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# 2001 NOVEMBER TUESDAY, NEW YORK,

### Asian-American Vignettes Spread Across 120 Years

By BRUCE WEBER

The Square," a well-executed anthology of short new works at the Joseph Papp Public Theater through Nov. 18, brings an impressive conbehtration of theater talent to a single subject, the Asian-American experience, and a single place, a fictional public square in the Chinatown of some imagined American city.

The show, presented by the Ma-Yi Theater Company, was originally commissioned by the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles Its creators, the director Lisa Peterson and the playwright Chay Yew, conceived of the piece as a kind of game. They solicited 10-minute plays from 16 writers, including David Henry Hwang, Craig Lucas, José Rivera, Diana Son, Kia Corthron, Jessica Hagedorn and Mr. Yew himself, assigning each of them a decade in history from the 1880's to the present, a theme (tradition, destiny, order or chaos) and a number of characters (one through four).

The assignments were random, but the four-by-four symmetry was intentional. And though inevitably the bite-size plays are satisfying only in varying degrees, as fluidly directed by Ms. Peterson and performed by a versatile ensemble of 12, the show is all of a piece. The result is curiously cinematic, as though the 16 stories told here had all unfolded in front of a camera that had been held in place for more than a century. Fragmented but linear, the snapshots of mismatched, clashing cultures - alternately comic, poignant, anguished and angry - become a sort of history of assimilation.

Not surprisingly, many of the playlets are concerned with the complexities of communication, linguistic and otherwise. In the deft opening vignette by Han Ong, one Chinese immigrant teaches English to a newer arrival, with results that are frustrating to the established resident, encouraging to the newcomer and amusing to the audience. When the recent immigrant then goes home and writes eloquent letters about his English lessons to his wife back in China (in Chinese, of course, though recited in English), the necessity of language to human connection is subtly, touchingly underscored.

THE SQUARE

By Bridget Carpenter, Ping Chong, Constance Congdon, Kia Corthron, Maria Irene Fornes, Philip Kan Gotanda, Jessica Hagedorn, David Henry Hwang, Craig Lucas, Robert O'Hara, Han Ong, José Rivera, Diana Son, Alice Tuan, Mac Wellman and Chay Yew Conceived and curated by Lisa Peterson and Chay Yew directed by Ms. Peterson. Sets by Rachel Hauck, costumes by Christianne Myers lighting by James Vermeulen; sound by Fabian Obispo, dramaturg, Mr. Yew; assistant director, Jonathan Carr, production stage manager, Wendy Ouellette. Presented by the Ma-Yi Theater Company, in association with the Center Theater Group/Mark Taper Forum's Asian Theater Workshop. At the Joseph Papp Public Theater/New York Shakespeare Festival, at 425 Lafayette Street, East Village WITH: David Wilson Barnes, Joel de la Fuen-

te, Saidah Arrika Ekulona, Michael Ray Es-camilla, Fiona Gallagher, Wai Ching Ho, Jennifer Ikeda, Ken Leung, Hamish Linklater, Ching Valdes-Aran, Henry Yuk and Janet

The relation of race to class is also explored. In a nicely turned piece from the 1880's, "Handsome" by Ms. Son, the mutual attraction, comically rendered, between a privileged white woman and a Chinese immigrant worker turns painful as it seesaws on the fulcrum between taboo and the status quo. In Mr. Yew's "Scissors," the relationship between two old men, a white businessman and his barber, a blind Chinese, is both perpetuated and threatened by their respective styles of stiff upper lip.

But perhaps the most stirring and repeated lesson of these tales is how Asians have become increasingly tangled in the American mesh. The show presents Asians as a strand of American society that has engaged in a continuing comedy-drama with the Irish, the African, the Hispanic and all the other American immigrant strains and become as knotted in its own right as it is inextricable from the rest.

