of Asian American immigrant history. This past year, we presented *Word Up! A Festival of Asian American Performance*, which was a festival of solo work by Dan Kwong, Denise Uyehara, Alice Tuan, Eric Steinberg, Amy Hill, Dennis Dun, and many others. We managed to give four shows a world premiere run and others a workshop that eventually led to productions at Highways Performance Space and East West Players later that year. We continue to produce work every year given our very finite budget.

DR: What's remarkable about this work is that it diverts from the idea that work should only – or even primarily – be developed for the main stage. Anyone who's lived in Los Angeles knows by now that the Taper is not the place to see the works of playwrights and performers of color staged with any regularity. Here, instead, we see how you've been able to use your position at an elite theater institution to generate new work and stage it throughout the city with the Taper's imprint. This seems to be a mutually beneficial system for everyone: the theater, the artists, the audiences. Rather than simply waiting around for a mainstage production, a production that may not even happen, and placing all of one's energy there, ATW has found a way to use the resources of the Taper to the advantage of the artists and the Asian American community. I'm not suggesting that Asian American artists – or any other artists for that matter – should relinquish mainstage ambitions. ATW

seems to have come up with a way to both develop new work for potential productions on the regional theater circuit and stage actual theater and performance events in Los Angeles.

CY: I hope to continue offering resources and support. It's something that I would've wanted to have when I started out as a playwright, and now that I have an artistic home at the Taper, I feel it is vital to open the doors to other performers, playwrights, and actors in the city.

DR: It's important that the Taper, as the premier regional theater in Los Angeles, help support artists of color. And it's clear that the Asian Theater Workshop has done lots of interesting work precisely through its affiliation with the Taper. But, as you know, most people know the Taper primarily through their mainstage productions.

CY: The Taper has been nationally known for their diverse artistic staff and play development programs. While it is easy to point the finger at the Taper for not producing plays of color on the main stage, much of the work that has been developed and produced in the Taper's more intimate venues, for example the 'Taper, Too' season, which I am producing, starting June 2000, includes the world premieres of *Black Butterfly*, *Jaguar*, *Piñata Woman*, and *Other Superhero Girls Like Me*, *Drive My Coche*, *Weights*, and *The Square*, all of which have been written by a slew of Latino, Asian American, Black, White, and gay playwrights whom the Taper has commissioned and developed. Next season, we will present on the main stage August Wilson's *King Hedley II*, Charlayne Woodard's *In Real Life*, David Henry Hwang's rewritten book of *Flower Drum Song*, Marc Wolf's *Another American*, and John Belluso's *Body of Bourne*. I believe this is diversity at work in American theater. Aside from the Public Theater in New York and New WORLD Theater in Amherst, there are very few theaters in this country that can boast of such a multicultural palette.

DR: That's certainly true, although most of these works you mention are the works that will circulate nationally. But, you're right, the Taper's peer institutions – Manhattan Theater Club, Lincoln Center, American Repertory Theater, even Berkeley Rep – are stunningly conservative on this issue of diversity and these are theaters that are located in racially diverse cities! It's really amazing when you think of it. If it weren't for George C. Wolfe, the color of theater in New York would be strikingly different. Not that it's only George Wolfe who's doing the work – but as a producer and as a director, we need to give him credit for significantly changing the landscape of theater in New York City and by extension the rest of the country. Let's not forget that he offered you your first New York production.

CH: He's been an influential mentor and supporter. I admire his commitment to theater and to making theater relevant to the community.

DR: You seem to follow in those footsteps. The Asian Theater Workshop also produces other kinds of cultural events that educate audiences about larger social

and political issues. Tell me about the Workshop's presentation of Wei Jingsheng's *The Courage to Stand Alone*, which you directed in the summer of 1997.

CH: At the time, Wei Jingsheng was an imprisoned Chinese political dissident. Nominated numerous times for the Nobel Peace Prize, he was kept in jail for many years for criticizing the Communist government in China in his writings on the Democracy Wall. Wei was recently released to the U.S. for medical care but I hear he's already planning on slipping back into China, risking further imprisonment, to stir up the democracy movement there. During his imprisonment he had written many letters to the late Deng Xiaoping, China's Premier, urging and challenging him to reform China into a democratic state. On the anniversary of the Tiananmen Square riots in 1997, we presented a reading of his inspiring letters with a dramatization of his life and struggles at the Taper.

