

Chay Yew Aims for a Victory

The celebrated playwright and director discusses his new position as artistic director of Chicago's Victory Gardens Theater.

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Chay Yew

"There is a great vitality in the Chicago theater community," says Chay Yew, who recently took over as artistic director of Victory Gardens Theater, and is directing its production of *Ameriville*, which begins previews on January 27. "There are over 300 theaters, and each is distinctive in purpose and aesthetic."

Yew is clear about what he sees as his own place within the Chicago scene. "I came to Victory Gardens because of the theater's mission and passion for developing new plays and diversity," he states. "These were the same two tenets that have exemplified my entire life in the theater as playwright and director." Indeed, Yew is well known as a champion of voices that do not always get heard. His own plays, such as *Porcelain* and *A Language of Their Own*, were among the first to deal with the complex intersection of Asian ethnicity and gay sexuality. He also authored the moving documentary theater piece, *Question 27, Question 28*, which relates heretofore untold stories of Japanese Americans who lived through forced internment within the U.S. during World War II.

As the former director of the Asian Theatre Workshop at Los Angeles' Mark Taper Forum, he helped to develop Asian American writers and their plays -- several of which are represented in the anthology Yew edited, *Version 3.0: Contemporary Asian American Plays*, which was published by TCG last year. "It's inspiring and exciting to see the amazing diversity and breadth of theatrical styles and aesthetics, voices and points of views buttressed against each other," he says about the volume.

Yew hopes to achieve something similar at Victory Gardens. "I intend to build on the theater's mission and give a new generation of American playwrights an artistic home," he states. "I'm interested in building bridges, creating dialogue, and representing the myriad cultural communities in Chicago."

For his first directorial project at the theater, he chose a piece he helped develop with the New York-based performance poetry ensemble, Universes, and which was seen at the Under the Radar Festival in New York City in 2010.

"I thought *Ameriville* would be an ideal work to start my tenure," he says. "Using Hurricane Katrina as a prism, it explores the pressing issues of our nation. From foreign wars to global climate change, from racial and class politics to the exploitation antics of business conglomerates, from health care, housing, unemployment to immigration and education, this theatrical work takes you on a tour of contemporary America, and asks us, 'Where do we Americans go from here as a nation?'"

What seems to excite Yew about the performance is how relevant the piece seems right now. "As we bore silent witness to the fires in Tahrir Square, the cries from the Wisconsin budget repair bill and the Syrian protests, and the passions of the Occupy Wall Street movement, one thing is clear: This is a time for change," he states. "And Chicago is not immune. Our democracy and citizenship is never a given; it is constantly challenged and we must act as Americans. One small way is to vote, and to vote for the betterment of our nation. I can't ask for a better work to start our audiences thinking about the questions *Ameriville* poses for this election year."

http://www.theatermania.com/chicago/news/01-2012/chay-yew-aims-for-a-victory_48460.html