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# Calendar

ARTS AND ENTERTAINMENT



LORI SHEPLER / Los Angeles Times

Chita Rivera, with cane, plays the tyrannical matriarch in "The House of Bernarda Alba," with Sandra Oh in foreground.

# García Lorca Reimagined

'The House of Bernarda Alba' gets a lighter touch at the Taper

## Theater Review

By DON SHIRLEY  
TIMES STAFF WRITER

Among the classic plays that are inappropriate for Mother's Day, "The House of Bernarda Alba" is almost up there with "Medea." The tyrannical titular character of Federico García Lorca's drama doesn't murder her children, but she tries hard to prevent them from fully experiencing the variety of life. After her husband dies, she decrees that her five adult female offspring will do nothing but mourn for eight years—prisoners in

their own home, with marriage as the only possible escape route.

In a small village in 1936 Spain, she would probably argue, what choice did she have? If women aren't madonnas on their wedding day, they'll be considered whores.

The recent attention focused on misogyny, Taliban-style, is a reminder that this kind of cultural conditioning is hardly extinct. Still, it seems so remote from contemporary urban society that a theatergoer entering the Mark Taper Forum to see Chita Rivera as Bernarda Alba may wonder whether this play can be any-

thing beyond a grim documentary about another time, another place.

García Lorca's notation that the play was "intended as a photographic document"—which appears prominently at the beginning of the English translations—seems to reinforce that point of view.

But Chay Yew, author of the adaptation at the Taper, and director Lisa Peterson generally ignore that admonition. And the play comes alive.

In an interview in the program, Yew acknowledged García Lorca's intent but said, "I was interested in bringing

Please see Theater, F26

# Theater: A Slightly Softer 'Bernarda Alba'

Continued from F1

back some of the lyricism that permeates most of Lorca's plays and poetry." Yew's text is not only more lyrical but more explicit than the authorized English translation by Richard L. O'Connell and James Graham-Luján. The daughters' personalities are individuated more fully, with one even becoming a budding, book-taught—albeit ineffective—feminist.

Peterson's staging uses Rachel Hauck's set, Mark Bennett's score, ritualized movement and a touch of dance in ways that allow the audience to sense the feelings that

are being repressed, as well as the repression itself. Likewise, we see the stifling torpor in the household without literally experiencing it inside the theater.

In another review a few years ago, I wrote that "Alba" makes "King Lear" look lighthearted. I take it back. There are rich, bawdy laughs to be found in "Alba," and this company has found them.

Indeed, while it's predictable enough that the always commanding Rivera has the overweening imperiousness of Bernarda well in hand, it's more surprising to see her chuckling as she relishes a tid-

bit of gossip from her longtime housekeeper, Poncia.

Yew's text also enables Rivera to express a human pang of sentiment, missing from the authorized translation, about the fate of her youngest and most rebellious daughter (Sandra Oh). This Bernarda is not a witch.

Much of the play's comedy and its warmer tones emerge from the eye-opening performance of Camille Saviola as Poncia. She pokes her squat frame into every corner of the household, regaling the daughters with tales from her own marriage, offering words of wis-

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dom to her employers despite their class-based prejudices against her, occasionally exploding with curt Anglo-Saxon imprecations.

Shaheen Vaaz plays the younger, quieter maid with almost equal authority. Yew's text, in contrast to the original, provides more specific allusions to her affair with Bernarda's late husband.

The casting of Bernarda's old mother and daughters is one of the production's most decisive breaks with photo-realism: Four of these women have Asian features, and the sisters' ages are not as obvious as García Lorca appeared to desire. This may alienate those who can't manage an additional suspension of disbelief, but it will expand the meaning of the play for others beyond the confines of 1936 Spain.

Oh—the house's free spirit—and Rita Wolf as her most envious and eagle-eyed sister handle the play's most torrid exchanges well, including a moment in which the former sucks the latter's finger in a brief physicalization of their repressed sexuality. Giving Lydia Look thick-framed glasses for her role as the proto-feminist is too obvious, but Look's girlish voice adds a note of irony to her talk.

Marissa Chibas plays the eldest, betrothed sister with hapless befuddlement, accented by an amusing polka-dotted mourning outfit from costumer Joyce Kim Lee.

Eileen Galindo capably portrays the most cynical sister. Tsai Chin stalks the house as Bernarda's mad mom, her white tangle of hair a reminder of the general decay.

The color palette is primarily white and black, with red accents and rosy margins, exemplified in beds of petals that fit the symbolic framework but are unfortunately reminiscent of "American Beauty." A row of small trees hovers overhead.



LORI SHEPLER / Los Angeles Times

Camille Saviola, top, as the family housekeeper opposite Chita Rivera.

A strolling Annas Allaf stirs up the surfaces not only with his oud and guitar, but also as the only tangible evidence that the mysterious other sex actually exists.

*"The House of Bernarda Alba,"* Mark Taper Forum, 135 N. Grand Ave., Los Angeles. Tuesdays-Saturdays, 8 p.m.; Saturdays-Sundays, 2:30 p.m.; Sundays, 7:30 p.m.; Aug. 28, 2:30 p.m. Ends with the matinee on Sept. 1. \$30-\$44. (213) 628-2772. Running time: 1 hour, 55 minutes (no intermission).

Chita Rivera	.....	Bernarda Alba
Tsai Chin	.....	Maria Josefa
Camille Saviola	.....	Poncia
Shaheen Vaaz	.....	Blanca
Sandra Oh	.....	Adela
Marissa Chibas	.....	Angustias
Eileen Galindo	.....	Magdalena
Lydia Look	.....	Amelia
Rita Wolf	.....	Martirio
Jeanne Sakata	.....	Prudencia
Christine Avila	.....	Beggar Woman

"The House of Bernarda Alba." By Federico García Lorca. Adapted by Chay Yew. Directed by Lisa Peterson. Set by Rachel Hauck. Costumes by Joyce Kim Lee. Lighting by Christopher Akerlind. Music and sound by Mark Bennett. Hair and wigs by Carol E. Doran. Production stage manager Mary K. Klinger.

# DAILY VARIETY

## LEGIT REVIEW

### The House of Bernarda Alba

(Mark Taper Forum;  
760 seats; \$44 top)

A Center Theater Group/Music Center of Los Angeles County and Mark Taper Forum presentation in one act of a play by Federico Garcia Lorca, adapted by Chay Yew. Directed by Lisa Peterson. Set, Rachel Hauck; costumes, Joyce Kim Lee; lighting, Christopher Akerlind; sound and original music, Mark Bennett; casting, Amy Lieberman. Opened July 25, 2002, reviewed July 24; closes Sept. 1. Running time: 1 HOUR, 45 MIN.

Maria Josefa ..... Tsai Chin  
Blanca ..... Shaheen Vaaz  
Poncia ..... Camille Saviola  
Bernarda Alba ..... Chita Rivera  
Adela ..... Sandra Oh  
Amelia ..... Lydia Look  
Martirio ..... Rita Wolf  
Magdalena ..... Eileen Galindo  
Angustias ..... Marissa Chibas  
Prudencia ..... Jeanne Sakata

With: Annas Allaf, Christine Avila, Aixa Clemente, Karen Huie, Adrianne Avey, Carla Jimenez, Anita Dashiell.