DR: Many people went to the Taper that night to become educated around the issue. There was a panel discussion afterwards with a U.S. State Representative and former Chinese dissidents who'd also gone through what Wei Jingsheng had experienced. Although the evening provided a forum to talk about the issue, it also proved to be compelling drama.

CY: That was a most gratifying project on many levels. With *The Courage to Stand Alone*, we were able to inform the Los Angeles audience on the issues of human rights and democracy in China, and more importantly, to tell the life and struggles of this courageous and remarkable man. After the dramatic presentation, the audience was heatedly engaged in civic dialogue with the panelists. I remember thinking to myself, 'Yeah, that's the immediacy of theater. That's what theater can do.'

DR: Can you comment on the larger artistic community of Los Angeles? I think most people think of L.A. as primarily an industry town for television and film and don't necessarily see it as a theater town. And when they do think of L.A. theater, it's generally imagined to be a showcase for one of these other major industries. You seem to be the exception to that rule. It also seems to me that most of the people that you work with actually see themselves as theater artists.

CY: I don't think anyone deliberately moves to Los Angeles to work in theater. I think actors, directors, and writers want to be in film or television for economic, artistic or egocentric reasons, or all three of them. And when they realize their 15 minutes will not be handed to them on a silver platter, they do something to attract the attention of casting agents: they start their theater companies. In part, that's why we have this image of theater being a showcase for actors and writers, and in part, some of these theaters are actually formed in response to the film and TV industry as if to say 'We can do this acting and writing thing better.' And a few of these individuals do decide to stay in the theater. Some find provocative and challenging ways to create new work. Don't get me wrong, not all L.A. theater is interesting. For one enlightening moment in L.A. theater, there are ten horrible productions you have to sit through. The other wonderful thing about the L.A. theater scene is that because it's so geographically far from New York, we can

actually redefine theatrical aesthetics, form, and content, and also to some extent, create them without deference to New York. That's the L.A. theater movement: uniquely different and individual, and blessed with very good actors. As a result of this, some interesting theater companies have been born.

DR: What companies are you thinking of?

CY: Actors' Gang, Fabulous Monsters, Highways Performance Space, Bottom's Dream, City Garage, Playwrights Arena, East West Players, Cornerstone Theater, Indecent Exposure, Circle X, LA Poverty Department, and Open Fist are great examples.

DR: Highways is actually a performance space that presents new work and not an actual theater company. I was on the board of Highways for five years, serving even as its chair for close to two years. Not many of the artists who we presented or who saw Highways as their artistic home aspired to work in film and television. These artists, for the most part, were drawn to create alternative performance outside of the major entertainment industries of Los Angeles.

CY: Highways is unique in that way; they've played an important role in this region. Dan Kwong, who has been a resident artist there for many years, curates a wonderful festival of Asian American performance every year. 'Treasure in the House' is one of the most exciting festivals of its kind and it's opened up Highways to many Asian American artists.

DR: Dan's events brought in not only new artists but also – and equally important – he brought in new audiences. This leads me to my next point. L.A. theater is also often associated with 'multiculturalism,' if for no other reason than the city's rapidly changing demographics. Beginning in the late 1980s, many theaters tried to do outreach to under-represented communities or applied for grants targeted for specific kinds of audience development. Do you think there was a mandate at a certain point – maybe in the late 1980s, early 1990s – for multiculturalism? And do you think there's still an interest in Los Angeles for race-related work?

