

A drama of China's seizure of the arts

By Douglas J. Keating
INQUIRER THEATER CRITIC

The mid-1990s American political spat over government funding of the arts does not seem to have much to do with the Chinese Cultural Revolution, which sought to eliminate Chinese artistic tradition virtually overnight. But living through the former put Chay Yew into a frame of mind that led him to write *Red*, a play about the latter.

Yew said that he and fellow writers were outraged over proposals by some politicians that, because they found some works funded by the National Endowment for the Arts offensive, the government should eliminate all arts support. Around the same time, Yew recalled that an actress he knew told him the story of her father, a prominent actor who died under house arrest after the Cultural Revolution radically changed the long-established, revered Beijing Opera.

"These things came together, and I got the idea of exploring a world where art just basically disappears," Yew said. The result was *Red*, a play he wrote in 1998 about the antagonistic relationship between a Beijing Opera star and a member of the Cultural Revolution's Red Guard, which opens at the Wilma Theater Wednesday.

If Yew, 36, a Singapore-born Chinese, required the inspiration of political provocation and a friend's story to enter the world of the Cultural Revolution, Jamie H.J. Guan, the choreographer working on the Wilma production, needed nothing but his own memories.

Guan was training to be a member of the Beijing Opera. See **DANCE** on H7

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'Red' tells both sides of story of China's stifling of the arts

DANCE from H1
when the revolution began, and in contrast to the actor whose story helped to inspire *Red*, the revolution gave his career a boost. Speaking over supper during a rehearsal break, Guan said he auditioned for the opera in 1958, when he was 8. "Three thousand tried out, I was one of 70 who were chosen," he said.

The training regime was intense. Guan recalled 12-hour days of schooling, instruction and practice as he learned his specialty of martial-arts dancing. By the time he was 17 and nearly ready to join the opera, the Cultural Revolution was under way. One of its instigators was Jiang Qing, wife of Mao Tse-tung, the country's leader and Communist Party chairman. She was one of the so-called Gang of Four that ran the country in place of the ill Mao.

A former actress, Jiang Qing took charge of the performing arts, got rid of most of the artists, and drastically changed the traditional Beijing Opera programming from pieces about emperors and folk tales to extolling patriotism and communist ideology.

When she was gathering a company to perform, Guan said, Jiang Qing came to his school and chose four students, including him. For the nearly 10 years of the Cultural Revolution,

at the time, and came to like the new revolutionary style of performance.

He also had a strong personal reason for remaining in the reformed opera. Because he worked for the powerful Jiang Qing, he saved his banker father from almost certain harassment, or worse, he said, by the Red Guard. "My father often told me I had saved his life."

When the Cultural Revolution ended in 1976, Guan said, the Beijing Opera gradually returned to traditional stories and style of performance. He remained with the company until 1984, when he married a visiting American and came to this country. He now makes his living as a dancer and choreographer — he recently worked on the Broadway revival of *Flower Drum Song* — and continues his association with the Beijing Opera as its American representative.

Chay Yew came to the United States from Singapore when he was 16, but didn't begin writing plays until he completed college here and returned to his native country to do his compulsory military service. He had acted in college, and started to spend free evenings acting with a small theater company in Singapore.

The company, he said, wanted to stage a play about the impact the AIDS epidemic had on Singapore, but was having trou-

ble government before they can be performed. He was rejected.

"They said my gay character was too sympathetic," Yew said.

By then, Yew had finished his military service and been accepted for graduate studies in the United States, so he gladly left Singapore. Living in England after graduate school, he wrote *Forzezin*, a play about an Asian homosexual accused of murdering his lover, which won a best-play award at the London Fringe Festival and has been produced many times in this country. Several plays later, Yew is a well-regarded theater artist juggling his time between writing, directing and heading the Asian Theatre Workshop at the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles.

If *Red* was conceived as an indictment of government misuse of art and abuse of artists,



Choreographer Jamie H.J. Guan (left), cast member Francis Jue of "Red," at the Wilma. His association with the Beijing Opera gives Guan firsthand knowledge of China's 1960s-70s Cultural Revolution.

Yew said he also was determined to present the positions of both sides in the Cultural Revolution. As he wrote, he became more understanding, if not approving, of the thinking and be-

havior of the Red Guard. "They were young. They didn't want to be bound and defined by traditions," Yew said. "They wanted to forge their own."

"It was so free, so liberating,

and in that fervor so much damage was done."

Contact theater critic Douglas J. Keating at 215-646-6609 or dkeating@phillynews.com.

Theater

Red

Previews today and Tuesday, opens Wednesday and runs through June 22 at the Wilma Theater, Broad and Spruce Streets. Information: 215-646-7824 or www.wilma-theater.org.