

Los Angeles Times

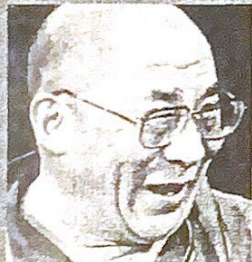
SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 19, 1999

BONUS: A pullout guide to the season's concerts, plays, exhibitions, recordings and more.

SUNDAY Calendar



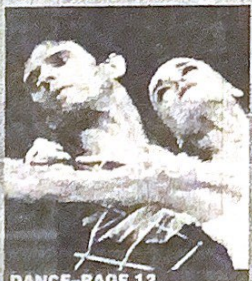
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HITTING CLOSE TO HOME

By JAN BRESLAUER

Ask most people where their home is, and they'll give you a quick and easy reply. Ask playwright Chay Yew, and the response becomes more complex.

Born and raised in Singapore, he came to California for college in the 1980s and has lived here since, with the exception of a few years. Yet like so many immigrants, he still feels betwixt and between, hovering in a limbo that is both psychological and cultural.

"The problem with me is I never feel I belong anywhere," says the playwright, sitting in his office at the Mark Taper Forum, where he's a resident artist and director of the Asian Theatre Workshop. "It's probably one of the few topics I keep exploring in my work. Surprisingly, [home] is

Playwright Chay Yew explores what it means to belong—an acutely personal theme for a member of the immigrant and gay communities.

probably an empty stage, because it's anything you want it to be. Perhaps that's the metaphor for America, you know. But I hope I'll never find [home], because I think if I do, something is going to change."

That something is his body of work—notably a collection of half a dozen plays and a couple of adaptations that, although he is only 34, have been seen at a broad range of respected venues, including London's Royal Court Theatre, New York's Public Theater, Long Wharf Theatre in

New Haven, the Manhattan Theatre Club, Portland's Center Stage and others. His work has been seen in Los Angeles at East West Players and the Celebration Theatre, and "Wonderland," a reworking of an earlier work, opens Wednesday at the La Jolla Playhouse, directed by Lisa Peterson.

Yew's stories often have deceptively simple premises. The main character of "Porcelain," for instance, is an alienated young Londoner who has committed a violent crime. The protagonists in "A Language of Their

Own," perhaps Yew's best-known work, are two men excavating the machinations of their failed relationship, not to mention their own identities.

In both dramas, as in other Yew works, the characters are Asian and gay. For this reason, Yew has sometimes been pigeonholed as an "Asian" or "gay" playwright. Yet he's long been concerned with broader questions of identity and affiliation.

Whatever the particulars of Yew's characters, his essential topic is displacement. Taken together, his plays constitute a complex meditation on what it means to belong, to be at home.

Indeed, that's where this playwright mines the experience of his own East-West journey, turning the personal into the theatrical. "You come to this country and you realize, well, it's

Please see Yew, Page 81.



Yew, in his office at the Mark Taper Forum, where he's a resident artist and helps develop new plays as director of the Asian Theatre Workshop. ROBERT GAUTHIER / Los Angeles Times

everything you read about, isn't it?" he says. "The books, the magazines, the movies, the TV shows. And once you come here, you want everything to be like Disneyland. And then on your third day, you realize it's not."

In "Wonderland," an Asian American man and his immigrant wife grapple with the gap between the myth of the American Dream and the reality. They move to the U.S. with their son, only to have their fantasy of an idyllic life in a house overlooking the Pacific challenged in ways they could never have anticipated.

"Wonderland" was first staged as a play called "Half Lives," and was originally conceived as the third component of Yew's "Whitelands" trilogy, which premiered at East West Players in 1996. Also included in the "Whitelands" trilogy are "Porcelain," which won the 1993 London Fringe Award for best play, and "A Language of Their Own," which had its premiere at L.A.'s Celebration Theatre in 1994 and went on to be staged at the Public Theater in 1995.

While "Whitelands" received praise, critics and others noticed a difference in theme between "Half Lives" and the other two plays, both of which are more specifically focused on gay life and issues.

"I was at a crossroads of aesthetics, and perhaps my political beliefs and something had been ignited in me, and I just couldn't write those small, little gay Asian plays," Yew says. "That in and of itself was a different chapter of my life, and this is now something else. It's a play in and of itself, and a very different one from what I had written in 1996."

Still, the central concerns remain intact. "It's not an unfamiliar story, about people and how they perceive themselves in the American Dream," Yew says. "Wonderland" director Peterson, who staged the premiere of Yew's "Red" last year at Seattle's Intiman Theatre, describes the play as "frankly emotional and structurally formal, like a living poem. It's not realistic at all, especially when you look at it on the page—a lot of it is direct address—but when it's played it seems more realistic."