CY: There was definitely more of a conscious attempt to program theater seasons multiculturally during that time. That was largely due to mandates in funding. I strongly believe that was a good thing. Theaters began to program plays of color that eventually found their way into the American theater vernacular; I am speaking of the August Wilsons, David Hwang, Eduardo Machado. Now that there are fewer mandates in funding for multicultural work, only a handful of theaters are consciously programming and seeking plays of color in their seasons. I think the notion of a truly American theater is a myth in this country. A truly American theater should and must program all the diverse myriad voices that reflected and represented the United States. Show me a theater season that boasts of new plays and classics, a season with African American plays, Latino plays and Asian American plays in the mix with their usual fare of Shakespeares, David Hares or A. R. Gurneys. These theaters are rare and few. Most American theater companies don't even

reflect their immediate communities in their productions. And theater managers are wondering why their audiences are dwindling and why audiences of color are not coming to their theaters. Maybe that's why I prefer to work out here in L.A. or New York where multiculturalism isn't only at work, but is a reality. When the larger White theater institutions do not open their doors to audiences and artists of color, the smaller theater companies are birthed. This was the case with East West Players.

DR: Do you see much collaboration between people of different races in the theater? I'm wondering if there are ways to bring in people to think about race on a broader level than just single-theme plays about the experiences of one particular cultural group – Asian Americans, Latinos, Polish Americans. José Rivera does this in his plays. His plays not only expand our understanding of Latinos by including Latino characters from different national backgrounds, they also show Latinos in a world populated by people from all kinds of cultural backgrounds. This not only provides a more realistic sense of living in a multicultural world, but it also makes for really interesting drama. You're now moving in that direction also. Do you see more opportunities now for people of different races and cultural backgrounds to work together – and not just behind the scenes as part of the creative or production team – to produce work that actually thematizes this point?

CY: I think there's a great opportunity for us to do that. My only concern is whether the intention to create that multicultural work is honest. Is it to satisfy a grant? Is it just to create something multicultural because it's hip and politically correct? Then I strongly question the integrity of such a project. The result will be a project that doesn't seem alive, or honest, or real. That's not art. That's product.

DR: I'm not so sure that 'multicultural' is so hip anymore – especially in the state of California! In fact, I think the recent wave of anti-immigrant, anti-affirmative action, and anti-queer initiatives that we've seen in California in the past decade have, in fact, given license to many people to explicitly act out against multiculturalism. Anyway, I was thinking less of these potentially exploitative projects and was thinking instead of work that sets out to represent a multicultural world. Certain artists are already at the forefront of this and not just José Rivera. Anna Deavere Smith, Danny Hoch, and Cornerstone Theater also come to mind. Their work is very much alive and committed to contemporary concerns. You've also commissioned an interesting play that addresses this topic. Can you tell me about *The Square* and what you had in mind for this project?

CY: *The Square* is an epic project that attempted to bring a host of playwrights to create work that comments on their own individual perceptions of Asian America. So I approached Mac Wellman, David Hwang, Philip Gotanda, Connie Congdon, and Ping Chong if they were interested in writing ten-minute plays set in Columbus Park in New York's Chinatown. And the rest of the roster of playwrights included José Rivera, Maria Irene Fornes, Diana Son, Jessica Hagedorn, Craig Lucas, Bridget Carpenter, Robert O'Hara, Kia Corthron, Han Ong, Alice Tuan, and me. Lisa Peterson, the Resident Director and my colleague at the Taper, would direct.

DR: So the Asian American playwrights wrote about non-Asian American characters and the non-Asians wrote about Asian Americans?

CY: Well, yes and no. The playwrights were assigned a list of four criteria picked randomly by Lisa and me. Basically, the four categories included the number of actors, racial make-up, broad themes, and four time periods – 1880s, 1920s, 1960s, and 2000. The wonderful thing about watching this play is you are witnessing Asian American history of the last 120 years, and different and marvelous voices of American theater of the last 30 years. I remember saying, during *The Square's* workshop production at the Taper's 1997 New Works Festival, 'Oh, that's a Ping Chong play, that's a Mac Wellman play, and that's an Irene Fornes play.' I mentioned earlier that there was a lack of a second space at the Taper. In June and July of 2000, I will be producing the second season at the Taper called 'Taper, Too.' We will be presenting four productions in a 99-seat theater in Los Angeles, and *The Square* would be one of them. It has been a long journey for *The Square* as it was one of the first projects I conceived when I founded Asian Theater Workshop five years ago. I'm very pleased that this project is finally a reality.

DR: Can you talk about how it is you started directing? What drew you to this new artistic practice and what kinds of works are you yourself drawn to work on?