By STEVEN OXMAN

**P**roductions of plays by the great Spanish poet and playwright Federico Garcia Lorca are often leaden affairs. The sharp points of Lorca's dramaturgy, a unique and slippery hybrid of classical and modernist styles, usually get blunted either by shrillness and cheap melodrama or by a strained self-consciousness that strives for ethereal poeticism and reaches only boredom. This spare yet unsparring Mark Taper Forum production of "The House of Bernarda Alba" is therefore all the more laudable. The clear-eyed adaptation by Chay Yew; the elegant direction of Lisa Peterson; an engrossing, implosive performance by Chita Rivera as the



Chita Rivera, left, and Camille Saviola star in Chay Yew's adaptation of Federico Garcia Lorca's "The House of Bernarda Alba."

oppressive matriarch of a brood of five daughters (here cast multiracially); and, perhaps most of all, a magnificently earthy turn by Camille Saviola as the saucy but smart servant coalesce successfully to find the right, extremely elusive balance of social realism and stylized theatricality.

Lorca wrote "The House of Bernarda Alba" in 1936, just before he was killed for his liberal views and his homosexuality during a time of massive political upheaval. It's subtitled "A Drama About Women in the Villages of Spain," and not a single man appears as a character, itself a striking choice at the time. On the one hand, it is a work of significant realism, depicting a family of women nearly imprisoned by their ultraproper Catholic mother, who lives her life mostly in fear of the slightest indiscretion. When a handsome young man begins courting the only daughter who has inherited a decent fortune, the repressed desires of the others emerge with pent-up force, creating

a classically dense march toward inevitable tragedy.

Yew, a Los Angeles theater artist who is gradually gaining a national reputation, has been smart in handling Lorca's text. For the most part, Yew's work is a loose translation of the play; there aren't any structural changes to the piece, but the language has been modernized to avoid the stiffness of the "authorized" translations. But he has made a few changes, setting the play outdoors, in Bernarda Alba's courtyard, and filling in details for some of the smaller characters. Amelia (Lydia Look), for example, one of the less defined of Bernarda's daughters in Lorca's original, here becomes a bookish closet revolutionary. An unnamed servant becomes Blanca (Shaheen Vaaz), a full-bodied character, her affair with Bernarda's just-deceased husband more than off-handedly mentioned. In a bolder choice, Yew also seeks to give the tyrannical title character a bit of a soul, allowing

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## LEGIT REVIEWS

### The House of Bernarda Alba

*Continued from page 22*

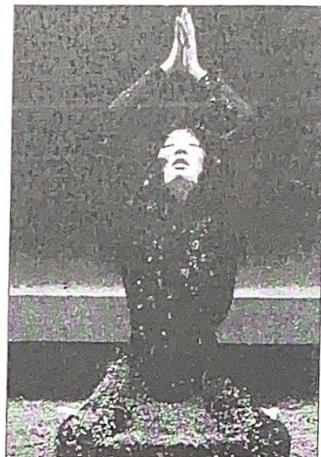
her a tragic epiphany that undoes Lorca's intentional depiction of the coldest of characters, who can repress even the most intense of feelings.

What Yew has done most successfully of all is to clarify the thematic elements of the play — this is where he has most “adapted” the work as opposed to translating it. To Yew, the play is clearly about how the oppressed can so easily become the oppressor. And yet, despite this crisp focus, the adaptation remains a faithful one.

The production's set design comes from Rachel Hauck, who can do with chairs what Picasso did with a bicycle handle bar. Her work is always so simple and yet so stunning. Working in tandem with costume designer Joyce Kim Lee and lighting designer Christopher Akerlind, Hauck keeps the palate confined mostly to white, black and red, although there's enough variety to keep it from being stagnant. The gray chairs are reconfigured frequently to define the main white playing space. Some trees that have the light brown dried-out look of dead foliage are attached to the back wall above the courtyard, a wall that also serves as a place for the chorus of village women to peer in surrealistically — an effective, and creepy, visualization of Bernarda's social paranoia. Below the main platform on three sides are pits of red gravel, and when characters step into these areas, we know they're being overwhelmed by their passion.

The character who feels most at home in the blood-red part of the set is Adela, the youngest of the daughters and the object of the desired young man's lust if not his courtship. Sandra Oh delivers a superb, physically expressive performance: She's a woman incapable of holding back her sexual passion, and most at risk of becoming like her grandmother Maria Josefa (an outstanding, white-wigged Tsai Chin), an insane elderly woman whom Bernarda keeps locked up.

Peterson has always drawn strong performances from her casts, and this one is no exception. Rivera is the epitome of controlled chilliness. She's tightly wound and ready to explode at the smallest stimulus, commanding the stage with restrained ease. She also proves to be



**Sandra Oh stars in “The House of Bernarda Alba.”**

a very generous performer here. She allows Saviola, in essence, to steal the show as the plain-spoken maid, a character who injects vulgar humor into the proceedings while she's also the one figure who really knows everything that's going on.

Of the rest of the ensemble, the most effective is Marissa Chibas, as the eldest and homeliest of the daughters, who manages to look like a bad drag queen and still make us feel sorry for her character. Rita Wolf, as the pivotal figure Martirio, seemed to be a weaker link, all surface and no depth.

Peterson is one of those directors who can be both cerebral and intuitive, and that's why she turns out to be the perfect match for Lorca, who also had these contradictory qualities. The cerebral element of this adaptation and production involves the multiracial casting, even while the show remains grounded in period Spain. It's a bit self-conscious but not overly so. It puts forth the idea that this play about the oppression of women remains a universally necessary work without pointing fingers at specific cultures. That said, Lee's costumes, with the village women covering their heads, certainly brings to mind Muslim customs.

Mostly, this production falls on the intuitive side rather than the cerebral, and that's just as it should be. It's a show filled with beautiful images and painfully expressive of the characters' inner yearnings. In particular, Peterson makes exquisite use of Mark Bennett's music. She brings guitarist Annas Allaf onstage at points to play the passionate flamenco that defines the intensity of the drama.

JULY 26-28, 2002

# The Hollywood Reporter

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## 'House of Bernarda Alba'

Repression is hardly ever a good idea, no matter which end of it — victim or victimizer — you happen to be on. This truth is amply demonstrated in Lisa Peterson's haunting production of Federico Garcia Lorca's "The House of



BY  
JAY  
REINER

**venue**  
Mark Taper Forum,  
Los Angeles  
(Through Sept. 1)

**the bottom line**  
This is a haunting production of Lorca's chilling play about the terrible price paid for repression on a personal and social level.

Bernarda Alba," a cold but austere beautiful play built upon the silenced passion of an entire nation.

That nation is Spain, a country on the brink of civil war when Lorca finished the play in 1936. It's the last in a trilogy of folk tragedies that included "Blood Wedding" and "Yerma." Lorca

subtitled the play "A Drama About Women in the Villages of Spain." The bitter irony is that some of the same repressive forces Lorca was writing about were responsible for executing him, at age 38, only two months after he finished the play.

Bernarda Alba (Chita Rivera) is the tyrannical matriarch of a well-off Spanish family that includes five unmarried daughters. Having just buried her second husband, Bernarda orders that her daughters must go into mourning for eight years, shut away from the rest of the village in a sealed house. Bernarda has lived her life in strict obedience to the social codes and conventions of her time and class.

The daughters feel compelled to obey their iron-willed mother, except for the youngest, Adela (Sandra Oh), a free spirit in love with a local villager, the "stallion" Pepe el Romano. Unfortunately, Pepe is wooing the eldest sister, Angustias (Marissa Chibas), who has inherited the father's wealth, even as he and Adela are carrying on. When Bernarda learns of the affair between Adela and Pepe, a tragic ending is inevitable.



