

# Playwright Chay Yew Revisits His Own Distant Shore

AN INTERVIEW BY ROB KENDT



CRAIG SCHWARTZ

Chay Yew.

**CHAY YEW HADN'T RETURNED TO HIS NATIVE SINGAPORE** for 13 years — a “voluntary exile” from the country of his birth and childhood, where his first play, *As If He Hears*, was banned for its gay themes.

When he was invited back to Singapore three years ago for an international arts festival, it was a strange sort of homecoming for the Asian American author of *Porcelain*, *A Language of Their Own*, *Wonderland* and *Red*.

“I was home but I wasn't,” Yew recalls in a rehearsal room at the Kirk Douglas Theatre, where his new play *A Distant Shore* is being presented in April and May. “I found I had very little patience for local customs, and I became the ugly American when I demanded ‘Can we do this faster?’ And yet breathing in the thick humid air and speaking in the singsong local dialects, I felt like I never left.”

Being an American abroad after 9/11 gave Yew's return an extra layer.

“I had forgotten what it was like to live in a country filled with so much colonial history,” Yew says. “It brought into bold relief to me the legacy of the British Empire, the notion of how America is perceived today, and issues of globalism and colonialism.”

These observations gave him a fresh angle on an adaptation of Federico Garcia Lorca's *Blood Wedding*, which San Francisco's American Conservatory Theatre had commissioned after his stark rethinking of Lorca's *The House of Bernarda Alba* for the Mark Taper Forum in 2002. He soon found himself crafting a new play that took some inspiration from the love triangle in *Blood Wedding* and was set in an unnamed Southeast Asian country across 80 years of post-colonial change.

“You smell a little bit of *Blood Wedding* in *A Distant Shore*, a tale of inter-cultural romance and exploitation, Yew says. The playwright, who serves as director of the Mark Taper Forum's Asian Theatre Workshop, discusses the complicated emotional and economic topography of *A Distant Shore*.



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Chay Yew with actress Maria Cina in rehearsal for *A Distant Shore*.

**RK:** You haven't named the specific country where *A Distant Shore* is set. Obviously some of it's based on Singapore, though the play's country is Islamic, like Indonesia.

**CY:** The country in the play is probably an amalgamation of Indonesia's economy and politics and Malaysia's geography and history. I wanted to place the play in a country that's Islamic, and not too conservative for Western financial investments. Indonesia, for example. Because of the amount of debt the government has, it borrows from the World Bank, and who controls the World Bank? The Americans do, with a high interest rate. Slavery is a very strong word, but shouldn't we call it what it truly is? Third World people can't afford to have their own lives and they're forever paying the debt that they can never fully repay. Their farms and factories are dictated unfair policies imposed by the IMF and World Bank, mandating them to farm approved produce at certain quotas. They are paid pittance for their labor when there are trade surpluses. These people have no control of their fates. At the end of the day, hungry and tired, they turn to religion which is a powerful opiate. And then we are surprised by radical Islamic hatred of the West? I believe we must share that responsibility as well. The world in which we live is connected, cause and effect, supply and demand.

**But hasn't the experience of the so-called Asian tigers [the growing economies of Taiwan, Hong Kong, South Korea and Singapore] been not so much dependency but jobs and growth?**

It depends who's controlling the growth. If you're talking about Japan or Taiwan—they are definitely tigers. The countries are not in debt and have more control on their economy; they have gained much from the free market and globalization. But there are also tigers that are caged by a different kind of globalization where they get the short end of the stick. 9/11 brought a painful perspective of how people perceive Americans. Going back to Singapore, even cab drivers were extremely knowledgeable about American foreign and economic policies that affected their livelihoods and saying, "I can't believe you guys elected that Bush!" I was surprised. I thought this was an American conversation, but it's a global conversation.

In this play I'm also trying to grapple with why history is often repeated and will things ever change? Do we really think we have control over our destiny when we are just mere players in a play that already has a scripted end that we are not privy to? The fates of most of these people in Southeast Asian countries today are still decided in boardrooms in Rotterdam, New York and London, as they were when they were Dutch and British colonies.

**Is the concept of destiny vs. change different in East Asian cultures — or in Lorca, for that matter — than in America?**

I think in older countries — I would say in Europe, too — the notion of "This is my lot" is pervasive. When people mention, "Oh, that was his fate," it's more about *lot*, and I don't think Americans really understand that concept. The wonderful legacy that America has given the world is the belief that one can change. It's reflected in literature, media and film; we have to have choices or a happy ending. I think if you do a survey of happy endings in American movies and plays, it's probably a very high percentage compared to Asian movies or plays. God knows I came to this country on that promise.

The idea of reincarnation is also explored in the play. The characters from 1924 in Act One return in 2004 in Act Two. Did they learn from their mistakes 80 years ago? Are they still trapped in these patterns? Maybe history is bigger than them and it does repeat itself—but are they going to be swept up by it, or is there a way that they can actually forge change? Or is change another American luxury?

**Colonialism was driven by economics, certainly, but there was also a "dream" attached to it for many Westerners to come to Southeast Asia. What do you think motivates the players in this cross-cultural drama?**

In my opinion, it's more psychological. From personal experience, I have met a cross section of people who go there are either adventurous, unhappy or never felt they fit their own countries. Once they set foot in this beautiful foreign place, it's an exotic wonderland, and they can be whoever they want to be, this other person that they can never be in Des Moines or Calabasas. Given the history of colonialism in Southeast Asia, the Caucasian is automatically given higher status. (Though things are rapidly changing as we speak, given the waning strength of the U.S. dollar and the rising economic pull of the E.U. and China.)

There's also a sense of romanticism and optimism; some English colonialists really wanted to affect positive change in the region. The notion of trying to change something is very arrogant — and admirable. In the heyday of the British Empire, the young officers going to Southeast Asia were fresh graduates from Oxford. They believed it was a duty to the Crown. Of course, it had nothing to do with the Crown; it was all about protecting the spice trade, valuable Asian trade routes and to encourage the fortunes of the East India Company. East India Company was the Halliburton, or even McDonald's of the time. In a strange way, nothing has changed, has it? It just has different names, different faces, except the people who lived in distant shores are no longer passive or quiet as we learned from 9/11. ●