Craig Lucas's "Examination," about the seduction of an Asian doctor by his white patient, ties together elements of Asian assimilation into white America and gay assimilation into mainstream America, Maria Irene Fornes finds fodder in the subject of Asians in movies; Jessica Hagedorn finds in 1920's Chinatown a hideout for white women drawn to the sexy, the seamy and the dangerous aspects of a world better known for its Fitzgeraldesque society up-

Mr. Hwang's arch spoof of intellectual predisposition and pretension, "Jade Flowerpots and Bound Feet," is about two women in unexpected roles: a black book editor in search of ethnic fiction and a white novelist masquerading as an Asian. Ms Corthron's monologue by a woman who is half black and half Chinese is a strident litany of racist incident; "The Spot," by Robert O'Hara, takes a very funny stereotype-exploding confrontation between a black woman and an Asian woman and turns it into a surprising commentary on the attitudes of the police.

And "New" by Constance Congdon, set in 1960, is a dialogue between two young Republican women straight out of the Eisenhower 50's, in the wake of John F. Kennedy's victory over Richard M. Nixon. Though the skit gets a little ponderous in making a historical point, the discussion between Hiroko (Jennifer Ikeda), the young Americanized Japanese, and Monica (Fiona Gallagher), the blank, presumptuously white sorority product, is spot-on satire, wickedly presented by the two

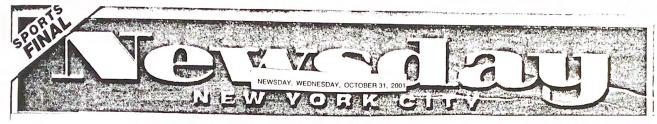
If not without exception, the cast is in general imaginative and appealing. At least partial credit for this must go to Ms. Peterson, who has orchestrated the ensemble at a unified pitch. Everyone seems up, strung tight, cognizant both of the serious emotions of the individual texts and the raucous artifice of the omnibus presentation. It is a multiethnic bunch, and the mix-and-match energy is right on point.



Fiona Gallagher in "The Square," by the Ma-Yi Theater Company.

York

165 West 46 Street, #910 NYC 212.221.8466 fax-921.8023



# Up the Asian-American Experience

THE SQUARE. Sixteen short plays by 16 playwrights, directed by Llsa Peterson, conceived and curated by Peterson and Chay Yew With David Wilson Barnes, Joel de la Fuente, Saidah Arrika Ekulona. Michael Ray Escamilla, Fiona Gallagher, Wai Ching Ho, Jennifer Ikeda, Ken Leung, Harnish Linklater, Ching Valdes-Aran, Henry Yuk, Janet Zarish. Set by Rachel Hauck, costumes by Christianne Myers, lights by James Vermeulen, sound by Fabian Obispo. Public Theater, 425 Lafayette St., Manhattan. Seen Saturday afternoon.

#### By Gordon Cox

SENSE of mathematical balance shapes the ambitious experiment of "The Square," a look at the robust life of a Chinatown public square loosely modeled on Columbus Park in downtown Manhattan. Of the production's 16 participating playwrights, eight are Asian-American and eight are not. The 16 short plays each address one of four themes (tradition, destiny, order or chaos) and take place in one of four periods (1880, 1920, 1960 or 2000). Of its diverse set of 12 actors, six are male and six are female.

When Lisa Peterson and Chay Yew, the guiding hands behind this collaborative theater event, invited the playwrights to submit plays, they randomly assigned not only the theme and era for each play, but also the number of characters (no more than four) and the cast's ethnic makeup. But those arbitrary parameters, rather than boxing those writers in, provided a unifying foundation for their wildly different creativities. The result is a variegated, often exhilarating meditation on transnational identity and the Asian-American experience.

It helps, of course, that the show's list of writers



Henry Yuk as a blind ex-servant in one of "The Square's" 16 plays.

reads like a who's-who of contemporary playwriting, from well-established names (like Maria Irene Fornes, David Henry Hwang and Craig Lucas) to newer voices (among them Kia Corthron and Diana Son). It helps, too, that Peterson, directing the show's East Coast premiere in a production from Ma-Yi Theater Company that opened Saturday, fits it all together with a clear eye and a flexible imagina-

With each miniplay serving as a kind of writing exercise for its author, the results are, predictably, a mixed bag, and some bits work better than others.