**Matriarch Chita Rivera imposes her moral will after her husband's death.**

There is a strong anti-sexual component to Bernarda's oppressive behavior that Chay Yew's new adaptation captures nicely. Rivera, her hair tightly drawn back and parted down the middle, her walk stiff and unyielding, her face frozen in disaffection, comes to personify this blighted, anti-life attitude. At the same time, she at selected moments allows a certain amount of humanity to color her portrayal.

Oh's supple, erotically charged performance is like a brilliant flare going off in a dark room, momentarily allowing us to see what's really there but doomed to expire before anything can be done. Camille Saviola is a wonderful presence as Poncia, the crafty housekeeper who understands the urges of the flesh but knows her place as well.

### THE HOUSE OF BERNARDA ALBA

Presented by  
Center Theatre Group/Music Center  
of Los Angeles County

**Credits:** Playwright: Federico Garcia Lorca; Director: Lisa Peterson; Adapter: Chay Yew; Set designer: Rachel Hauck; Lighting designer: Christopher Akerlind; Original sound and music: Mark Bennett. **Cast:** Bernarda Alba: Chita Rivera; Adela: Sandra Oh; Poncia: Camille Saviola; Maria Josef: Tsai Chin; Blanca: Shaheen Vaaz; Amelia: Lydia Look; Martirio: Rita Wolf; Magdalena: Eileen Galindo; Angustias: Marissa Chibas; Prudencia: Jeanne Sakata.

# A Spectacle in Black, White and Red: Lorca's 'The House of Bernarda Alba'

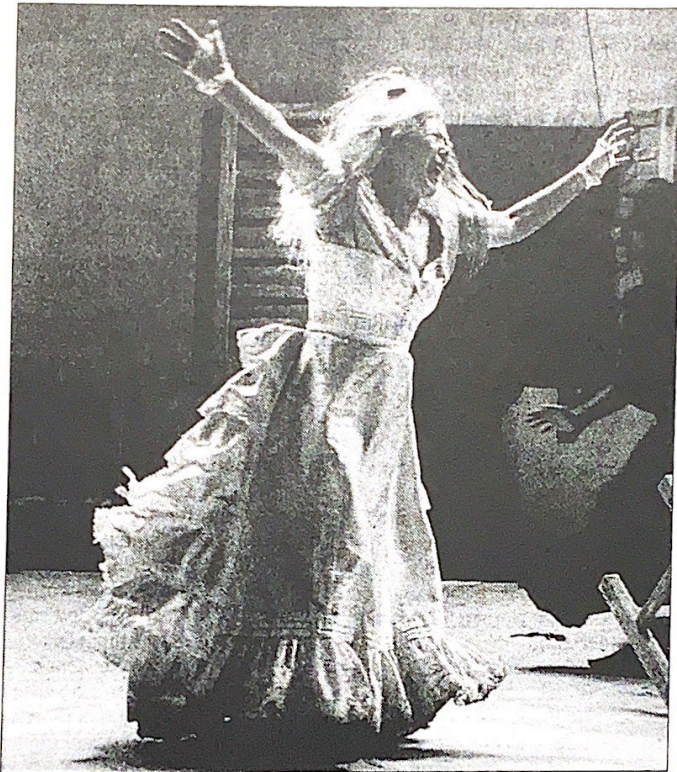
By LAURA WITSENHAUSEN  
Associate Editor

**B**lack, white and red dominate the set and the costumes of the visually striking adaptation of Federico Garcia Lorca's 1936 "The House of Bernarda Alba" at the Mark Taper Forum through September 1. The new adaptation of the Spanish classic is by Chay Yew and the direction by Lisa Peterson.

The cast is all women—nine live in the Alba household. There is iron-willed head of household Bernarda (Chita Rivera), her crazy mother, five daughters and two servants.

Bernarda's chief aim in life is to keep the outside world out of her home and away from her daughters. What the neighbors might think and her daughters' virtue are highly prized and important to her. And so is class, which she believes no one in the town has enough of to marry one of her eligible daughters, ranging in age from 20 to 39. "There is no man in 100 miles good enough for my daughters," she says, having dismissed one potential suitor, the son of a farmhand.

The play opens in dramatic fashion. While the maid Blanca (Shaheen Vaaz) scrubs the white floor of the courtyard, mourners dressed in black stand among the audience members. Both sound and gesture are used for great effect in this production. Besides the nine women in the Alba household, the cast includes seven village women who make up a kind of Greek chorus. In fact, the entire production with its strong visuals, wailing sounds and dramatic gestures evoke ancient theatrical traditions. The colorblind casting, gesturing and guttural sounds bring the story to the level of myth—it could be happening in any place



Tsai Chin in the Mark Taper Forum production of Garcia Lorca's "The House of Bernarda Alba."

Photo: Craig Schwartz

and time, allowing the audience to bring their own meaning.

That is good, because the play itself is enigmatic. The action opens in the late summer of 1936 in Spain, with the women grieving just after the funeral Mass for Antonio, Bernarda's husband. He was also Blanca's secret lover. In an announcement to her daughters, Bernarda says, "For the next eight years, we will mourn," and orders them all to wear black.

Wearing her white-streaked hair severely pulled back, Rivera stands perfectly straight employing her cane in her role as a domineering, tightly controlled mother—she reels in all the emotions

that her crazy mother expresses freely, and tries to force her daughters to rein themselves in as well. Bernarda is vigilant about guarding her daughter's purity. All the men are offstage characters, neither seen nor heard.

Tsai Chin as Maria Josefa, the 80-year-old mother, brings a feeling of lightness to the heavy household atmosphere. Wearing a dirty white wedding dress with long white hair, she talks about getting married, and having a baby, in a household of spinsters.

Annas Allaf adds a striking,

mournful tone with his acoustic guitar and oud. He sits on the periphery of the set, adding a hypnotic feel with his music composed by Mark Bennett. The village women also add their vocals and percussive sounds to the mix, heightening the drama.

Angustia, the oldest sister, finally has a suitor, a handsome 25-year-old, who is apparently interested only in her inheritance.

The four younger daughters each react differently to the lack of male love and companionship in their lives. The characters's portrayals are pushed to the level of archetype and stereotype. Amelia (Lydia Look) loves her books, Martirio is ill (Rita Wolf), Magdalena (Eileen Galindo) has given up on men, and only the youngest Adela (Sandra Oh) remains unbroke by her mother, and still insists she will be free, flaunting a red dress while the rest wear black.

One of the most authentic voices in the play comes from Poncia (Camille Saviola), the loyal, long-time servant, who as the truth-teller, urges Bernarda to lighten up on the lock and key. She also curses her mistress when she is out of earshot. Having been married and had children, she is the emblem of what the others could not reach. "Fifteen days into the marriage, the man abandons the bed for the dining table, and after that for the tavern," she advises.

When the braying of a stallion bothers a visiting neighbor, Bernarda gives orders. "Take the stallion, let him run free, keep the mares in the stall." Tragically, Bernarda fails to free her daughters from their home or see clearly what is happening to them as they fester in this environment.

Contact: (213) 628-2772.