CY: I think directing is a natural extension of playwriting. Creating a world on paper is the first step. Creating the same world on stage is another. Being a playwright informs my directorial sense, and vice versa. I'm always protective of the playwright and the play, ensuring I'm always serving the play. The most wonderful thing is painting the visual picture and breathing life into the playwright's words. I most recently directed both David Henry Hwang's *Golden Child* and Alec Mapa's one-man show *Pointless* at East West Players.⁵ Aside from plays, I have directed scores of solo work. Partially, it was always economically feasible to produce a solo show. Partially, I believe that some of the theater work I found most socio-political and urgent is solo work. Right now I am in pre-production for Seattle-based performer David Schmader's incisive and funny *Straight*, which is about gay conversion therapy for a June 2000 production at Highways. I have directed *Depth Becomes Her*, Sandra Tsing Loh's witty and provocative look at multicultural Los Angeles; *Talking with My Hands*, James Sie's touching and insightful journey about being biracial; *Maps of Body and City*, Denise Uyehara's life as a Japanese American girl coming of age in California; *I Remember Mapa*, Alec Mapa's account of being a gay outsider in an otherwise exclusive entertainment industry. There was also an international collaboration of multidisciplinary artists whom I worked with –

DR: Up at the Northwest Asian American Theater in Seattle, right?

CY: Yes, in January of 1998, at NWATT. It was an exciting challenge to work with Asian artists from different disciplines from both America and Asia to create a work called *Home: Places between Asia and America*. The collaborators were a Singapore shaman dancer, a Malaysian choreographer, a Seattle-based solo performer, and Suzie Kozawa, a composer who makes music with found objects. I wrote the

performance text and directed the project. It was my first collaborative work and to speak simultaneously in Mandarin, Cantonese, and in English felt more like a session at the U.N. than a rehearsal day. Despite some initial language difficulties, we were constantly learning from each other and were continually inspired to explore different aesthetics. I guess I particularly felt at home because I was able to explore both my Western and Eastern philosophies and aesthetics.

DR: This kind of transnational exchange and collaboration is important, especially given the rise of global capitalism and the World Wide Web. While there's a long history of interculturalism in performance, there seems to be a new opportunity for U.S. artists to now share resources with cultures outside of the States. It's also interesting to see how these collaborations then shape your own work. I've heard you say that the Seattle project informed *A Beautiful Country*, your recent play about Asian American immigration.

CY: Yeah, I think it did. *A Beautiful Country* was commissioned by Cornerstone Theater Company, a theater company who reaches out to myriad communities in Los Angeles through theater. When artistic director Bill Rauch approached me, I said I would be very interested in creating a show on-site in L.A.'s Chinatown. Cornerstone is primarily known for adapting classic Western plays for different communities but, at the time, I was very preoccupied about learning more about the history of Los Angeles and, in particular, Chinatown. I was also passionate about documentary theater, the theatrical forms that Emily Mann and Anna Deavere Smith created. Coming off from *Home*, I also wanted to explore the concept of Mike Leigh's devised theater; I then employed musical theater, dance, percussionists, slides, video, film, and the testimonials of several local Chinatown residents. Add all of that up with an immigrant Asian drag queen as your guide, you get *A Beautiful Country* which was a significant theatrical experience for me.⁶

DR: *A Beautiful Country*, which is so much about Asian American history and culture, seems to be a major departure from your earlier plays, which focus on the intimate relations between and among people. *A Beautiful Country* takes on the questions of transnationalism, citizenship, and the force of history much more aggressively than the earlier plays. Do you see this as a progression of a theme or a new concern of yours? Let's talk a little about your plays and their major themes. Is there a story that you tell that begins with *Porcelain*?

