

# How to Remedy Dislocation

## The Hyphenated American

By Chay Yew  
Grove Press  
ISBN 0-8021-3912-4  
PB, \$16.00, 454 pp.

Reviewed by Matthew Graham Smith

There are no circuit boys here. Those expecting Chay Yew's earlier plays, intimate both in subject and tone, dealing almost exclusively with contemporary gay Asian characters will be surprised. The plays in his new collection, *The Hyphenated American*, explode into newer, broader and more wildly theatrical territory. The plays constitute an exciting change, making Yew accessible to wider audiences as he examines America's contradictory messages about identity using historical sources, historical fantasies and a middle-class American family. With these plays, he moves away from the interior worlds of his previous collection toward public exteriors. Although the work lacks his uniquely urgent bedroom whisper, and on the whole are less radical in terms of morality and sexuality, they expand his canvas considerably with new subjects, welcome revisionist politics and inventive new aesthetics.

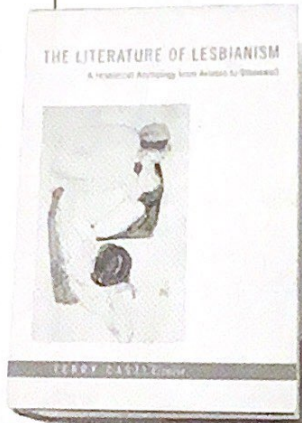
In *Wonderland*, the last and best play in the collection, Yew completes a trilogy exploring the gay Asian experience he began with the previously published *Porcelain* and *A Language of Their Own*. *Wonderland* is a mighty operatic tragedy of the American Family in the tradition of Arthur Miller and Eugene O'Neill. *Wonderland* purposely abandons the fresh keyhole-peeking character studies of the trilogy's previous two plays, instead sculpting its figures in a more archetypal mode. He focuses on a family with a gay son (rather than relationships between urban gay men), who must face the contradictions of living as "hyphenated Americans." They believe in the equality of American privileges, yet are routinely denied access to those privileges in basic ways.

*Wonderland* is the story of an Asian-American family, Man, Woman, Son, and their dreams for the future, personified by

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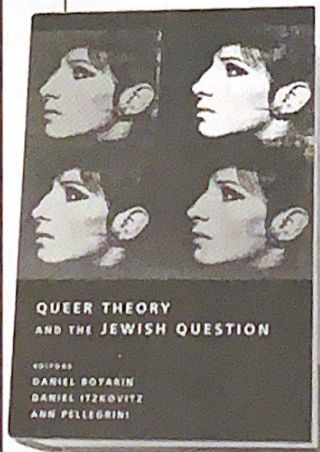
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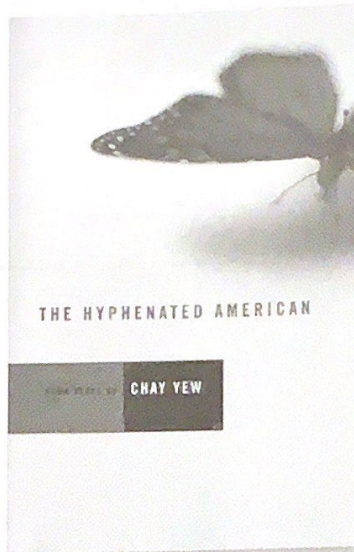
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the narrator, a Young Man, who we know is the adult the Son will become. Man, an architect, dreams of building skyscrapers and monuments, yet settles for building giant shopping malls like the eponymous *Wonderland*. Woman, a determined immigrant from Singapore, longs to live the lifestyles portrayed in her favorite American films and TV shows, hoping her family will resemble *Leave It to Beaver*. Then the tragedy: *Wonderland* mall collapses because of Man's cost-effective compromises, ensuring he will never design another building. Son, a fiercely resolute teen, proudly accepts his gay identity and leaves his rejecting family for life on the street that spirals into prostitution. The tragedy locks into place like a perfectly constructed trap until the Young Man's final speech in which the play's audience is directly implicated (or empowered) as participants in choosing representations of American identity.

The play has the weight of one of Miller or O'Neill's classics—an ode to the hopes and damaged reality of the American family. Yet the characters here are all Asian Americans and Son is a gay man whose coming out is a symbol of the freedom of American individuality. Suddenly, the subjects of Asian



immigrant drag queen, *Miss Visa Denied*. The scenes proceed in a nonlinear spiral, playing with tonal and modal counterpoints. Yew places a scathing yet campy 1941 infomercial, "How to tell your friends from the Japs," next to a poignant buddy scene portraying the friendship between Yoshi, a Japanese-American interned during WWII, and Ralph Lazzo, "the only Mexican-American interned during WWII." The emotional palates of these scenes exist in opposite spheres, yet together they deepen the kaleidoscope of Yew's America. By jamming drastically different styles up against each other he awakens the senses to the revelations and historical limitations of dramatic genres to portray identity. He uses classic American vaudeville form to depict 1870s stereotypes of Chinese immigrants, and utilizes mime and a cappella to distance us

from the graphic details of the 1871 Negro Alley Massacre of Chinese immigrants in Los Angeles. At one point, he even revisits the same massacre as "an Isadora Duncanesque dance" by white women members of the Friends of Asia society, played by men in drag, "to the music from the movie *Titanic*... which is

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American identity, gay identity, assimilation and freedom are thematically harmonized to create a fresh, stunningly honest and deeply heartfelt portrait of an American family. The play's emotions feel so true that even non-Asian readers will identify with the family and see that Yew's writing about the Asian-American experience reveals something profound about all Americans in a place that is increasingly hyphenated, isolated, complicated and fragmented. *Wonderland* is irresistible in its compassion and undeniable in its redrawing of the American family and its struggle.

*Wonderland* and the collection as a whole asks a question that concerns all minority groups and conservatives alike: Who gets to be an American? Immigration checkpoint scenes appear in several plays, and there is an unforgettable image of a man peering from an airplane porthole at a vast ocean. Yew's characters all experience dislocation of some sort, or as he says in *Red*, "Asians who have no idea what their histories are/ These Asian Americans are never Asian enough/ never American enough/ Straddling two worlds/ that have no place for them."

Yew's work is partly an effort to remedy that dislocation. In *A Beautiful Country*, Yew presents an A-Z docudrama of Asian-American history and contemporary essays about Asian-American experience created in collaboration with members of the Los Angeles Chinatown community. The project is a multimedia, theatricalized nonfiction collage-cabaret hosted by an

reminiscent of the hippos dancing ballet in Disney's *Fantasia*." His radical experiments with form, and especially his use of camp, transform historical events and re-map today's reality of an American identity in ways that are both profound and entertaining.

*Red* cuts between the Communist China theater world and the American literary marketplace, drawing comparisons between government censorship and free market colonialism. Yew follows a fiction writer on her return to China as she learns about the complexities of identity representation and the dangers of burning one's past. The play dwells heavily on straightforward lessons, but presents one of the fiercest relationships in the entire collection, between a young Communist and her gay mentor, whom she worships and then, ultimately, betrays. At their weakest moments, the plays in this collection veer toward preaching progressive politics; at their best, they embody, with perfect economy and invention, the new characters of a new America.

**Matthew Graham Smith** is a writer, director, and performer. He is the author of the play *Strip*, winner of Best New Student Play award from Primary Stages in NYC.