August 1, 2002

## THE HOUSE OF BERNARDA ALBA

at the Mark Taper Forum

Reviewed by Jesse Dienstag

In his new adaptation, Chay Yew takes the original work by Spanish poet and playwright Federico García Lorca and makes the text more lyrical than Lorca originally intended, giving it the feel of Lorca's other two great plays, *Blood Wedding* and *Yerma*. Under the direction of Lisa Peterson, the results are a very beautiful production, with more relevance to the plight of women than one might expect but less intensity than needed.

Living La Vida Lorca, *Bernarda Alba* is a tough cookie. She runs a tight ship. As the play opens, her second husband has just died, and *Bernarda* announces that she and her five daughters will remain in mourning for eight years, as was the practice when her father died. How the daugh-

ters and staff choose to exist under the tyrannical rule of *Bernarda* is the impetus for the play.

As *Bernarda*, Chita Rivera is riveting. There are only a few moments when the character is anything but a psychotic witch, but those are the moments when Rivera reveals that she is not just chewing up scenery; she is instead driven entirely by *Bernarda's* insane but very real compulsions. Equally fantastic is *Bernarda's* long-time maidservant, Poncia, played with exquisite heart by Camille Saviola. It's pleasantly surprising how much humor is in this production, and Saviola is at the root of almost all of it. Watching Rivera and Saviola play off each other makes us almost forget everyone else; these two are superbly connected. Yew seems to have worked very hard to fill out the roles of the rest of the cast, and it's particularly rewarding in the case of the servant under Poncia, here Shaheen Vaaz. Three of the sisters, played by Marissa Chibas, Eileen Galindo, and Sandra Oh, also hold their own. Unfortunately the women playing the other two sisters (Lydia Look and Rita Wolf) and *Bernarda's* mother (Tsai Chin) aren't as good. Their outbursts and issues seem forced. Especially distracting is the super-feminist daughter in little round glasses (Look). In general, the sister scenes lack the chemistry and emotional intensity of the scenes anchored by Rivera, Saviola, and Vaaz. As a result the build-up to the emotional climax at the end of the play isn't as intense as it should be, and disappointingly we're not on the edge of our seats as we should be.

What works beautifully is the guitar and oud of Annas Allaf as he roams over the lovely set of Rachel Hauck. His playing and the original music by Mark Bennett add color to Hauck's black, white, and red-heavy stage. Peterson also deftly uses what amounts to a Greek chorus throughout the production in a variety of interesting ways. Joyce Kim Lee's costumes are at the same time elegant, dour, and appropriate.

As if we needed reminding, Lorca illustrates what a raw deal it was to be a woman, and sometimes a man, in Spain in 1936. With its stifling rules, social structure, and intolerance—Lorca was murdered by nationalists—it's a setting rife with conflict. Yew's adaptation and Peterson's multi-ethnic casting, while off-putting at times, remind us that the same kind of oppression still exists in many regions around the world today.

*"The House of Bernarda Alba,"* presented by Center Theatre Group at the Mark Taper Forum, 135 N. Grand Ave., Downtown L.A. Tues.-Fri. 8 p.m., Sat. 2:30 & 8 p.m., Sun. 2:30 & 7:30 p.m. July 25-Sept. 1. 530-44. (213) 628-2772.





# Ticket holders

## The House of Bernarda Alba Mark Taper Forum reviewed by Travis Michael Holder

There's a magical kind of lyrical elegance in the poetic works of Federico Garcia Lorca, who wrote his classic *The House of Bernarda Alba* at age 38, shortly before his assassination in 1936 during the Spanish Civil War. But as is true with most of his plays, there's also something constricted and unspoken in his writing, which was considered shocking enough for its time to make him the target of Nationalist rebels for his liberal views. Lorca said in an interview shortly before his death that he considered himself a novice whose work had just begun. Because of the tenor of the times, he could not open himself completely to the radical and the avant-garde and, though acknowledged as Spain's premier playwright and poet before his early demise at the hands of the ultra-Catholic right, much of his more daring work remained unpublished before his death.

There was an immediate sense of rejoicing for me at the beginning of the Chay Yew's arresting adaptation of *Bernarda Alba*, now at the Mark Taper, as the grande dame's servant Poncia (Camille Saviola)

offered the opinion that her employer was "a cunt." Yew has made Lorca's beautiful but sometimes unplayable work sing with a dulcet new freedom of expression, amplified by placing the setting somewhere between Spain and the Philippines and opening casting to include Asians as well as Hispanics.

Of course, *Bernarda Alba* is the tale of a recently widowed matriarch (in a rare non-musical turn by one of theater's most noteworthy stars, Chita Rivera) who insists her five daughters dress in black along with her for seven years, locking them away from the rest of the teeming, ugly world and denying them love. "There is no man within 100 miles worthy of my daughters," rants Bernarda with a toss of her ever-present cane. "The men here are shit." But this is a hot and humid climate, the sort that Tennessee Williams and so many others liked to write within, so that the fluttering of hand-held fans signal a palatable sense of itchy sexual tension. It doesn't take long for her youngest daughter, Adela (Sandra Oh), to take a late night hike into the fields with the betrothed future husband of her older, less-attractive and wealthier sister.

Lisa Peterson's direction is as new and fresh and innovative as Yew's writing, filled with startling images that have the air and majesty of a classic Flamenco

presentation, yet without the dance — except incidentally. Perhaps one of the most haunting images happens as the daughters do break into a sort of dance of freedom, highlighted beautifully by Mark Bennett's exceptional but never pervasive original score. As the girls move sensually to exorcise the demons of their imposed confinement, through a window at the back of the courtyard stands Rivera as Bernarda, watching quietly. How bizarre it seems to me to watch Chita Rivera watch other people dancing without lifting one of those ageless limbs in an extension reaching her ear.

See, the thing is with Chita, whom I have known and whose friendship I have cherished since we were in *Bye Bye Birdie* together in New York in 1960, when I was 13 and she was 26, is that agelessness is her middle name. To see her perform in *Chicago* two years ago when I visited her in Las Vegas, there would be no way anyone could ever

guess her age — or accept that it wasn't that many years ago, when she was in trials in Toronto for *The Kiss of the Spider Woman*, that a taxicab accident left her with the



Chita Rivera and Camille Saviola in *The House of Bernarda Alba*

medical opinion that not only would she possibly not ever dance again, but might not ever walk. Four months later, with 12 metal pins in her right leg, Chita was back in *Spider Woman*, extending that gorgeous gam as high as ever.

Now Chita once again conquers new ground, brilliantly segueing from her niche as the greatest living performer in musical theater today to presenting us with the steely, austere Bernarda of Lorca's dreams. Her performance here is absolutely riveting — subdued and totally haunting in its simplicity and startling acerbity. It is the stuff for which awards are given, mark my word.

The exceptional work of Saviola, Oh and Tsai Chin as Bernarda's batty mother are all tremendous assets to this production, as are the committed performances of Lydia Look, Rita Wolf, Eileen Galindo and Marissa Chibas as the other daughters; Shaheen Vaaz as the domestic who gave the late Senor Alba more than tea service; and a chorus of established local talent appearing as the village women. Rachel Hauck's spectacularly Spartan set design is a knockout, as always, as is the rigidly black-themed costuming by Joyce Kim Lee. In all, there is not a miss in this production as it sweeps us happily into Lorceland.

