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"I get bored easily in one position," jokes Chay Yew, who is a playwright, director, producer, and more. His plays include *A Language of Their Own* and *Red*. Yew heads the Asian Theater Workshop at the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles, and recently became the artistic director of the Northwest Asian American Theater in Seattle. In New York, he's directing his own adaptation of *The House of Bernarda Alba* for the National Asian-American Theater Company (NAATCO), which is devoted to producing Western theater classics starring Asian-American actors. Taking some time out of his busy schedule, Yew chatted with TheaterMania.



Chay Yew (center) with cast members from *The House of Bernarda Alba*. (Photo: Carol Rosegg)

TheaterMania: This is the first time you've worked with NAATCO. How did the collaboration come about?

CHAY YEW: The dishy part of it is that, when Mia [Katigbak, artistic director of NAATCO] and I first met, we had kind of a run-in. I said, "I don't understand why your theater company is doing classics; there are so few places where Asian-American theater is being done. If you set up a new theater company, it would be wonderful if you could do more Asian-American work." Years later, we're better friends, and I've probably mellowed out more. I've realized that what she basically wanted was for Asian-American actors to have the option to do works not usually available to them in other theaters. That was the genesis of most Asian-American theater companies anyway, when there wasn't an Asian-American canon. Most actors and artistic directors would go straight to the classics and then either tweak them into an Asian context or not. It was an opportunity to sharpen their craft. So, when I started directing a few years ago, I decided to also look into the classics. Mia and I started talking about the possibility of working together. She said she was contemplating doing a season of Lorca. And, of course, I said: "*The House of Bernarda Alba*. I'd do it."

TM: You're not only directing *Bernarda Alba*, you've also adapted it. What kind of changes have you made?

YEW: I decided to craft the characters a little bit more, minding what Lorca already had and giving it a deeper and richer complexity. In a way, it's still his work. This is my first adaptation. It's like a very strange dating thing: I want to make a good impression, but I don't want to lose myself in the relationship. The play was written in the 1930s and, as time has gone by, I feel like we've become faster and more complicated as human beings. So I decided to try to find a contemporary emotional tone in the play, and basically accentuate it.

TM: Your own playwriting is often quite poetic in structure and language. That's a trait you share with Lorca. However, *The House of Bernarda Alba* is probably the least formally poetic of Lorca's works. Is your version more in the style of poeticism?

YEW: Yeah, it is. But I want to be clear: I love poetic language in the theater, but I hate poetic language in the theater when it upstages what's happening emotionally, plot-wise, and dramatically on stage. It ceases to be theatrical because it's so poetic, it just becomes stilted.

TM: All of the play's characters are female. What kind of statement do you think the play makes about women?

YEW: It isn't completely contemporary; I'd like to think that women in today's society are more liberated and have more rights than they used to have. But one thing I do toy with in this production is that the women are responsible for their imprisonment, too. I believe it's one thing to listen to the laws of men and the religions created by men, but when you're finally on your own, you somehow adopt the male standard of rule. In a way, it speaks to a lot of people who are (a) women, and (b) people of color, or gay men, or lesbians. It's one thing to say, "Yeah, we're equal and we do our own thing." But our standards are that of the status quo, which is actually oppressive. Women today want to advance, but then they adopt the male standard and oppress their fellow female workers. So, in that, way the play's contemporary. But I hope there's an answer to that, too, and a way out. Otherwise, it's a vicious circle that will always continue. Lorca wrote this play in the 1930s; now it's the year 2000, and we're still going through the same thing. I think that says a lot.

TM: I understand you're using a chorus that remains on stage the entire time. What does this add to the production?

YEW: I'm not sure yet! *[laughs]* It was inspired by Lorca's play. In the stage directions, somehow, 200 women in black enter the funeral service. I looked at it and said, "You know what? There was a reason why he wanted to do that." I felt it was certainly powerful as a theatrical image. I couldn't get 200 women, and I wouldn't want to unless I had a huge opera theater and knew how to stack them. Then it would be a different experience altogether. I use the chorus basically as the town, always looking at what's going on.

TM: And it's a chorus of women.

YEW: Yes. All in black. They also play other parts not written in the play, like some of the neighbors and the men who sing on the outside of the wall. They're a great chorus. I actually went overboard and gave them a lot to do; then I realized it was suffocating the play, but when do you cut back? That's the strange thing about being a playwright and a director.

TM: Do you think it's easier or harder because you're both?

YEW: I think it's better that I'm both. Some directors get excited, imposing an

image on the play that might not be the right image. As a playwright, I'm always respectful of another playwright's work. There is something in there, no matter what you think. Once you unlock the secrets, images and thoughts and stuff come out. It's basically unlocking a code. If I'm imposing something that doesn't really work, then I haven't done my homework well.

TM: What's your vision of the play?

YEW: I'm setting it in an ephemeral place. Instead of saying it's in a particular city, I say "The City." Looking at this play, sometimes I think: Oh my god it's very Asian. But we're not setting the play in a specific culture. But because I allow the actors to come in as they look, the text is multi-cultural in a weird way. Ching [Valdes-Aran, who plays the title role] is Filipina. She and I, being Singaporean, have the same kind of language; we miss having servants, which is very funny. There's a way we speak to them, and we bring in a different kind of perspective. In Lorca, Bernarda Alba tends to yell a lot. I think no, because I remember that all you had to do was use the eyes. Power is very subtle. It's never large. So, these are some of the things we bring in. Ultimately, I can't say what the production really is. It's not really Spanish. It's Asian and it's not. In that way, it is perhaps mostly an Asian-American expression.

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