Other directors also point to Yew's unique voice. "I was intrigued with Chay's command of language—his rhythm and vivid metaphoric style that I have not experienced in any other Asian Pacific playwright or American theater playwright for that matter," says Tim Dang, who directed "A Language of Their Own" at the Celebration Theatre in 1994 as well as "Whitelands" at East West in 1996, and who is also producing artistic director of East West, where Yew is a resident director.

Yet for all the praise his poetics receive, Yew's language is also readily performable. "As an actor, I know all the work has been done for me already," says Eric D. Steinberg, who has acted in Yew's plays and "been directed by him." "The

clues are in the words and the rhythms. That's extraordinarily rare, especially in a contemporary piece."

The older of two children of a father who was a businessman and mother who worked as a civil servant, Yew grew up speaking Chinese and English.

At 16, when Singapore teenagers typically complete high school, Yew applied to and was accepted at Pepperdine University in Malibu. "Leaving was part of that American Dream that all of us had," he says.

Having been to the U.S. on a family vacation the previous year, Yew was eager. In fact, he now looks back on his own youthful idealism with wry self-consciousness. "It was exciting," he says. "It was one of those Barbra Streisand-'Don't Rain on My Parade'-I'm on this big tugboat going to America kind of things.

"But then I realized that I left behind everything, like friends, family, tradition," he continues. "And to this very day, I always say, 'You're doing what you're doing. Be grateful. You can't complain about this.'"

The mixed emotions didn't stop Yew from thriving at Pepperdine, where he studied theater, much to the chagrin of his father, who had encouraged him to pursue business. Then, after two years at Pepperdine, he returned to Singapore to fulfill an obligation to serve in the army.

"For me to leave the country at the time, my father put up a bond of money to ensure my return to do national service," he says.

Back in Singapore, Yew hooked up with a friend who had a company called Theater Works.

The company was looking for someone to write a play about AIDS and protected sex, and Yew took on the project. Unfortunately, what he came up with didn't go over well with the Singapore establishment.

"We had to get plays vetted by the government and the agencies," the playwright says. "And, of course, this play was banned, because it had sympathetic gay characters."

At first, Yew declined to rewrite. But after some thought, he agreed to make changes, seemingly giving the censors what they asked for while continuing to pursue his own agenda between the lines.

"I decided to make the character more effeminate but refused [to make him weak]," he says. "So the dialogue no longer said, 'pro-gay.'"

He won the battle, but not without cost. "So I had my way, and now, of course, I'm put on the government [expletive] list, still," Yew says. "It's hard because you always say, well, it would be great if the country that I came from would embrace me. But it's a myth. So you just let it be what it is, and you keep doing what you need to do."

Yew returned to America in 1988, basically for good, although he did make one trip back in 1989. "My mom says, 'Well, look, your grandmother immigrated too. She came from China to Singapore. The legacy is perhaps for you to move, and you have to find your own happiness'—which is kind of Western, for a Chinese parent. But she let me go. I am

the American son."

He made his way here at a particularly opportune time. Returning to the U.S. just as the vogue of multiculturalism hit the regional theater scene, Yew has emerged quickly as an Asian American voice in the mainstream.

Indeed, such prominence brought him his position at the Taper, where, as director of the Asian Theater Workshop, it's his job to commission writers, to develop new plays and help those works toward production.

For developing his own work, Yew has another creative outlet at East West Players, where he directed last year's staging of "Big Hunk o' Burnin' Love" and will stage David Henry Hwang's

"Golden Child" in January 2000.

"His contribution to the Asian American theater scene has made Los Angeles a destination point for all Asian American writers and performers," Dang says.

Indeed, it may not be the archetypal American Dream, but it's not a bad situation that Yew has created for himself here in his adopted country. "I never expected to end up here, doing all these things," he says. "I didn't expect to be an 'Asian American playwright,' you know. But I realize there's so many stories, and sometimes they need to be told." □

• "Wonderland," *La Jolla Playhouse, UC San Diego campus, La Jolla Village Drive and Torrey Pines Road.*

Opens Wednesday. Regular schedule: Tuesdays-Saturdays, 8 p.m.; Saturdays-Sundays, 2 p.m. Sundays (and opening night), 7 p.m. Ends Oct. 17. \$29-\$39. (858) 550-1010.

Jan Breslauer is a regular contributor to Calendar.