

'Red' takes Mao's culture wars personally

By James V. Ruocco

NEW HAVEN — Playwright Chay Yew's use of the Cultural Revolution of China and its attack against ancient art forms like the Beijing Opera is pivotal to the storyline of his new play "Red."

Yet director David Petrarca insists the two-act drama is fairly easy to understand and not something audiences should stay away from.

"It's not like people have to come armed with a Ph.D. in Chinese history," he mused. "You also don't have to study for it. Everything in the play is there. It's a very personal, very emotional story."

When he first read the play, Petrarca's reaction was one of complete amazement. "It took me by surprise," he recalled. "I didn't expect the turns that it took. What I really liked was the idea of a personal story about how we erase our past and how we don't know what to do in the future if we erase it. Here, the idea of the cultural revolution and the decision to erase one's history appealed to me."

Although Petrarca insists it's "next to impossible" to explain Chinese history because of constant changes, he is very knowledgeable of how Chairman Mao Zedong's Cultural Revolution started in 1966 and how it con-

'RED'
Where: Long Wharf Theater,
222 Sargent Drive, New Haven
When: Through Feb. 7
Tickets: \$10-\$43
Telephone: (203) 787-4282

fronted ancient traditions.

"For awhile, Mao said the Chinese had to perform traditional opera," explained Petrarca. "Then, once he started the Cultural Revolution, he said 'We have to get rid of anything that doesn't speak to the Chinese worker and the peasant.'"

"All operas were banned except for five sanctioned model dramas which were written by Mao's wife. Every other performance was forbidden. Anything that came from Confucius was destroyed. Any intellectual was denounced. And sons and daughters were forced to join the Red Guard and denounce their parents."

When asked to describe "Red," Petrarca said it is a work full of surprises, but it's told completely out of sequence. "It's kind of like taking a piece of glass and shattering it. It's a puzzle. You keep trying to figure out how the pieces fit together and how they come together in the end."

The story of "Red" is also very personal.

"Essentially, it's about a successful novelist in America who has been working on a book for four years about a famous Beijing Opera star. She's an Asian Danielle Steel who goes back to her homeland to write something very important."

"Then, while doing her research, she goes back to the theater where this man used to perform and he's there. It's all very complicated emotionally, but because the play has so many surprises — five or six important moments — it's best not to reveal too much."