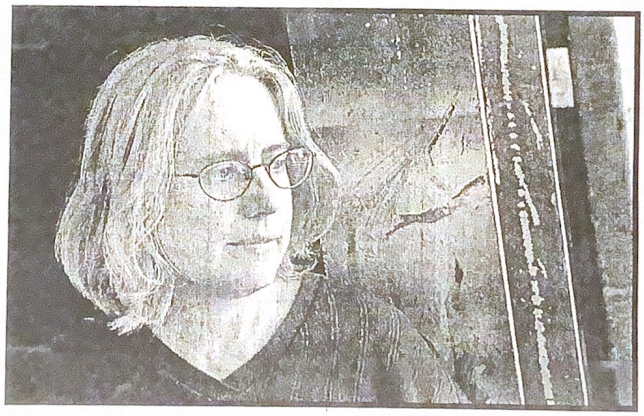
The San Diego Union-Tribune.

Sunday
September 19, 1999

american dreamer

AT LA JOLLA PLAYHOUSE, CHAY YEW EXAMINES THE 'WONDERLAND' OF HIS ADOPTED COUNTRY

story by jennifer poyen, arts critic



Stages of life: *Playwright Chay Yew (above) meditates on the dark side of the American dream in his new work, "Wonderland." Says the play's acclaimed director, Lisa Peterson (left): "I believe in Chay's voice."*

Three years ago, playwright Chay Yew was working on "Half Lives," the last play in a trilogy commissioned by Los Angeles' East West Players, when he realized something wasn't quite right.

The first two plays, "Porcelain" and "A Language of Their Own," explored the loneliness and alienation of two sets of gay couples straining for intimacy in their relationships and acceptance in society. But when Yew turned to the third installment, about a Chinese-American family's American dream-turned-nightmare, he found himself in an antagonistic relationship with his characters.

"They were very hard," said Yew, relaxing in flip-flops, rolled-up pants and an untucked T-shirt after a recent rehearsal at the La Jolla Playhouse, where an updated version of that play, "Wonderland," opens Wednesday.

"After three years, when I came back to it, I understood them better. I understood acceptance, which is important in the story. I don't wanna go all Shirley MacLaine or anything, but I feel like it's a new play that had a previous life. It's become much bigger than the other plays in the trilogy, and it's a collaboration with (director) Lisa Peterson. We keep pushing each other, and it's frightening, because we don't know what we have yet. It's like a child — will it be good or bad?"

How children grow up — and whether they are judged good or bad — is a central theme in "Wonderland," whose four characters bear the archetypal, somewhat ominous names Man, Young Man, Woman and Son.

Young Man, a grown-up version of Son, narrates the movie-within-a-play that's based on the lives of the other three. Each is struggling, in a different way, for a sense of identity in a culture that rejects them. And while Yew has dismissed autobiography as "self-indulgent" and answers questions about his own family in careful terms, the struggles between father and son strike some of the play's most poignant notes.

"I don't think it's strictly autobiographical, but at heart, the issues of a son and his parents are Chay's," said Peterson, a friend and colleague of Yew's. (Peterson is resident director at the Mark Taper Forum, where Yew is director of the Asian Theatre Workshop.) "It feels like an Arthur Miller story, with the father-son issues, the mother-son issues, and the danger, the seductive power of the American dream.

"The emotions running through the play are very, very true. I really feel he knows what he's writing about."

California dreamin'

Yew was a 16-year-old Singaporean, born of Chinese parents and bred on American pop culture, when he got his own first, real taste of the American dream. A creatively inclined bookworm in a totalitarian state — where strong students are streamed into scientific careers and artists must pass a political smell test to survive — he was happy when his father suggested he go to a university abroad.

"He would have preferred it if I'd chosen to go to England, since Singapore's a former British colony and we tend to look to Britain for education and culture, but I was interested in America," Yew said. "There was no culture shock. It was like a second skin."

He ended up at Pepperdine University, one of two schools (the other was the University of South Carolina) that would accept such a young foreign student.

"I thought, get killed or lead a beach life, so I went to Los Angeles," said Yew, who is gay.

It wasn't until he lived stateside for a while that he began to see a dif-

ferent America — the darker, deeply conservative forces underlying the liberal, hedonistic images that Hollywood churns out for international consumption. And he was struck by "the great irony of democratic capitalism" — that the single-minded pursuit of economic riches engenders a kind of groupthink that runs counter to the pursuits of art: examining and questioning the ways in which we live and the choices we make.