CY: There were a few contributing factors. Firstly, I guess I've always been a closeted Asian American. In actual fact, I'm an immigrant from Singapore. And, like most immigrants when they arrive in America, they either cling on to their past histories fiercely, or co-opt the history of the country they land in. I did the latter. The history and culture of White America through movies, novels, and television. But I longed for a connection, a deeper one, to my adopted country. And I finally found that connection in the immigrant experiences of Asian Americans while researching *A Beautiful Country*. It was then I didn't feel alone anymore; I felt strangely at home in this country. So I chose to express these new feelings and thoughts through

subsequent plays. Secondly, I was aware that my theatrical canvas was enlarged after *Language*. I attributed that to my being at the Mark Taper Forum. I had always loved working in the smaller and intimate spaces, and my early plays reflected that chamber-like quality. Under Taper artistic director Gordon Davidson, I was very much influenced by his passion for socio-political theater. All my plays written during my residency at the Taper explore the complexities of humanity in the context of environment, politics, and race. I don't really know if there's a specific thematic journey that resonates from *Porcelain* to *Wonderland*, except for a chronological one. But some recurring themes do appear in the plays, for example the outsider's place in the world is one of them, and the question of home is another. As an immigrant to this country, I guess I'm constantly trying to find and define the concept of home through my plays. Each play is different from the other, stylistically as well as content. I guess I'm always a little self-conscious about repeating myself. The only way for me to sit down and write a play is that the world of the play has to be intriguing to me, and the way to tell the story has to be challenging. My plays also indicate my psychological being at the time when they were written: *Porcelain* was about how I fit into straight White America; *Language* was about my falling in and out of love; *Red* was about why I work in the theater and what I would sacrifice to keep doing it; and *Wonderland* was about finding happiness in life and fighting the demons of mediocrity and compromise. That's why I am always embarrassed to revisit an old play. It's like seeing myself again at 18, embarrassed by the childish obsessions, needs, and desires of that age. I guess I'm older and more jaded now.

DR: I think one thing that distinguishes your work from other contemporary work in American theater is that you really do ruminate on major tragic themes. You don't really work in the genre of comedy, even though you might have some humorous moments in your plays. Your plays are very tragic, they take on big themes; they address either the missed opportunities or denied opportunities of Asian Americans. Your characters struggle to improve their position in the world. We see them come up against all kinds of obstacles including their own deeply felt ambivalence about being 'Asian.' For the most part these plays do not have happy endings.

CY: I guess the most memorable stories I have read, seen on the stage, TV, or in the movies have always been tragedies. Tragedies indirectly uplift souls and celebrate life. They force you to confront your life, the decisions you have made, the questions of the society and God. There is such great complex humanity in these stories too. For example, *Wild Duck* and *Enemy of the People* deal with the high cost a person has to pay in order to stand by their own beliefs and moralities. And to endure the devastating consequences are heroes born. I continue to learn about myself and life itself through these great stories. I find Shakespeare's tragedies more resonating than his comedies. I still take to bed the lessons of *Lear*, *Macbeth*, *Brutus*, and *Othello*. They are lessons for a lifetime.

DR: The other thing about your work is that you are very generous with your characters – and, by extension, your actors – because your work is so poetic. Your

characters have these very moving extended monologues which reveal their worldview and which makes us empathize, in part, with their situations.

CY: I think that comes from my influences by playwrights like Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller, Strindberg, Chekhov, and Sondheim. The emotions and passions of their characters are fraught with such complexity and depth; their plays articulated with colorful images and language that continue to linger in my mind's eye and drown in my heart. That's what drew me to write for the theater in the first place. I must also credit the countless hours of music and art lessons my mother forced me to take for me to fully appreciate Debussy, J.S. Bach, Beethoven, Schiele, and Caravaggio, who were important to me while I was growing up.

DR: You are a child of high culture! I was raised on *I Love Lucy* and Diana Ross and the Supremes. My first theater outings were to productions of *Jesus Christ Superstar* and *Godspell*. My parents, who were both born in Colombia, raised us Catholic, which meant that while you were practicing Debussy and Bach on the piano, I was singing 'I Don't Know how to Love Him' and 'Day by Day' at the weekly folk mass where I played guitar.

CY: That's why we are such good friends!

DR: Indeed! Well, that was my life in South Jersey in the 1970s. Let's get back to Los Angeles in the year 2000. Do you think there's support for the arts in Los Angeles?