Corthron's contribution, made up of the sanitarium rant of a mixed-race woman, washes past in cacophonous semi-intelligibility, and Lucas' play, about a tentative romantic encounter between a Chinese-American doctor between a Chinese-American doctor and his patient, is pious and dull. But the majority of pieces, from the tender sadness of Han Ong's story of learning English to the canny comedy of Hwang's cheeky take on cultural au-thenticity, are well-crafted, complicat-

ed and surprising.
Peterson's real achievement is creatreterson's real achievement is creating, with the help of her designers and cast, a space where the show's stylistic varieties can coexist. With the audience on all four sides of the playing area, actors who aren't in a scene watch attentively from the margins and serve as themselved.

watch attentively from the margins and serve as stagehands when needed, giving "The Square" a nourishing, actor-powered sense of communality. The excellent ensemble highlights standout work from Jennifer Ikeda, sweetly touching as an artist's daughter in a monologue by Bridget Carpenter, and Henry Yuk, quietly generous as a blind former servant in Yew's playlet. The formidable Ching Valdes-Aran holds it all together as the main character in the dreamy, musical and episodic piece by Mac Wellman that crops up throughout the piece by Mac Wellman that crops up throughout the

A remarkably coherent collusion of distinct talents, "The Square" is a lively jigsaw puzzle, pieced together with care, inventiveness and humane intelligence.

Gordon Cox is a regular contributor to Newsday,

165 West 46 Street, #910 NYC 212.221.8466 fax-921.8023

# Thursday, November 1, 2001

REVIEW

## Short plays showcase actors in 'Square'

#### NEW YORK STAGE

#### The Square

Where: Public Theater, 425 Lafavette St., New York

When: Through Nov. 18; 8 p.m., Tuesdays to Saturdays; 2 p.m. Saturdays and Sundays

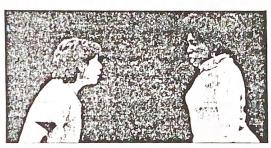
How much; \$40. Call (212) 239-6200 or visit www.ma-yilheatre.org.

#### BY MICHAEL SOMMERS

NEW YORK — A dim sum spread of Asian-American experiences, some sweet, mostly sour, is served with swift professionalism in "The Square."

Presented by the Ma-YI Theater Company at the Public Theater's 150-seat Shiva space, where the show opened last Sunday, "The Square" is a program of new short works by 16 playwrights. Half are Astan-Americans.

Conceived and "curated" by director Lisa Peterson and writer Asian; and none of them uses folds Chay Yew, the pieces center on a more than four players.



Wai Ching Ho, left, and Saldah Arrika Ekulona are featured in the ensemble cast of "The Square."

fictional square in New York's Chinatown district.

The works were commissioned to cover four decades (1880s, 1920s, 1960s and present); four themes (tradition, destiny, order, chaosi; four sexual and ethnic categories (male and female, Asian and non-Asian); and none of them uses more than four players.

The theater space has been arranged in arena fashion. A mix of chairs, trunks, boxes and baskets flank the acting perimeters. As the show dawns with an incantation of rising street sounds and voices, an outline of salt is drawn, marking the square where the action unfolds.

Some of the pieces can stand

apart. Others are fragments. A typically enigmatic series of bits by Mac Wellman involving an old Chlnese woman's eternal quest provides hazy links.

Among the more striking works:

David Henry Hwang's presentday "Jade Flowerpots and Bound
Feet" satirically views an author
whose infinitesimal claim to ethnic
origin is doubted by her publisher.
"What does 'authentic' mean, anyway?" walls the novelist as she protests providing a blood sample.

■ Diana Son's "Handsome" subtly reveals secret passion between an 1880s American gentlewoman and her Chinese protegé, who wants to sacrifice his traditional queue for love. "I want to be handsome for you," he insists, but their bond breaks with abrupt bitterness.

■ Bridget Carpenter's "Kismet," another light contemporary piece, is a woman's somewhat resentful, ultimately appreciative account of her Korean mom's anything-is-possible triumphs.

