

EDITORIAL FEATURE

Q: RED. WHAT'S IT ABOUT?

A: It's fundamentally a story about a best-selling romance novelist, an Asian Barbara Cartland, who goes to China to research the subject of her next book the complex and ever-evolving relationship between a male Chinese Opera star and a female Red Guard who interrogates him during the Cultural Revolution.

don't have public funding, don't have support for the arts—which I find amazing. It's a sharp contrast to Europe and Asia. I felt a lot of anger.

Q: WHAT ABOUT ANGER AS AN ARTIST'S STARTING POINT?

A: For me, it was the picture of this pompous, ultra-conservative screeching "Look, we're going to control art, we want art to be a certain way. And if you

CONVERSATIONS
WITH RED
PLAYWRIGHT...
CHAY YEW

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Q: WHERE DID THE IDEA COME FROM?

A: It came from many different places. That's usually how my plays originate, never from one source, but from the fusion of many. I think it was originally born out of my immediate response to the American government's, particularly Newt Gingrich's, move to shut down the NEA. I got infuriated because this country is one of the super-powers and one of the richest countries in the world, and yet we

art is contrary to my beliefs and values, we're cutting your funding." In a Democracy, surely this is the purest form of censorship. And, in an ironic way, it's really Communism at work. "There is only one way to view art. There is only one way to do art. The government's way." What about the freedom of speech? The freedom of expression? What was this country built on? Did I forget something? Look at the

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remnants of ancient civilizations. People perish, buildings are demolished, but the art lives on and enriches future generations. It begs the question: What will we hang on the walls of museums thousands of years from now? What will we give our children and descendants? Our economics? Our stupid laws? The fucking Starr Report? I was incensed by the short-sightedness and selfishness of American politicians that use art as a weapon to further their ambitions. With this swirling in my mind, I needed to find a conduit to express my feelings.

Q: THUS RED!

A: Yes. In a conversation with Tsai Chin two years ago [Chinese actress best known to U.S. audiences from the movie *Joy Luck Club*, and more recently David Henry Hwang's play *Golden Child*], she talked about the purging of her father, a famous Beijing opera star, during the Cultural Revolution in China. I said it was the same thing that was occurring in the United States: government controlling art. And she said, "No, it's not. Lives were not lost." She added, "You must know more about the Cultural Revolution. You must read my book!" So I did. (It's a great read, actually—her autobiography *Daughter From Shanghai*.)

And after reading and researching the Cultural Revolution, as I began writing *Red*, I saw it as a metaphor for the way the government in America feels about the arts today.

Q: ACTUALLY, YOU HAVE QUITE A HISTORY WITH GOVERNMENT CENSORSHIP IN THE ARTS. WASN'T ONE OF YOUR FIRST PLAYS BANNED BACK IN SINGAPORE?

A: Yes. That's why I am particularly sensitive about the de-funding of the NEA and the recent controversy that erupted over Terrence McNally's *Corpus Christi*. It was 1988, and I had gone back to Singapore to work with TheatreWorks, a theatre company there. As I studied their season I saw that they had a slot for a play about AIDS, and—fascinated—I said, "Who's writing this play?" And they said, "No one yet." And I said, "Oh. How much does it

pay?" And they said "Five-hundred dollars!" And I said, "I'm writing it."

At the time I was much influenced by Larry Kramer's work. Watching *The Normal Heart* at the Public Theatre was a major turning point in my life—where I realized that theatre could really be socio-politically charged with a rich emotional life. So I decided to use what I learned from Kramer's work in my first play, *As If He Hears*.

Q: SO WHAT HAPPENED?

A: When TheatreWorks submitted the play to the government for vetting [a mandatory practice there], they read it and objected to the main character who was gay. Since I didn't portray him as a limp-wristed, effete character made for ridicule and comedy, it was quite difficult for them to digest.

The play centered on a relationship between this character (a gay social worker) and the model Singaporean male-heterosexual, who gets infected with AIDS from his frequent business trips to Bangkok.

The imbalance, and perhaps inversion, of power that the government perceived in that relationship made them uncomfortable, and they basically said that it was "contrary to their social value system to have a homosexual character portrayed positively onstage."