Still, aside from all the excellent

performances and splendid production values, Chay Yew's gloriously unfettered adaptation is the true star of this presentation. It finds the classic beauty and unspoken frustrations of Lorca's writing while bringing to it a new loud and glorious freedom, as well as a few needed laughs. Lorca must be jumping for joy somewhere, if there's anywhere to jump once we shuffle off this mortal coil. And if there isn't, at least with such a loving reinvention of his never quite realized genius, the master will live on for all time. For tickets, call (213) 628-2772.

CHRIS SCHWARTZ



RIVERA HOLDING DOWN THE FORT

## Mi Casa Es Mi Casa

I DON'T RECALL BERNARDA ALBA ever being referred to as an "old cunt" in my New Directions translation of Federico García Lorca's play, but it's a description I'm willing to accept in the spirit of accessibility. Productions of Lorca, after all, tend to plod along or wallow in their texts' poetics—which is why Lorca, like Brecht, is a playwright everyone likes to quote but not sit through. Chay Yew's adaptation of *The House of Bernarda Alba*, directed at the Mark Taper Forum by Lisa Peterson, is a vigorous Latin-Pacific fusion that retains the play's repressive gravity while leavening it with bawdy laughter. This version is nominally still set in Spain in 1936 (the year of that country's civil war and Lorca's execution) but, thanks to an ethnically mixed cast, has been spiritu-

ally moved by Yew somewhere between Andalusia and Mindanao, lending a Pacific humidity to the torturous Iberian heat. The house in question is a gulag of women ruled by a tyrant queen who has crippled the lives of her five daughters by forbidding them the pleasures—and torments—of love; the story begins after the burial of Bernarda's husband and ends with preparations for the funeral of a daughter. The play works on several levels, not the least of which is political—Spain torn between liberty and authority. Yew spotlights some of the play's minor characters and stresses each daughter's personality, while resisting any urges to thoroughly modernize the period's language or outlook.

Peterson's direction summons a medieval Catholicism of whitewashed

stone walls in which women are offered the security of marriage, convent or whorehouse, which is why the addition of the slightest splash of color or pattern on Rachel Hauck's angular set or Joyce Kim Lee's dark costumes brings a headrush of emotions to the play's characters. Chita Rivera's Bernarda is a steely, cane-wielding figure in black pinstripe who manages, against all odds, to be an appealing, even sympathetic character, while Camille Saviola's earth *madre* of a servant, Poncia, all but carries the show away on her broad shoulders.

—S.M.

**THE HOUSE OF BERNARDA ALBA** | By FEDERICO GARCÍA LORCA | At the MARK TAPER FORUM, 135 N. Grand Ave., downtown | Through September 1

STEVE MIKULAN  
AUGUST 9 - 15, 2002 LA WEEKLY 35

## RANDOM SIGHTINGS by Polly Warfield

### Alba Afterthoughts

The Taper's current production of *The House of Bernarda Alba* is a triumph of coordinated stagecraft—visually beautiful, viscerally compelling, theatrically thrilling, a glowing example of theatre's collaborative artistry. Adapter Chay Yew has added his own touches to Federico García Lorca's classic without disturbing the integrity of Lorca's vision or diluting the lyricism of Lorca's distinctive voice. Try, if you will, to transplant this house of Alba to the Philippines, or any other place. It remains in Lorca's Moorish-flavored Spain. The daughters of this tyrannical mother may here be a mixed brood of ethnicities, it matters not one whit; they merge like nuns in a convent or houris in a harem ruled by self-decreed, all-powerful pasha Bernarda.



As Lorca's (and Jung's) archetypal Terrible Mother, Chita Rivera's stiletto-sharp portrayal begins with an entrance as emphatic as an exclamation point, her bearing as erect, black, and unbending as one. Her cane is a weapon, her voice is a bullwhip, you could cut glass with her profile. Oppression and repression pressing down on this house can't contain its seething passions. The Moors who conquered Spain long ago still cast their shadows.

There is surprise in the powerful performance of Camille Saviola, worthy ally/adversary of autocratic, aristocratic Bernarda. She is the family's wise, strong peasant servitor, Poncia, grounded in earth. Helming this distaff production is Lisa Peterson, who masterfully displays her gallery of women as the masterpiece it is. Rachel Hauck's painterly set, Joyce Kim Lee's somber costumes, Christopher Akerlind's lighting, all contribute to the stunning visual effect—straight-angle lines, black-and-white hues, startling splashes of vivid red licking forth like tongues of flame or spurts of blood. Annas Allaf hovers, alluringly, provocatively glimpsed as the only masculine presence. The haunting music of his guitar and oud throbs and pulses with repressed need. You can take Lorca out of Spain, but you cannot take Spain out of Lorca.

# critic

by Robert and Katharine Morsberger

## THE HOUSE OF BERNARDA ALBA AT THE TAPER

A few weeks after he completed his dramatic masterpiece, *The House of Bernarda Alba*, Federico Garcia Lorca, along with thousands of his countrymen, was executed by the ultraconservative religious and political fascists who betrayed the fledgling Spanish republic and supported Franco's dictatorship.

The play was suppressed and not staged in Spain until 1950. What were the fascists so afraid of? Lorca, who was considered a symbol of Spanish liberalism, claimed to be apolitical. But while *The House of Bernarda Alba* is ostensibly a domestic drama about a widow who demands unquestioning obedience from her 5 repressed daughters, it can represent all tyrannies at any time and in any place. Artists, usually independent nonconformists, are particularly vulnerable.

Chay Yew, who has adapted the play rather than literally translate it, says he "set the play in an imaginary place between Spain and the Philippines". In this production, however, according to the program the play is set in Spain in 1936, the year the civil war broke out. The casting is still multicultural.

Aspects of the staging and performances resemble Kabuki and other Asian drama, but the total effect is to reinforce the tragedy's timelessness. It could be taking place almost anywhere from China to Peru. But, as Lorca's brother observed, introducing the 1941 English translation, *Bernarda Alba* is "hard, Goyesque...and infinitely Spanish." Similar black-clad women could be seen in 1965 Spain, still mourning the civil war dead in the basilica at the Valle de los Caídos.

Bernarda (Chita Rivera) has just buried her husband but

she shows no sign of grief. Her only concern is to continue to exercise absolute control over her daughters. It is never stated that she also had such control over her husband but it is evident that the household is to continue as it has always been. In this regard, Bernarda Alba resembles the repressive Spanish right wing, who resisted any sort of change. She has rejected a suitor for one of her daughters on the grounds that he was too low-caste, and she spits out the decree that if ever a daughter is to marry, she, Bernarda Alba, will pick the man. "In my house, it will never be a question of my daughters' choice."

Meanwhile, they are all to be in mourning for 8 years. She is a ruthless tyrant, who proclaims that no one else should think; she will make all decisions for everyone. Any opposition results in a slap or a slash across the face by the widow's silver-handed cane.

One daughter is, in fact, betrothed to Pepe el Romano, but all of them are infatuated with him, while he dallies with them all. "Lock the mares in the corral, but let the stallion run free," says Bernarda. Romano never appears on stage, but his invisible presence is felt throughout the play; he is not so much a character as a symbol of the predatory, promiscuous, aggressive male who prowls around the house at night, whose sensuality has all the females in heat, and who enjoys all of them. He may also be the father of a baby born to a neighbor's unmarried daughter, who killed and buried her child. It is God's will that she be tortured and killed, says Bernarda Alba.