Jessica Hagedorn's "Sllent Movie" details the 1920s experiments of two non-Aslan women in an oplum den, overlaid with flickering images from D.W. Griffiths' "Broken Blossoms."

■ Constance Congdon's "New," an uneasy comedy set at the beginning of the Kennedy epoch, suddenly fast-forwards through some coming tragedies of the 1960s.

Craig Lucas, Maria Irene Fornes, Ping Chong and Kia Corthron also contribute riffs in their characteristic styles.

The energy between Peterson's sensitive, imaginative direction and a dozen good actors who fulfill multiple roles makes the most of these fleeting compositions. Wal Ching Ho, Saidah Arrika Ekulona, Jennifer Ikeda, Hamish Linklater and Ken Leung are particularly adept in their diversity Vivid lighting by James Vermeulen and flavorful sound design by Fabian Oblspo lend able support to the texts as well, helping to weave them together.

### show listings: plays The Square

#### THEATRE

Shiva

#### **OPENED**

October 27, 2001

#### CLOSES

November 18, 2001

#### **PERFORMANCES**

Tue - Sat at 8pm; Sat & Sun at 2pm

#### RUNNING TIME

2 hours, 30 minutes

#### TICKETS

\$40

Telecharge 212-239-6200

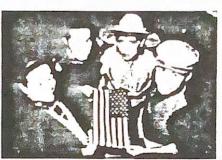
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#### CAST

David Wilson Barnes, Joel de la Fuente. Saidah Arrika Ekulona, Michael Ray Escamilla. Fiona Gallagher. Wai Ching Ho, Jennifer Ikeda. Ken Leung, Hamish Linklater. Ching Valdes-Aran. Henry Yuk, Janet Zarish

#### **AUTHOR**

Bridget Carpenter. Ping Chong, Constance Congdon, Kia Corthron. Maria Irene Fornes, Philip Kan Gotanda, Jessica Hagedorn. David Henry Hwang, Craig Lucas. Robert O'Hara, Han Ong, Jose Rivera, Diana Son. Alice Tuan, Mac Wellman, Chay Yew DIRECTOR The Square is a program of 16 short plays (about ten minutes each) about the Asian-American experience, created and



curated by Lisa Peterson and Chay Yew, and presented by Ma-Yi Theatre Company. *The Square* is set in and around a square in New York's Chinatown, and spans 150 years from post-Civil War to the present day. The sixteen playwrights represented include Filipino-American, Chinese-American, Japanese-American, African-American, Latin-American, and Caucasian-American authors, representing different points of view and writing in a wide stylistic range.

This is the East Coast premiere of *The Square*, which was commissioned by the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles last year. Pictured in the photo above are cast members Henry Yuk, Ken Leung, Ching Valdes-Aran, and Joel De La Fuente (photo by Nigel Teare).

#### nytheatre.com review

by Martin Denton · October 24, 2001

I can never know precisely what it feels like to be Asian in America; my Caucasian heritage—and features—make that an impossibility. Which is why a project like *The Square* is so invaluable: for two-and-a-half hours, I and a theatre full of people of the same and different sizes, shapes, ethnicities, together experience, up close and personal, something of what it

Lisa Peterson
SETS
Rachel Hauck
LIGHTING
James Vermeulen
COSTUMES
Christianne Myers
SOUND & ORIGINAL
MUSIC
Fabian Obispo
DRAMATURG
Chay Yew
PRODUCER
Ma-Yi Theatre Company

means to be an Asian-American. In the bargain, we are expertly entertained as well as enlightened. *The Square* is a huge success for Ma-Yi Theatre Company, who are presenting it at The Public Theatre, and for Lisa Peterson and Chay Yew, the director and playwright who dreamed it up in the first place.

What they dreamed is a play composed of sixteen short plays, all set in a square in a Chinatown in a large American city. They asked sixteen American playwrights (see the list in the sidebar at left) to write these plays; and found a dozen actors to play the many varied roles that resulted.