"At 19, I went to see Larry Kramer's 'The Normal Heart' at the Public Theater (in New York), and I realized that you can tell stories in a small room and just blow people away," Yew said. "On the other hand, it's really hard to reach a lot of people with your point of view."

A self-described member of the TV generation, Yew is keen on pop culture. His speech is peppered with references to television, celebrities and mainstream movies, and "Wonderland" draws heavily on iconic Americana.

"I remember watching 'Charlie's Angels' and thinking I wanted to live in that world," Yew said. "My notion of the American dream was to have your own little American sitcom."

His notion of the perfect American life has changed, but the lure of Hollywood remains. But so far, "Nightshifts," a late-night television series in Boston, is his only venture into the popular arts.

"TV is calling, and eventually I may have to give in. I mean, I need health insurance. I would like to buy a house," Yew said with a sigh and a shake of the head. "My dad says, 'You know what happened to Van Gogh. He ended up with one ear, no one loved him, he died poor and long after that, some Japanese guys paid millions for his work.' But I want my voice to count. That's what I've been able to do in the theater.

"For me, now, the American dream is the bare stage. In other words, it's basically nothing but an opportunity to do what you want. I may fail, but you know what? It's cool. I didn't come to this country at 16 to sit in the audience. I don't want a half life."

His first play, "As If He Hears" (1989), was initially banned as "socially unacceptable" in his native land because its gay protagonist was both too sympathetic and too straight-looking for the governmental authorities' tastes. At first, he refused to change the play. But a friend at Singapore's Theatreworks, which had commissioned the work, persuaded him to persevere.

"That experience taught me the wonderful art of subtext," said Yew, who rewrote his character with a stereotyped "flamer" veneer. "The government didn't bother to read the stage directions and let it pass. At first, the audience laughed at the character. Halfway through, they laughed with the character and by the end, they were empathetic."

It also opened Yew's eyes to the dangers of censorship, not just in totalitarian regimes, but in America, as well. Heavily influenced by fellow playwright Tony Kushner ("Angels in America"), Yew has begun to see the theater as an agent of change, not just a temple of art.

"For me, being banned was like a Nancy Drew mystery — I could leave. But for anyone who has to live under that regime, it's horrible," Yew said. "I tell my writers: 'You have to fight for your point of view. It's your right, but you have to fight

FRED GREAVES

All in the family: *Young Man (Joel de la Fuente, right) frames a scene between a younger version of himself, Son (Alec Mapa), and his mother, Woman (Tsai Chin), in "Wonderland."*

for it to keep it.'

"OK, I'm being perverse now," he added, as if choosing a different path that nonetheless leads to the same mountaintop, "but I wish that one day theater could be obliterated, that we will have learned all those lessons of the past. It's really sad to me that thousands of years after Euripides, we still need lessons about war."

Theater school

His "Whitelands" trilogy deals in more contemporary lessons — about perceptions of ethnicity, questions of sexual orientation, injuries of bigotry and struggles for acceptance. Yew tends to tell stories that explore life's darker side: "Porcelain," the first of the trilogy, centers on a gay man who murdered his lover in a public toilet; his most recent play, "Red," tells the story of a legendary opera singer who is persecuted by a former pupil during Mao's cultural revolution.

Peterson, who directed the "Red" premiere at Seattle's Intiman Theatre, is less optimistic than Yew that theater can change the world. But it's still, as she put it, "the room we go to as a community to ask the tough questions about what it means to be alive." And she's determined to help bring new work — especially by experimental writers — to the stage.

A former musician, she tends to approach a play as a piece of music that needs to be scored. For "Wonderland," the dark timber of the characters' words and actions is offset by "curlicues of wicked, campy humor" that wafts around the stage similar to how grace notes might inhabit a dramatic orchestral score.

"I believe in Chay's voice," Peterson said. "And I love the fact that with new plays, there is no map, no history, that tells you what it should be. I love to uncover the world of a new play."

So, too, does Yew, who likens the experience of making theater art to falling in love, for a while, with another world.

"Theater people are serially promiscuous," Yew said with a laugh. "I'm never going to be an astronaut, but I can create one in my mind and live there, or bring it to life on stage, for a time.

"In the end, you know what? You're still not an astronaut. But at least you've been to outer space for a little while."