The homosexuality of both Garcia Lorca and adapter Chay Yew may be a factor in the way the daughters rhapsodize over Pepe el Romano's irresistible male sensuality and in the writer's ability to empathize so thoroughly with the young women. The only male we see is a black-clad musician (Annas Allaf) who strums on an oud (an archaic instrument that resembles a lute) and the guitar, sometimes playing a passionate flamenco that counterpoints the daughters' repressed sexuality.

There are also 7 black-clad women who sometimes wail, sometimes sing and sometimes beat sticks together in Kabuki fashion. Many of Lorca's plays include music:

the multitalented playwright could also design sets and costumes, arrange the music and provide piano accompaniment.

Both Lorca and Yew have stated that they felt like outsiders, but the women are insiders, virtual prisoners in their mother's claustrophobic house. Even in church, says their mother, women should see no man except the priest, and only because he is in skirts. Rachel Hauck's set is a bare gray stage, with a rectangular hole in to the front of stage left, gray chairs and a gray rear wall.

By contrast, below the stage level is a border of passionate red sand or possibly rose petals, in which several of the women sometimes lie and writhe. Ordinarily they are all dressed in black, but the youngest and most rebellious daughter, Adela (Sandra Oh) once appears in a skimpy red dress, in which she moves in sensuous flamenco style around the stage.

Lisa Peterson's direction is dynamic and gets the most out of her all-female cast. As Bernarda Alba, Chita Rivera is the ultimate Matriarchal martinet, but before the drama is over, creates a characterization of range, depth and subtlety. Sandra Oh, as her youngest daughter, is not only passionate and rebellious, but has moments in which she almost resembles her self-willed mother. Camille Saviola is a bawdy Poncia, the servant who is the only person in whom Bernarda Alba and her daughters can confide. Tsai Chin, the daughter of China's pre-eminent classic actor of the last century, is a memorable madwoman, her performance and her wildly disheveled long white hair reminiscent of Kabuki.

Yew's adaption has kept the play intact, though there are some additions to and changes in the script. Yew has managed to make the language simultaneously realistic and poetic. Whether inspired by playwright, director or cast, the use of silence (Bernarda's final word) colors the tragedy with particular intensity. The intensity builds unbroken from beginning to end: there is no intermission.

*The House of Bernarda Alba*, which concludes the 35th season, plays through September 1, Tuesday - Saturday, 8 pm; Sunday 7:30 pm; Saturday-Sunday 2:30 pm, at the Mark Taper Forum, 135 Grand Ave., Los Angeles. Running time is one hour and 45 minutes. Reservations: (213) 628-2772.



, Eileen Galindo and Marissa Chibas perform in "The House of Bernarda Alba" at the Mark Taper Forum.

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[http://www.artvoice.com/august15\\_august21\\_2002/pages/theatrereviews.html](http://www.artvoice.com/august15_august21_2002/pages/theatrereviews.html)

THEATRE REVIEWS

Two Houses of Bernarda Alba

The Comedy of Errors

BY ANTHONY CHASE

TWO HOUSES OF  
BERNARDA ALBA

It often happens that a play not seen for years will attract an inexplicable renewal of interest and multiple productions will pop up independently of each other all at the same time. Two high profile productions of Federico Garcia Lorca's 1936 masterpiece, *The House of Bernarda Alba*, are running at the moment, one at the Shaw Festival in Niagara-on-the-Lake and the other at



the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles. Each production illuminates the contemporary significance of this play in new ways.

Garcia Lorca never saw this play performed. The Spanish playwright was executed by Franco's Fascists on August 9, 1936, just weeks after finishing the script. Striking at the heart of the social reality in which he lived, Garcia Lorca created a work that highlighted the oppression of women by setting the action entirely within a women's world. Like Clare Booth Luce's play, *The Women*, which was also written in 1936, the characters are obsessed with the world of men and speak of little else, but no men appear in the play. Unlike Luce, who takes her stabs at society through a rollicking and urbane comedy, Garcia Lorca employs desperate tragedy in a rural Spanish town to advance his argument.

The title character is the mother of five unmarried daughters. Eager to protect the respectability of her family after the death of her husband, Bernarda wastes no time in announcing that the family will be confined to the house for the traditional period of mourning -- eight years. A crisis ensues when a handsome local boy, Pepe el Romano, motivated by greed, proposes marriage to Angustias, the eldest daughter. Angustias is the child of Bernarda's first husband, and consequently the only one of the girls with any money. It is soon revealed, however, that the youngest daughter, Adela, is secretly having a love affair with Pepe and that she intends to run away with him. In the confines of the house, passions fester, turning sister against sister, culminating with Bernarda's failed attempt to shoot Pepe to death. Believing that her lover has been killed along with her only hope of escape, Adela hangs herself.

Interestingly, *The House of Bernarda Alba* was seen in Buffalo just last year at Buffalo United Artists. That production featured Emily Mann's brilliantly economical adaptation and starred Arlene Clement, who gave a compelling Artie Award nominated performance in the title role under the direction of Javier Bustillos. That production affords a handy reminder of the play, and adds perspective to viewings in Ontario and California.

The very traditional Shaw Festival production uses a new translation by Richard Sanger, and stars Shaw Festival favorite, Nora McClellan, under the direction of Polish director Tadeusz Bradecki. The Los Angeles production uses a bold new adaptation by Chay Yew, and features Broadway legend Chita Rivera under the direction of Lisa Peterson.

Both productions demonstrate how the significance of *The House of Bernarda Alba* has shifted remarkably since 1936. In textbook accounts and in reviews of the first productions, the tyranny of Bernarda is emphasized to such a degree that the woman seems a monster. Clearly, history and the women's liberation movement have afforded her a reappraisal.

Both Chita Rivera and Nora McClellan portray Bernarda as a complex woman made harsh by her impossible circumstances. This is, certainly, an interpretation supported by Garcia Lorca's text. Both McClellan and Rivera, for instance, play the scene in which the eldest daughter confides in her mother that Pepe seems bored and distracted when he speaks with her, as an opportunity to show that Bernarda's inflexibility has a compelling motivation. Realizing that her daughter's future is dependent upon having a husband, Bernarda advises Angustias to turn a blind eye to his indifference and any indiscretions, to look at her husband only when he looks at her and never to ask for explanations. Knowing the unhappiness to which she has, of necessity condemned her daughter, Rivera's Bernarda reacts with a private moment of anguish lifted straight out of *Mother Courage*. Nora McClellan's Bernarda becomes momentarily flustered, and a flash of palpable fear comes over her before she snaps back into control.

Chay Yew's adaptation provides Rivera with an additional opportunity, unimagined by Garcia Lorca, to show the vulnerability of Bernarda. In the final scene, Chay Yew's script has Bernarda break down upon learning of her daughter's suicide. The moment is originally played with stoic resolve, Bernarda's vulnerability betrayed only by her breaking her cane. Rivera,

however, actually throws herself headlong onto the floor in a cry of despair before being admonished by Magdalena, the daughter who most resembles Bernarda herself, to cry in the privacy of her bed—the very advice Bernarda gave Magdalena after the funeral of her father.

Chita Rivera is, of course, a mega star of the American musical theater, having created roles in *West Side Story*, *Bye Bye Birdie*, *The Rink*, and *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, among other shows. She is also a remarkable actress and her Bernarda is riveting. Whereas Nora McClellan's performance is impressive and beautiful for its restraint and poetic control, Rivera's is impressive for the thrilling risks she takes and for the physicality with which she underscores Bernarda's emotional torment.