What they've got is a play about difference, mostly: how keenly it's felt, and how damagingly it resonates. In Han Ong's Untitled, we meet an immigrant fresh off the boat trying to make sense of the English language and the American Way, learning his place in a society that views him as intractably alien. And will continue to view his descendants that way as well: in Diana Son's Handsome an American lady lusts after her Chinese servant but draws the line at treating him as an equal; in Jessica Hagedorn's Silent Movie the stereotype of the inscrutable Oriental is deconstructed; and in Constance Congdon's New the interment of Japanese-Americans during World War II is a significant plot point. Perhaps Jose Rivera's Pediatrics, the most effective of the sixteen plays in The Square, illustrates this unpleasant truth most powerfully in its tale of prejudice and hatred among a group of immigrant children.

Other pieces in *The Square* focus on feelings of aloneness and other-ness. Mac Wellman's mini-serial *My Old Habit of Returning to Places* gives us the excellent actress Ching Valdes-Aran as a past-her-prime matriarch in search of whatever it was she was looking for when she emigrated to America. *Kismet, In a Square on a Wedding Day in Spring* by Bridget Carpenter offers a look at a second-generation Asian-American woman trying to understand her mother's energetic assimilation into Andy Warhol's Factory Culture. And Philip Kan Gotanda's lovely *The Old Chinese Man* reveals the clash between Old World and New in the defensive mindset of an Asian-American girl dating an All-American guy.

Broad issues of bigotry and stereotyping are addressed

in Maria Irene Fornes's oblique The Audition, David Henry Hwang's whimsical Jade Flowerpots and Bound Feet, Ping Chong's compelling Excerpts from the Diary Diary of a Chinese Envoy, and Robert O'Hara's clever but overlong The Spot. And all of themes mentioned heretofore are refracted through the prism of homosexuality in Craig Lucas's excellent Examination and Chay Yew's moving Scissors.

Cricket, by Alice Tuan, points the way toward a new world of understanding and acceptance.

Only Kia Corthron's Anchor Aria really misses the mark. This rambling monologue feels indulgent and diffuse.

A crisp, clean staging is provided by Lisa Peterson on a unit set by Rachel Hauck, augmented by appropriate costumes (Christianne Meyers) and lighting (James Vermeulen). The ensemble is exemplary, with particularly memorable work turned in by Hamish Linklater (as an Irish kid trying to understand adult ideas of racism in *Pediatrics*, and as a gay man with a crush on his Asian-American doctor in *Examination*), Joel de la Fuente (as a smart Chinese teacher in *Cricket*, and as the object of the American lady's desire in *Handsome*), Wai Ching Ho (as a surprisingly liberated Chinese lady in *The Spot*), and Michael Ray Escamilla (in a surprising variety of roles, in *The Spot*, *Cricket*, *The Audition*, and *My Old Habit of Returning to Places*).

Last update: 06 November, 2001

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**EDITORIAL** 





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# Review of The Square At The Public Theater



By Arlene McKanic/Greenwich Village Gazette

he May Yi Theater company was created to make up for the dearth of Asian American directors in the theater and their production of The Square has just made its east coast premiere at the Public Theater. Conceived and curated by Lisa Peterson and Chay Yew, the play is made up of short works by sixteen playwrights, some Asian and some not, all of them dealing with the Asian American experience. The Square begins with a cacophony of voices and sounds that span the decades, then an old woman (Ching Valdes-Aran) carrying a lighted match wanders into a square picked out with salt as if to keep away demons and begins her story. This recurring and evolving vignette, "My Old Habit of Returning to Places," was written by Mac Wellman and spells out the theme of the evening, for all the action takes place in and around a square, rumored to be Columbus Park in New York's Chinatown. The pieces cover a time period from around the Civil War to the present. Some deal with the immediate immigrant experience and the difficulties of learning a new language and navigating a not always welcoming culture. In Han Ong's









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"Untitled," one of the best works, an immigrant gentlemen essays to teach English to another, who has left his wife behind in China. The word the student focuses on is "lonely. Everywhere lonely."