CY: Not as much as I'd like it to be. But I think this not only an L.A. dilemma but a national one. I find it disturbing that there's a concerted effort in Congress to effectively defund the National Endowment for the Arts. We are a superpower that does not support the arts, and I can rattle off a list of smaller nations that do. This is a country where the freedom of speech is prized and yet the opportunities to express oneself in art are rare and few. When we go to museums, do we not realize that art is what endures? Empires rise and fall, but art ultimately represents the legacy civilizations leave behind. And here in one of the greatest countries in the world we refuse to support our artists. Aside from the government, it's disappointing in this day and age when today's industrialists and business leaders are not giving money to non-profit and art organizations. In the early part of last century, we had Carnegies, the Mellons, and the Rockefellers. They gave away part of their immense wealth to cities and organizations, to found new universities, museums, concert halls, and public places. There was great philanthropy and civic responsibility, and, as a result, much of their legacies have made a deep impact in the American culture. And now our contemporary Bill Gateses and Michael Eisners have not been giving much to the arts. I find that the government's battle over federal funding for the arts and the state of institutional giving criminal.

DR: That's such a strong statement, can you explain what you mean by that?

CY: Is it? Children in schools have their music and arts programs eliminated. We

have studies about how music and arts education enhances children's intellectual development and affords them opportunities of self-expression. Now, many small theater companies around the country, and in L.A., are closing their doors because there's no funding. We are the richest and most democratic country in the world. I don't see why we have to beg for all these things. It's really sad when one day all we have left to show of our late twentieth century are music videos, video games, and Pokemon.

DR: You're also lucky because you seem to have two resident homes, one at the Taper where you also work closely with the other people who are affiliated with the Taper, whether it's Gordon Davidson, Lisa Peterson, or Luis Alfaro, and you also have a home as resident director at East West Players. Due to your work in these two theaters, you seem to have built a bridge between the Taper and East West Players. Do you think you'll continue those relationships?

CY: Definitely. There is a distinct lack of proper play development in most Asian American theater companies. Given their limited resources, the Taper's Asian Theater Workshop also serves as a venue where we commission and develop plays with the intention of finding them homes in Asian American theaters; Prince Gomolivas's *Big Hunk o' Burnin' Love* is a recent example which was workshopped and developed at ATW and was eventually produced at East West Players. Also, we co-produce many productions and events with East West, Northwest Asian American Theater Company in Seattle and Asian American Theater Company in San Francisco, thereby lowering production costs, sharing production resources, and broadening audiences; Alice Tuan's *Ikebana*, "Word Up! Festival," *A Beautiful Country* and both Alec Mapa's solo shows, *I Remember Mapa* and *Pointless*, come to mind. I'm extremely proud of ATW's partnership with these theaters through the years. Personally, East West and the Taper have been the most important part of my career for the last five years. I have been able to flex my muscles in playwriting, directing, producing, and dramaturging. That is because I have the opportunity to come into the theater every day, observe rehearsals, participate in production meetings, and spend time in the company of theater artists. I am constantly being informed and challenged artistically. And, more importantly, these two theaters have allowed me to practice my craft.

DR: This idea of institutional support and theatrical community seems critical to the future of American theater. Your experience seems highly unusual. Most artists don't have access to these kinds of institutions and the day-to-day experiences that you mention.

CY: Presently, there are only a few artistic homes readily available to theater artists. I find that very troubling and disappointing, particularly in New York, where you have some of the best theaters in the country that do not open their doors as homes for these artists. My question is, do theaters produce these playwrights, or hold them on a leash by doing an umpteenth reading of their new plays? American playwrights don't write for readings. These plays need to be produced. And by

being produced is where the playwright learns his or her craft. That's the strange dance that's going around with American theaters.

DR: But it is an important one too. Emerging playwrights benefit from these associations with established institutions. Although I agree that the development process at regional theaters can lead to a form of paralysis where artists don't move into the next step which is production.

