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Chay Yew on Marcus Gardley's *Black Odyssey*, which premieres tonight

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Chay Yew is a hot director who was in the news a year or two ago when he took over Chicago's acclaimed Victory Gardens Theatre and made several controversial changes. The strife at the time, according to the *New York Times*

, "recalls family melodramas like

August Osage County

or even

King Lear

(minus the murders)." Yew reconfigured the theater's celebrated Playwrights

Ensemble, retiring such eminent names as Nilo Cruz (

Anna in the Tropics

, seen at the Aurora Fox in 2007) and John Logan, who wrote

Red

(recently given a terrific production by Curious Theatre) and replacing them with

four hot new writers. One of these writers was Samuel D. Hunter, whom Denver

audiences will remember for

The Whale

, a play that premiered at the Denver Center Theatre Company, went on to critical

acclaim in New York and was produced by Yew in Chicago last year. Another was

Marcus Gardley, who was in Denver for last year's New Play Summit, when his

Black Odyssey

was workshopped. Now the full production -- directed by Yew -- will open at the

Denver Center tonight.

See also:

[**Marcus Gardley debuts *Black Odyssey***](#)

[***at New Play Summit***](#)

"Marcus and I have known each other for seven long years," Yew says. "I have directed and workshopped his plays for many other venues. I love his writing. I feel he is passionate about politics, history and poetry, and has a sense of contemporary theater that speaks to every American. When we work together, it always feels like old friends coming together."

Last year, **Gardley told me how he helpful** he'd found his experiences at the Summit: "The Denver Center, unlike most theaters in the country, lets you write what you want to write, encourages you to think big and outside the box, and has the resources to support a big production," he said at the time. "I think the play has really taken off and become better."

Today, Yew echoed that. "Denver definitely has huge resources without which I would never have been able to do this play," he says. "It's a wonderful thing; it's great to be out here and explore a different part of Marcus Gardley. You have to be a kind of Nancy Drew going through this process. At the Summit I would have some point-blank questions and he would come back with a new draft and further the conversation.

"The way the story's being told is a weave of stories," he continues. "I think, given movies, MTV and the Internet, we tend to think faster. In that way, Marcus has tapped into the contemporary consciousness of how we tell stories, the notion of playwrights sampling things, taking new things and making them their own."

Yew describes

Black Odyssey

as a mix of the realistic and the poetic: "It's like entering a fever dream, and the fever dream is America. All you do is follow it like a yarn. There's something wonderfully old-fashioned there, even though there are many different tropes."

The play deals with a soldier after the Gulf War of the early 1990s, and his thirteen-year odyssey returning home. The war, says Yew, is "an event, but not the crucial event of the play." The focus is on "his own personal odyssey, finding out who he is as an African-American and a man."

Yew himself has some military background: He grew up in Singapore, which has compulsory service for young men. It was "kind of a bitch," he says. "And it informs me as a director. I bark." He laughs, then adds, "But if you get to know me, you know my bark is worse than my bite: We'll take this beach together, people. We don't make enough money in the theater to be working with mean people."

A persistent criticism of Gardley's past work has been that while the language is exciting, there's often a kind of formlessness to the plays. Gardley started out as a poet, Yew observes, "and the early plays are more free in structure. But this particular piece is actually taking

The Odyssey

that we know of, one of history's most dramatically structured pieces. So he has something to hang the play on. Then there's me and the others in the room -- and we always have dramatic questions."

"You see all aspects of our history reflected in the play. In 2014, it's no longer just a black or Asian or Latino story; we're all American and hungry to learn more about what it means to be an American," Yew says. "As a country, we need to know this history -- and what better place than the theater to bring it alive? Once we forget the things we fought for, the people who died for us, it can all be taken away quickly. I feel it's easy to get into our own personal silos, zip codes, blocks. We still strive to figure out how to live with each other. But other countries are figuring out about race, and we did a lot of that fifty years ago. We are doing a little better, but I think that's a continual challenge.

"I'm looking to younger generations," he concludes. "They tend to glom onto that a little faster. If we don't open the doors to younger people, the stories will die off. If they're just chained to iPads and iPhones, where do we get a sense of community?"

Black Odyssey

runs January 17 through February 16 in the **Space Theatre** at the Denver Performing Arts Complex. For show times and tickets, call 303-893-4100 or go to denvercenter.org.

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