Other stories touch on not quite comfortable attempts at assimilation. In "The Old Chinese Man," by Philip Kan Gotanda, an otherwise bubbly Chinese-American girl engaged to a Caucasian boy feels suddenly self-conscious and even ashamed in the presence of an old Chinese man on a park bench. She thinks he's judging her, her clothes, her open affection for her boyfriend, but there's a twist at the end.

In "New," by Constance Congdon, a Japanese-American girl (the excellent Jennifer Ikeda, who appears in many of the pieces) who supports Richard Nixon during the 1960 campaign minces about in a Jackie-like suit and is as flaky as her baby voiced white friend (Fiona Gallagher) till, shockingly, history intrudes.

In Maria Irene Fornes "The Audition," one of many funny pieces, two Chinese guys aspire to play Mexicans in a western. One of their friends, who's Japanese, passed for a Mexican in a movie, so why can't they? Many of the works deal with the often complex and sometimes sexually charged relationships between the Asian characters and people of different races.



In "Handsome," by Diana Son, Chee Kwan (Joel de la Fuente) begs his lover/employer to cut off his queue so he can be what he thinks of as handsome while in "Scissors," by Chay Yew, "A" played by Henry Yuk, and "B" played by David Wilson Barnes, share a tetchy homoerotic relationship that has gone on for years. In "Jade Flowerpots and Bound Feet," by David Henry Hwang, a white woman writer insists on claiming her Asian roots by writing an over the top book about an alleged Chinese ancestress. The woman calls herself Mei-Li, but her real name is apparently Ashley Winterstone. "I think of that as my slave name," she tells the skeptical African American woman (Saidah Arrika Ekulona) who's come to interview her. In "The Spot," by Robert O'Hara, Shakella (Ekulona) and Ming (Wai Ching Ho) come to a place to hear Martin Luther King Jr., and end up arguing who has the better right to be there; this work also ends with a twist. In Jose Rivera's "Pediatrics," a girl (Ikeda) gets lost in the wrong neighborhood and is cornered by a bunch of ragamuffins only to reveal that she's as tough and mean as they are. Cleverly, a Voice (Wai Ching Ho) speaks in Chinese the words the angry and frightened



Arlene McK Current Col Past Column 10-26-01 10-19-01 10-05-01 09-07-01 08-03-01 07-20-01 07-13-01A 07-13-01 07-06-01a 07-06-01 06-29-01 06-15-01 06-08-01 06-02-01 05-11-01 05-04-01 04-20-01 04-13-01 03-30-01 03-09-01 02-23-01 02-09-01

girl utters in English for the benefit of the audience. Her three tormentors (Hamish Linklater, David Wilson Barnes and Fiona Gallagher) hear only the Chinese. There are also moments of pure happiness, as in Bridget Carpenter's "Kismet In A Square On a Wedding Day in Spring," where a young woman, played with sparkling energy by Ikeda, celebrates the upcoming nuptials of her artist/flower child Korean immigrant mother, even if she does have to wear a seafoam green bridesmaid's dress.

The director and crew do a great deal in a small space. Director Lisa Peterson keeps everything smoothly running and Rachel Hauck's scenic design uses the smallest of props, a cricket cage, a medicine cart, the lush pillows of an opium den (in Jessica Hagedorn's hallucinogenic "Silent Movie,") to capture the spirit of each work, as does Christianne Myers' costume design. Myers' task was daunting, and we see everything from the buttons and bustles of the mistress in "Handsome," to the flowered red silk cheongsam of the fake Asian woman in "Jade Flowerpots," the traditional tunic and trousers of "Untitled," the hippie threads of "Kismet," the starched collars of the Depression era "Scissors," and the lime green and Pepto Bismol pink suits of the girls in "New." James Vermeulen's best lighting design is low key and atmospheric, rather like lamplight from another era.

Though inevitably uneven in spots, and a bit long, The Square is a much needed and enjoyable work. It will be at The Public Theater through November 18.

you may contact Arlene at: amckanic@aol.com

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