CY: My advice to younger writers has always been: 'Don't ever be that barbarian at the gate because more often than not, the theaters will never let you in. Instead what you need to do is produce your own plays. Be more entrepreneurial. Start your own theater companies. Start your own artistic homes.' How can you learn from your play? It's by watching it come alive. You're never going to learn much about your play hearing it or seeing it in countless workshops and readings. Once it comes alive with a group of actors who have lived with the play for several weeks and in front of an audience, then you will see your play come to life. And from that experience, it will make you write the next play and the next and the next. Some of these theater companies include San Francisco's Campos Santo, San Diego's Sledgehammer, Seattle's Printer's Devil Theater, and Austin's Frontera Theater. They produce exciting new work. They're young and energetic and it's wonderful to see the seeds of tomorrow's American theater taking root.

DR: Asian American theater has a rich and complicated history; it can't be reduced to a handful of playwrights anymore. It's a much more diverse field now. Can you comment a little bit on the general status of Asian American theater?

CY: Asian American theater is flourishing more every year. There are more Asian American theaters being established in the last four years, and new Asian American plays are getting produced in Asian American theaters and regional theaters. Some Asian American theaters concentrate on performance work and some on traditional arts and dances, while most produce plays largely for an Asian audience. It's refreshing to see a diversity of work coming out of these theaters. Recently, we had our first-ever national Asian American theater convening in Seattle. However, there are the usual problems of funding, resources, and audience development. I think Asian American theaters face the same question other theaters face: how can we get a younger and more diversified audience into these theaters? Audience development in Asian American theater is tricky. The primary audience is naturally Asian and, more complicatedly, it is extremely diverse within a race. For example, Japanese American audiences are more likely to attend a Philip Gotanda play, and may not choose to attend a play written by Chinese American Elizabeth Wong or a Korean-themed play by Sung Rno. This creates a real financial and programmatic challenge for any Asian American theater. There must be inventive ways to cultivate an Asian American theater audience. Naturally, it should be a goal of an Asian American theater to reach out to non-Asian audiences. Our stories need to be heard not only by our communities but by others; only then can Asian American theater be transcendent. That is true

theater. Also, there is the question whether more Asian American work is being produced in the larger regional theaters. Only about two percent of the plays produced in the country are written by Asian Americans. I have been produced in regional theaters where I was either their first Asian American playwright they have presented, or the first since they produced David Hwang's *M. Butterfly* ten years ago. And I find that a very disappointing and discouraging landscape for all Asian American playwrights to write in.

DR: Five years ago, you expressed how you represented a new wave of Asian American theater that was going against the realistic representations of early Asian American drama, which tended to focus on what it meant to be 'Asian American.'

CY: Right.

DR: And, five years ago, when I first met you, it was really important for you to differentiate yourself generationally and aesthetically from that group of writers. While you made clear that you felt an alliance with these playwrights on a political and cultural level, you also made clear that there were significant creative differences between you and this earlier generation of playwrights. Do you still hold on to those distinctions?

CY: The first generation of Asian American playwrights, David Henry Hwang, Philip Kan Gotanda, Wakako Yamauchi, and others write about being Asian in America. They were more or less identity plays. Now we see a new wave of Asian playwrights like Han Ong, Alice Tuan, and Diana Son who hail from different ethnic backgrounds and sexualities, writing with fascinating theatrical aesthetics and with a whole new agenda. For us, race ceases to be the primary focus. Instead, race becomes the jumping-off point. Asian characters are fully integrated in the American environment; they are constantly navigating their course through politics, humanity, and history. Without the doors opened to us by David Hwang, Frank Chin, or Wakako Yamauchi, we would have a harder time getting our plays produced. We owe these writers a great deal. Now, there is another new development on the horizon where the playwrights are Asian American and their plays do not necessarily reflect and represent Asian Americans or the Asian American landscape. Most of these playwrights do not identify themselves as Asian American and have been vehemently opposed to writing plays that classify them as Asian American. These writers are not interested in plays that explore Asian American experiences, heritages, and histories. I think, in part, that it's terribly exciting to write outside of one's skin, and in part, I find it troubling that in order to do so, you have to completely scrub away the skin that physically defines you. I don't hear the same arguments from my fellow Latino American or African American playwrights; in fact, there is a certain pride and strength in their voices and their work about being and not forgetting about being the Other in America. I wonder if this recent trend in Asian American playwriting is the direct result of our assimilationist culture within Asian America. Nevertheless, these writers are an

undeniable voice. Their plays are articulate, beautiful, and complex, and they will redefine Asian American theater in the coming years.