The California production uses a multi-ethnic cast, a decision which serves to underscore the repression of women as an international phenomenon. Much is being made of the parallels to the women of Afghanistan suggested by the production.

The Shaw Festival production employs a far more faithful version of the script, though one less compelling and more sprawling than the Emily Mann version used in Buffalo last year. One would expect the strength of the Shaw Festival production to be in the fabulous women of the company. In this regard, however, Nora McClellan, whose performance is sublime, stands rather alone. Her Bernarda is a woman tormented to the point of distraction who becomes rather addled by the complications unfolding around her, and whose air of superiority always seems to be a pose. It is a wonderful interpretation, but one not supported by the rather superficial performances around her. Whereas Bernarda's servant, La Poncia, is fabulously played in LA by Camille Saviola with all the bawdy comedy and irony with which Garcia Lorca provides her (as the role was by Mary Loftus in Buffalo last year), the Shaw La Poncia, played by Patricia Hamilton, is oddly stiff, depriving the production of a needed note of comedy, a twist of human complexity, and a potent foil for Bernarda.

Both productions, like the Buffalo production and many a Bernarda Alba before them, employ entirely white sets. Rachel Hauck's California design employs accents of Garcia Lorca's emblematic red and black as well, a theme emphasized in Joyce Kim Lee's excellent costumes.

The House of Bernarda Alba continues in Los Angeles through September 1 and at the Shaw Festival's Court House Theatre through October 5.



DOWNTOWN NEWS 8/5/02

# HOUSE RULES

Taper Stages New, Intense Adaptation of Lorca's 'Alba'

1656

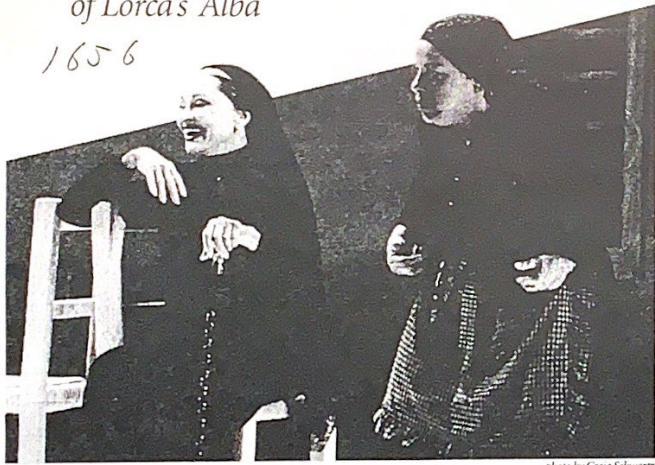


photo by Craig Schwartz

BY KRISTIN FRIEDRICH  
STAFF WRITER

In ultra-Catholic and conservative early 20th century Spain, criticizing the government, the class system and the oppression of women was a dangerous business. From the

## THEATER REVIEW

mouth of a gay writer, it was life-threatening. Federico Garcia Lorca wrote and spoke about what he saw around him, and the consequence was an assassination at the age of 38.

With a prelude like that, Lorca's *The House of Bernarda Alba*, which opened recently at

the Mark Taper Forum, could be presumed an interminably heavy enterprise. Instead, its occasional light notes and still-topical themes make for a compelling production.

Lorca set his 1936 play in rural Spain, inside a claustrophobic house whose female inhabitants suffer under stifling societal norms for proper feminine behavior, arranged marriages and constrained sexual passion. The story begins just after wealthy matriarch Bernarda Alba's husband has died, and she orders an eight-year mourning period for her five daughters, a sentence that comes on top of years of oppression and seclusion. Bernarda,

preoccupied with preserving her family's good name in the village and protecting her daughters from unsuitable men, keeps an overwhelmingly staid and celibate home.

The daughters find little ways to rebel, but their mother's prudish dogma seeps into their heads. Because they're older and, except for the eldest daughter, without much of a dowry, the possibility of marriage gets more remote every day. With their sisterly support system and gallows humor, they've learned to make intellectual peace with that reality, but their bodies still yearn for male attention.

### Well-Learned Lessons

Lorca, who was killed by Nationalist rebels in the early days of Spanish Civil War, based the play on the real-life neighbor of one of his cousins. Chay Yew, a gay man raised in conservative Singapore and brought to America in the '80s, embarked on his update after finding that recent translations of the play lacked the energy of Lorca's original. Yew's version, directed by Lisa Peterson, includes more attention to minor characters, an overt sexuality and more lyrical dialogue (which Lorca was renowned for, but toned down in this play).

Chita Rivera (*West Side Story*, *Sweet Charity*, *Chicago*) gives a fine portrayal of the complex domestic tyrant. Though Bernarda is usually a picture of starchy decorum, Rivera imbues her with occasional smiles and flashes of inner turmoil — the heavy hand she lords over her daughters' lives apparently have come at a cost.

Sandra Oh, a regular on HBO's "Arli\$\$," also makes an evocative turn as Adela, Bernarda's youngest and lustiest daughter, and the focal point of the story. When Adela swears, "It's my body and I'll do exactly what I want with it," it's not just petulant foot-stomping. Her passion for an unseen man, who happens to be her oldest sister's suitor, is everything to her, and she clenches to it despite the hurt she seems to know it will bring.

Those who play Bernarda's long-suffering servants are wonderful, too. Head maid Poncia, played by Camille Saviola, is such a funny and endearing break in the intensity that the audience almost sighs in relief when she starts one of her crude, feisty rants.

Music is provided by guitar and oud player Annas Allaf, who plays from different corners of the stage. His handsome virility — he's the only male presence in the show — looms on the set like the masculine visions in these lonely characters' daydreams.

### Setting the Stage

In the original play's forward, Lorca described the piece as a "photographic documentary." Set designer Rachel Hauck and costumer Joyce Kim Lee have paid heed to his words, and deliver staging and clothing that look like a stark, old photograph. Black and white predominate, but splashes of red make their way into the visual landscape — a scarlet dress that Adela sneaks into even though house rules require all black, and troughs of red beads that surround the stage and inevitably mottle Bernarda's white-washed floors, no matter how hard she makes her maids scrub them.

All the awful things that come with a stifled household run rampant in the Alba homestead: repressed emotions, jealousy, eavesdropping, tantrums and a suffocating web of gossip. In the daughters' naïve, hot-house existence, every unseen man who passes becomes an obsession and they merrily dart off to windows to observe.

Still, wizened maid Poncia warns her mistress that "something monstrous is festering within these walls," and in the end, she's right. The Alba women are indeed in peril. The worst part is, it's from themselves.

*The House of Bernarda Alba* runs through Sept. 1 at the Mark Taper Forum, 135 N. Grand Ave., (213) 628-2772 or [www.taperah-manson.com](http://www.taperah-manson.com).

<http://www.curtainup.com/houseofbernardaalbala.html>

The House of Bernarda Alba  
by Laura Hitchcock

Federico Garcia Lorca's 1938 classic about cultural repression, particularly of women of one generation by those of another generation, is enhanced and expanded in an adaptation by Chinese playwright Chay Yew. Director Lisa Peterson stylizes the production, underlining the traditions Bernarda cleaves to for safety and dignity. But Chay Yew's emphasis delves beyond this to explore the universalities that move this play past the conflicts between the ultra-Catholic forces who executed 38-year-old liberal Lorca and beyond the Red Guard in China whose youthful regimen led to the destruction of older liberals.