So they banned it, and I said fuck it, and came back to the States. But then a little while passed and the artistic director of TheatreWorks, Ong Keng Sen [who also directed *A Language of Their Own*, another Yew play at the Public], called me and said that they still wanted to produce *As If He Hears*. Keng said it was important that a play about AIDS be produced in Singapore as AIDS was about to reach epidemic proportions in Asia in the late Eighties. I agreed and did the appropriate rewrites. But what I did, really, was a devious thing. Like one of those "writing exercises" you find in the playwriting manual—"How Not To Write Literally."

Basically I maintained the character's

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homosexuality, but I excised all the Larry Kramer-isms, you know—pounding on a pulpit stuff. Instead, I wrote in subtext. So, in a way, I made him gay—er—he glided onstage with a lisp, but he still had the same integrity and coil. Since he was fey, the audience laughed at the character on first sight. But by the end of the play, they completely empathized with him.

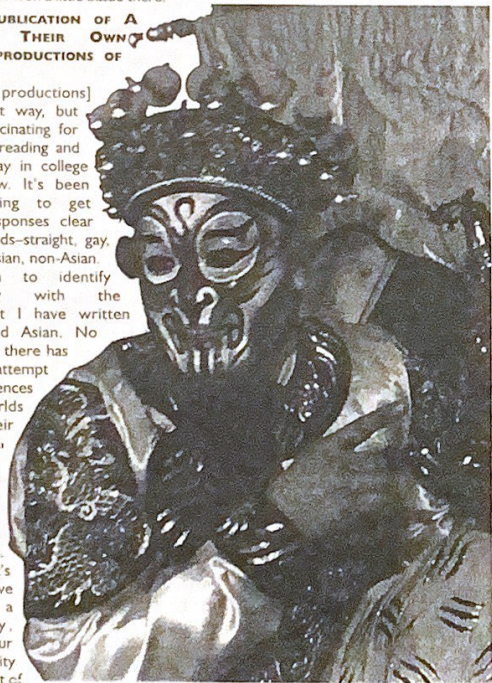
See, when the government had vetted the [re-written] play they couldn't read the...they only read the dialogue. Not between the lines where the characters lived and felt. So, I won a little battle there.

Q: HAS THE PUBLICATION OF A LANGUAGE OF THEIR OWN INSPIRED MORE PRODUCTIONS OF THE PLAY?

A: Some [new productions] came of it that way, but what's been fascinating for me is students reading and studying the play in college classrooms now. It's been really interesting to get enthusiastic responses clear across the boards—straight, gay, male, female, Asian, non-Asian.

They seem to identify wholeheartedly with the characters that I have written about: gay and Asian. No barriers. I think there has been a greater attempt by theatre audiences to enter worlds beyond their racial or sexual demographic. For the last decade, gay theatre has seeped into mainstream. And I think that's what ideally we want as a community, too—to have our own individuality but yet be a part of

the larger society. I see a lot of plays that are written by both gay and straight men that have gay characters, and most of them are pretty fleshed out, and integral to the landscape in which they live. It's like what's happened to most "ethnic" theatre groups. You have Jewish Theatre, Women's Theatre, Deaf Theatre...and next thing you know it finds itself the mainstream. There's no need to have your own ghettos.



Janice H.J. Guan in the traditional Beijing Opera role of "The Monkey King"

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Q: SO WHAT IS THE FUTURE OF ASIAN AMERICAN THEATRE?

A: The first generation of Asian American playwrights, David Henry Hwang, Philip Kan Gotanda and Wakako Yamauchi and others, write about being Asian in America. They posed questions like, "Who are we?," "How do we fit in?" and "Why are we different?" They mostly wrestled with the issues of identity Asian American theatre was also characteristically dominated by the Chinese and Japanese, who were the first Asian groups to arrive in America.

Now we see a new wave of Asian playwrights who hail from different ethnic backgrounds and sexualities, writing with fascinating theatrical aesthetics and a whole new agenda. My contemporaries and friends, Alice Tuan, Diana Son and Han Ong, go beyond the identity question: "Now we know we are, where do we go from here? How do we live with others?" For us, race ceases to be the primary focus. Instead, the Asian characters are fully integrated into the American environment; they are constantly navigating their course through politics, history and humanity.