DR: People most associate your contribution mainly around introducing sexuality into the larger themes of Asian American plays, which, of course, is considerable and important, but, nonetheless, is something of a misrepresentation of the body of your work. I think your contribution is also more artistic.

CY: I should stress that I've always had a problem being labeled as a gay or Asian playwright. I feel that the labeling immediately dictates to audiences how to perceive my work before they had a chance to experience it first hand for themselves. Perhaps this is all a part of our consumer culture. People need labels to know what they are buying. And what's the point of writing if you are continually bound by the labels you are given? Anything you write will be judged against that label. Is this work Asian enough? Is that play not gay enough? How dare he write about straight White people living in New England?

DR: I disagree. I think the 'label' is less about a 'product' and more about a 'politic.' And by politic, I don't necessarily mean a specific and rigid ideological position or a reductive essentialist notion of 'gay' or 'Asian American.' Instead, I mean to say these labels – 'gay', 'Asian American', or, in my case, 'Latino' – signal to audiences the lived relationship to these terms that we, whether we are playwrights, performers, or spectators, inevitably bring to the table given who we are and when and where we live. I even think the question 'Is this work Asian enough?' is endlessly fascinating. It forces us to think what is meant by 'Asian' in the first place and how impossible it is for that term to encompass the enormity of experience that it sets out to describe. I also realize that the question is also endlessly irritating. How annoying for those of us who live under these terms to be always held to someone else's conception of what these terms mean! Personally, I think it's important that you're known as a gay playwright and an Asian American playwright, although I'm not so sure that it describes your work any more successfully than it describes your day-to-day life. But that's not the point. The point is that these 'labels' identify us with a history of struggle against racism and homophobia and with the progressive movements behind these struggles. Your work – as well as mine, for that matter – converses with these efforts and even builds upon them.

CY: You are right. I think we will always defy the status quo, the labeling. Through our work, be it as a playwright, director, or producer, we continually explore and celebrate our humanity and the world in which we live. Naturally I have to write what defines me the most. And yes, some of my stories and characters will live in that gay and Asian world. If I write a play with straight White characters, they will undoubtedly be from a gay and Asian perspective. I don't think I can ever avoid that or want to. But I cannot and will not listen to how other people label my work. It's ironic that I am fighting the battles as I did in high school when they choose to define me as gay or Asian. I guess it's inevitable that people never really see you for what you are, only for what you represent. 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?

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NOTES

1. *Porcelain* and *A Language of Their Own* appear in *Two Plays by Chay Yew* published by Grove Press in 1997. For an excellent discussion of this trilogy, see Michael Reynolds's review of their production at East West Players, *Theatre Journal*, vol. 49, no. 1 (March 1997), pp. 75–9.
2. Chay Yew, whose cultural background is Chinese, was born and raised in Singapore. He left Singapore when he was 16 to study in the United States at Pepperdine University in Southern California.
3. Philip Kan Gotanda's *The Wash* was the last play produced on the main stage of the Taper.
4. The mission statement for East West players reads:
East West Players is dedicated to the nurturing and promotion of Asian Pacific Americans and other culturally diverse talent through the arts. We encourage artists to express themselves by writing stories, creating and producing projects, expanding their performance repertoire and sharing the work in the community.
5. Both of these productions were part of the 1999–2000 season at East West Players. *Pointless*, which was developed by Chay Yew at the 'Word Up Festival' which he organized, had its world première at East West Players. Chay also commissioned and directed the world première of Alec Mapa's *I Remember Mapa*. For the complete text and production history of *I Remember Mapa*, see Holly Hughes and David Román (eds), *O Solo Homo: The New Queer Performance* (New York: Grove Press, 1998). Chay directed the Los Angeles première of *Golden Child*.
6. For a more detailed discussion and analysis of Chay Yew's 1998 Cornerstone production of *A Beautiful Country*, see David Román, 'Visa Denied,' in Joseph Allen Boone et al. (eds), *Queer Frontiers: Millennial Geographies, Genders, and Generations* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2000), pp. 350–66.