

Opening Doors' Means Rattling Some Cages

By Patrick Healy

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CHICAGO — When a storied theater undergoes a leadership change, the new guard must decide how to handle members of the old guard — playwrights, directors, staff members and loyal audiences — who may rely financially or artistically on the status quo. Often there are bruised feelings, but few recent turnovers have been as contentious as the one here at Victory Gardens Theater, where the finger pointing recalls family melodramas like “August: Osage County” or even “King Lear” (minus the murders).

After an extraordinarily long 35 years with the same artistic director, Dennis Zacek, the board at Victory Gardens bypassed his handpicked successor last year in favor of Chay Yew, an admired playwright (“A Language of Their Own”) and director. Mr. Yew was an outsider to Victory Gardens and Chicago, both known for tribal loyalties, and he proceeded to sideline several Victory Gardens artists — most notably the longtime Playwrights Ensemble of more than a dozen writers, who were granted “alumni” status (essentially stripping them of a prestigious title).

Some of those writers are still furious, while others are split on whether Mr. Yew is ruining or renewing the 38-year-old theater, which won a Tony Award in 2001 for its body of work.



Chay Yew, artistic director at Victory Gardens Theater in Chicago, has chosen 4 playwrights to replace the older 12. Nathan Weber for The New York Times

The reputations of some of those involved make this more than a Chicago turf fight. The affiliated writers who have been retired to alumni status include the Pulitzer Prize winner Nilo Cruz (“Anna in the Tropics”), the Tony Award winner John Logan (“Red”), and the veteran playwrights Jeffrey Sweet (“Flyovers”) and James Sherman (“Beau Jest”). Now the ensemble consists of four writers Mr. Yew has chosen — two of whom, Samuel D. Hunter (“The Whale”) and Marcus Gardley (“Every Tongue Confess”), are increasingly prominent in New York but lack roots in Chicago. Ensemble members do not earn salaries, but rather receive artistic support at the theater, like readings and workshops, as well as the cachet of being associated with Victory Gardens.

Mr. Yew, in an interview at the theater, said he hoped to work with all of these writers and directors at some point. He went to lengths to praise them for building Victory Gardens, but he also said that its founding mission — to produce new plays by a diverse mix of writers — invited the changes that he is undertaking in this, his first time running a theater.

“I need to open these doors for the writing voices of the next generation, because they were opened to me before,” said the 47-year-old Mr. Yew, who was born in Singapore and studied at Pepperdine University and Boston University before returning home for a spell. The authorities there banned an early play of his, “As If He Hears,” because of its sympathetic portrayal of gay people.

“But I also can be — to a fault — uncompromising about opening those doors in the way I want to,” Mr. Yew said, his boyish face breaking into a wide smile. “If you cross an ocean to pursue the life you want, you are going to do the things you want to do.”



From left, Emjoy Gavino, Guy Massey and Michael Salinas in “Failure: A Love Story.” Michael Brosilow

That bullishness for the new has clashed squarely, however, with the reverence that some Chicago theaters have for the old. Among the Big Three theater companies here, Steppenwolf is known for its acting ensemble (John Malkovich, Gary Sinise, Laurie Metcalf); the Goodman for its directors (Robert Falls, who is also the artistic director, Frank Galati, Mary Zimmerman); and Victory Gardens for its playwrights.

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“At Steppenwolf, once a picture of a new ensemble actor goes up on the wall, you don’t see Martha Lavey on a ladder in the lobby taking down Joan Allen,” said the playwright Claudia Allen, referring to Steppenwolf’s artistic director and one of its ensemble actresses. (Claudia Allen is one of the Victory Gardens playwrights fuming over her new status; the two Allens are not related.)

With many nonprofit American theaters struggling to avoid budget deficits these days, the pressure on new leaders like Mr. Yew is even greater. They are hired by board members who often want big changes after years, even decades with leaders like Mr. Zacek, and they are often given mandates to take the theaters in new directions.