Q: WHAT ARE THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN WORKING IN SINGAPORE, LONDON AND THE U.S.?

A: When you say you are a writer in Singapore, they look at you as if you have Tourette's Syndrome and smile nicely at you. Then they quickly make a beeline to someone who has a degree in testicular surgery. You don't get respect and can't make a living doing theatre. This is true of China as well. It is common knowledge that actors socially rank the same as prostitutes. The Singapore government doesn't believe in investing in or supporting the arts: even famous stage actors have day jobs. The whole country has been artistically sterile and business-oriented for many years. Now, all of a sudden, they realize that art can be a profit-making business too, so let's have art. I believe a touring production of *Cats* is running over there now.

In London they pat you on the head like they would a child from the Make-A-Wish Foundation and say, "Oh, how delightful. You are an Asian writer, it's so nice to have you on board. We are not sure about grant money but come aboard anyway, let's have us a quick feel."

Over here in the States, it is more like, "It's good you are part of this small group of minority artists. We love your culture and Chinese food. You have lots of issues you can write about—safe, familiar, Mickey Mouse issues that are palatable to us, like immigration. *Joy Luck Club* experiences, and Asian women with bound feet being battered by insensitive, sexless Asian men." There are a lot of these PC things that we are supposed to be angry about. I guess I was angry when I was younger but I think my anger has kind of died, ever since I discovered the joys of therapy and shopping at Barney's. My feeling is let's get over it and let's all write about different things that continually define us as Asian Americans and as Americans.

Q: SHOULD THERE BE SEPARATE THEATRES?

A: In a utopian America, we would not need separate theatres. If any regional theatre could present plays that properly represent their communities instead of their white, middle-class, elderly subscribers, minority theatres will cease to exist. There wouldn't be the one requisite Latino or African American play (if we are lucky) in the season, there would be many. Regional theatres would produce these plays because they are good and worthy. Due to this present inequality, we must continue to have separate theatres to nurture and develop the voices of the Other America. American theatre should not and must not be specified by color or race, but by the universality of human experiences and emotions through the very distinct and varied voices that make up this country.

George C. Wolfe, producer at the

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New York Shakespeare Festival, is a prime example. In his theatre, you see true American theatre at work. You see a theatre committed to producing new work and classic work. You see slices of America that is varied, rich and colorful. It will be the death of American theatre if we see one myopic slice of this country. If American theatre does not address the issues of diversity, it should not exist at all.

My mission as an Asian American playwright and administrator at the Mark Taper Forum is to promote and support Asian American voices in the theatre. I don't believe in theatre that is purely exclusive—meaning Asian American theatres playing only to Asian American audiences. Asian Americans already know the issues in their respective communities, and they come to the theatre to witness their lives and concerns reflected and represented on stage. They come to the theatre to know they are not alone. The stories on Asian American stages should be seen by non-Asians, so that they can understand and appreciate the many similarities and differences our cultures steadfastly share.

Q: IS THEATRE REPRESENTATIVE OF AMERICA, IF NOT HOW CAN IT BECOME INCLUSIVE?

A: I don't think theatre is completely representative of America. It's high time establishment theatres return to and re-examine the communities that surround them. For years now, theatres have been steadfastly complaining about their dwindling, aged subscriber audiences. They must open their eyes to the looming fact that the American landscape has changed significantly in the last decade. These theatres need to cultivate younger and diverse audiences hungry to see their lives and concerns reflected on stage.

The regional theatre's slack has been, in part, taken up by smaller, non-equity and minority theatres. Wonderful work is being presented to a diverse, young and hip audience. However, with the present

shortage of government funding for the arts, these mom-and-pop theatres are quickly and dangerously becoming extinct.

These smaller theatre companies represent the hope and future of theatre, as they are a necessary step in the evolution of American theatre. Many noted American playwrights, including David Hwang, Tony Kushner and Ellen McLaughlin, originated from and were fostered by these theatres to become household names in regional houses. Without these theatres, I fear the eventual devastation of theatre audiences and artists is only imminent.

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