His Bernarda, matriarch of a family of five daughters who is determined they observe eight years of mourning for the death of their father, becomes a believable figure in the interplay of Chita Rivera's performance with that of Poncia, her long-time maid. The two gossip together and laugh about sexual high jinks but Bernarda never lets Poncia forget who is the mistress here, whose social status is higher, and why she wants her daughters to marry into socially inflated ranks. The exuberant madwoman Prudencia, Bernarda's mother, who breaks out of her room in an ancient wedding dress like Miss Haversham in *Great Expectations*, gives a clue to what Bernarda is rebelling against and clinging to: respectability, the importance of its safety in a macho society, the power only wealth and dignity could give a woman. She is why she makes short shrift of the handsomest man in town who courts Angustias, the heiress who is Bernarda's oldest daughter by her first marriage, but makes passionate love to Adela, Bernarda's high-spirited youngest.

Chay Yew and Peterson emphasize Bernarda, as person, not Bernarda, as the tyrant usually personified as ultra-conservative Spain. Although the text and its impetus are unchanged, the interchanges between Bernarda and Poncia illustrate the individual beneath the dictatorial mask. Poncia is the reverse side of Bernarda when she begs young Adela to be patient, to let her lover marry Angustias who is so narrow hipped she'll die in childbirth, I've seen it before. The stark reality is that Adela is ready to agree with her. Not everyone else is, particularly her sister Martirio, who upsets the whole social negotiation with an insurmountable passion.

Peterson illustrates the rigid strictures of society through stylized staging which is highly dramatic. The women sit in straight rows of chairs. Their gestures, pointed fingers, swiveled heads, are uniform and fiercely specific.

Even the trees which line the balcony behind the stage are precisely defined.

The only male presence on the stage is guitarist Annas Allaf, whose virile brooding presence and softly seductive music hang like a mesmerizing cloud over the Albas' bleak courtyard. Strong percussion music comes from the individual instruments of the village women who stand throughout the audience. The cast is headed by Chita Rivera as Bernarda, whose intense beauty and consuming eyes define her as hopelessly iconic role model and controlling mother. Camille Saviola finds lusty humor and sly servility in her long-time servant Poncia. Shaheen Vaaz makes the servant girl Bianca, former mistress of Signor Alba, a life-affirming presence, in vivid contrast to the five repressed daughters. The sisters, though individually good actresses, seem somewhat unevenly cast. There's no sense of family.

Notable exceptions are Sandra Oh, slim and lithe as a willow wand, who brings determination and a sensuous joyous rapture to Adela and Marissa Chibas who plays Angustias in lip make-up that's almost white leaving a mask-like face accented only by burning eyes, her tall frame hunched supplicatingly to Bernarda as she fantasizes about her fiancé Pedro. When she confides in Bernarda that he seems absent-minded, her mother pragmatically counsels her to ignore it.

Overall, this production has done justice to its classic roots and branched beyond them with burning beautiful precision.

#### RELATED LINKS

Another Part of the House --Migdalia Cruz's reinterpretation of Lorca  
The House of Bernarda -- not just adapted by directed by Chay Yew

#### THE HOUSE OF BERNARDA ALBA

Playwright: Federico Garcia Lorca, in a new adaptation by Chay Yew

Director: Lisa Peterson

Cast: Tsai Chin (Maria Josefa), Shaheen Vaaz (Blanca), Camille Saviola (Poncia), Christine Avila (Beggar Woman), Adrienne Avey (Girl), Chita Rivera (Bernarda Alba), Sandra Oh (Adela), Lydia Look (Amelia), Rita Wolf (Martirio), Eileen Galindo (Magdalena), Marissa Chibas (Angustias), Jeanne Sakata (Prudencia), Annas Allaf (Guitar and Oud)

Original Music and Sound Design: Mark Bennett

Set Design: Rachel Hauck

Costume Design: Joyce Kim Lee

Lighting Design: Christopher Akerlind

Hair and Wig Design: Carol F. Doran

Running Time: One hour, forty-five minutes. No intermission

Mark Taper Forum, Center Theatre Group, Los Angeles. Phone: (213) 628-2772

July 14-September 1, 2002

Reviewed by Laura Hitchcock on August 8.

West Covina, CA  
(Los Angeles Co.)  
San Gabriel Valley  
Daily Tribune  
(Cir. D. 56,958)  
(Cir. S. 59,180)

JUL 29 2002

Allen's P. C. B. Est. 1888

Pasadena, CA  
(Los Angeles Co.)  
Pasadena Star  
News  
(Cir. D. 43,000)

JUL 29 2002

Allen's P. C. B. Est. 1888

Whittier, CA  
(Los Angeles Co.)  
Whittier Daily News  
(Cir. D. 16,700)

JUL 29 2002

Allen's P. C. B. Est. 1888

## Bringing 'Bernarda Alba' to life

1656  
By Frances Baum  
Nicholson  
Correspondent

THE world of theater has many heroes. Federico Garcia Lorca was one of them, holding up a mirror to a repressive society until contention with Fascist Spain led to his execution. What this great playwright left behind are strong, sometimes bitter, always lyrical looks at the ways humans tie themselves in knots. As in "The House of Bernarda Alba," now at the Mark Taper Forum.

Added to the Garcia Lorca mix this time around are new voices. Chay Yew has adapted this piece into an almost Sophocles-like lyrical formality. Director Lisa Peterson has taken that vision and run with it toward a pattern which allows the symbolic nature of the piece, and its underlying strength, full sway. To facilitate a multicultural cast, the story is ostensibly moved from Spain to somewhere roughly near the Philippines.

Without so many of the usual

### 'THE HOUSE OF BERNARDA ALBA'

The Mark Taper Forum at the Music Center of Los Angeles County, 135 N. Grand Ave., Los Angeles

8 p.m. Tuesday-Saturday,  
7:30 p.m. Sunday, with matinees at 2:30 p.m. Saturdays and Sundays. Through Sept. 1  
\$30-\$44  
(213) 628-2772

trappings of place and history, the images in "Bernarda Alba" become starker and more profound, thanks to a universally talented cast.

The story involves an upper class woman in a small village, whose high standards and strict, repressive moral codes have isolated her and her five daughters. Their one outlet, their more passionate father, has just died. The servants who provide windows on a more natural world are kept thoroughly in their places by tone and training.

Bringing this to life is a remarkable company led by Chita Rivera as the coldly repressed Bernarda, insisting with an icy assurance her daughters live the life which drove her mother to madness and her husband into the arms of another. Balancing this ice, as the wise, earthy observer-servant, Camille Saviola dispenses a wisdom based on emotional insights Bernarda has shut down in herself.

Among the five daughters, each has moments of power. Linda Look's intellectual Amelia, retreating into books with a body language resistant to reality, speaks of one form of escape from the grim. Eileen

Galindo's fatalistic Magdalena, still yearning for the physical contact of love, and Marissa Chibas' aging but tentatively romantic. Rita Wolf's remarkable image of the crippled Martirio, which manages to display a sense of disability without overt physical image.

Providing a counter to the repressions of the rest, Sandra Oh blossoms as the young, vibrant Adela.

"The House of Bernarda Alba," as reworked here, is profound, many-layered and moving. The bleak view of the world of women echoes into more modern life as a debate between self-control and self-expression, between pride and human connection, and as such becomes significantly timeless.

Frances Baum Nicholson is a free-lance writer based in Altadena.