The director Diane Paulus faced blowback similar to the criticism of Mr. Yew after she took over the American Repertory Theater in Cambridge, Mass., and began hiring fewer of the actors who were in favor under her predecessors. Two Seattle theaters, Intiman and Seattle Rep, and the Center Theater Group in Los Angeles, all endured artistic and personnel turbulence during leadership transitions as well. And even after seven years as artistic director of the Public Theater in New York, Oskar Eustis is still sometimes the target of critical whispers by playwrights and talent agents who compare his decisions unfavorably to those of predecessors, including the Public's founder, Joseph Papp.

Jeffrey Sweet is now among the "alumni" of the Victory Gardens playwrights. Fred R. Conrad/The New York Times

Mr. Zacek, who is 72, disagreed at times with Victory Gardens board members, who wanted more box office hits as the theater budget tightened and deficits accumulated. Perhaps the biggest clash was over Mr. Zacek's successor. He wanted board members to appoint his longtime associate artistic director, Sandy Shinner, who was a finalist for the position. Mr. Yew subsequently reorganized the staff and shifted Ms. Shinner out of her job, which she had held for 25 years.

Mr. Yew said the two had “a difference in vision”; Ms. Shinner, who is beloved among many Chicago artists, declined to comment other than to confirm that she is no longer with the theater.

Mr. Zacek said, “Chay has new ideas and a new mission for the theater, even though it may be, in his mind, an extension of the old mission.” Asked to elaborate, he noted that when Victory Gardens received the Tony for regional theater, he arranged to have many of the ensemble playwrights flown to New York to accept the award alongside him during the nationally televised ceremony.

“We had a family there, many of them playwrights with Chicago roots, and we had an informal right of first refusal on their new work, and we would produce them regularly,” Mr. Zacek said. “Some seasons would only be ensemble playwrights. From what I see that is gone.”

Samuel D. Hunter, author of “The Whale,” is among the new writers Chay Yew has chosen. Sara Krulwich/The New York Times

Mr. Yew adamantly denied that he had dismantled Victory Gardens as an artistic home for Chicago writers, though he acknowledged that his playwrights have varying ties to Chicago and no one will be virtually guaranteed productions anymore. (The president of the Victory Gardens board, Steven N. Miller, said that

Mr. Yew had the full support of its members for his changes.)

“Chicago as a city is very much my focus, because I want to put on plays to get people to think about who they are as Chicagoans and Americans,” Mr. Yew said. Last summer at Victory Gardens he directed the critically praised “Oedipus El Rey,” an adaptation of Sophocles by Luis Alfaro about gang violence in Los Angeles. (Mr. Yew said the play had resonance here because of the city’s grim murder statistics.) A world premiere, “Failure: A Love Story,” by another new ensemble playwright, Philip Dawkins, is currently playing. The typical audience member at Victory Gardens is a white 50-something, Mr. Yew said. He and some of his new playwrights hope future plays will bring in younger and more diverse audiences, the goal of many theaters.

Mr. Hunter, who met Mr. Yew a few years ago in New York, said, “I’m still getting to know the city and its audiences, and the mood and ideas there that I want to try to reflect a little in my work.”

“I don’t want to be some carpetbagger coming in,” he added. “It’s just a matter of time before I can spend some serious time in Chicago.”

Perhaps the best-known playwright Mr. Yew retired was Mr. Logan, who won a Tony in 2010 for “Red,” and who is a three-time Oscar nominee for screenplays (most recently, this year, for “Hugo”). Mr. Logan said he owed his success today to Mr. Zacek and Victory Gardens for providing “a home where we could try out new material, workshop plays, have readings, learn the business, make mistakes.” Mr. Logan, whose last production there was a revival of “Never the Sinner” in 1995, before leaving Chicago, said he supported Mr. Yew’s shake-up of the ensemble to champion new voices as Mr. Zacek had once supported him.

“It’s obviously a complicated situation, but Chay has every right, and indeed a responsibility, to nurture new and emerging playwrights who can speak to Chicago audiences,” Mr. Logan said. “That was always the point of Victory Gardens in the first place.”