

at Intiman

Red — A World Premiere

Red plays at Intiman August 28 to September 26

The Cultural Revolution that swept through China, bringing about ten years of political upheaval, social chaos and economic crisis — along with the purging of almost *three million* artists, intellectuals and political dissidents — began not with a political attack, but with an artistic one.

A play written by Wu Han was seen as a thinly veiled attack on Chairman Mao, who was at the time also the subject of satirical barbs in the *Peking Evening News*. Wu would quickly confess "the error of his ways," but Peng Zhen, the mayor of Beijing, rebuffed Mao's demand that he publicly criticize the play. Sensing a building threat to his leadership and eager to revitalize the party with a new revolutionary spirit, Mao secured the support of the army, established the Cultural Revolution Small Group and swiftly purged Peng Zhen.

While the Cultural Revolution provides the backdrop for Chay Yew's stunning new play, *Red*, the playwright initially found himself inspired by artistic attacks closer to home. "There was all this talk about

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the de-funding of the National Endowment of the Arts, and I was very angered by it," said Yew, "the notion of censorship based on moral, religious and ethical issues." Coinciding with Yew's concern about the NEA was a request from the great Chinese-American actress Tsai Chin that he write a play for her. "Her father was a great opera star who was purged during the Cultural Revolution. He died while under house arrest, and her mother was beaten to death. I told her that I thought what was happening with the NEA was like the Cultural Revolution, and she said "No!" it was nothing like it, the purges, the lives destroyed." But I did some research, and I did find some similarities in art being influenced by the government."

In this period where whole forms of artistic expression were banned and their creators ruined, Yew found the perfect vehicle for his own concerns about art in America today. When Hua-Wai Mun, a Beijing Opera star who suddenly finds himself on the wrong side of the revolution eloquently tells his accusers:

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he could just as easily be making an impassioned defense of the NEA.

"When art and politics go head-to-head in Chay's superb new play," said Intiman Artistic Director Warner Shook, "the results are indeed life-changing, both for the characters and the audience." This is because Yew goes beyond polemics to tell a deeply moving tale of resilience in the face of adversity, of ties that bind across time and political opposition. "What's attractive about Chay's writing," said Lisa Peterson, who returns to Intiman after staging last year's world premiere of *Tongue of a Bird*, "is that it combines historical scope—it has a kind of big size—with a very personal story."

That personal story masterfully weaves together the lives of three people caught up in the shifting tides of history, irrevocably changed by the impossible choices they will be faced with. At the heart of the play is Hua, the great opera star — his performance in *The White-Haired Girl* once brought Chairman Mao to tears — who suddenly finds himself accused of crimes against the state, of using his "little romantic operas to subvert and pollute the masses." Now, he must renounce the art he has devoted his life to and agree to perform in state approved "model" plays, or risk grave consequences. In a cruel twist, he finds himself interrogated by his former protégé, Lin, a young woman who was once eager to learn from the master, but who now finds herself swept up in a revolutionary fervor that must inevitably lead to the destruction of either her mentor, or herself. Observing their clash is Sonja Wong Pickford, a Chinese-American romance novelist — "the Asian Barbara Cartland," as she describes herself — whose desire to write something "important" leads her to researching a biography of Hua. As she becomes deeply enmeshed in the emotional and philosophical struggle she is observing, however, she will learn more about a surprising subject: herself.

Complex and compelling, *Red* unfolds like a mystery, intertwining the past and the present, with dream and reality playing out simultaneously in a decrepit Beijing Opera theatre that may or may not be real. "I think very quickly," said Yew, explaining the structure of his play, which moves from 1966 to the present, shattering time into pieces of a puzzle. "It's just the way I think; multiple things, different time periods all running through my head at the same time. Memories are fragmented, not very linear. My work has never been conventionally structured, but at this point in my life, I'm especially interested in episodic theatre."

Red also provides Yew with an opportunity to write on a broader theatrical canvas than he is usually accustomed to. "A lot of my plays have been produced in 99-seat theatres," admitted the playwright, "and I've always written kind of small. With this play, I wanted to write something with a larger



Chay Yew

scope, on a larger scale." "The theatricality of this play is unique," added director Peterson. "The world that the play inhabits is one that we don't really see that often onstage, the world of Beijing Opera, and it provides a really interesting way of talking about art."

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Intiman audiences already familiar with Chay Yew's writing from the New Voices workshops of his plays, *A Language of Their Own* and *Half Lives*, will be amazed at the continued growth of this remarkable young writer, while newcomers will feel like they've discovered a major new talent. "Chay is a playwright I greatly admire and he has written a wonderful new play," said Warner Shook. "Like *Nine Armenians*, *Smash* and *Tongue of a Bird* before it, this play was developed in our New Voices program, and I am so proud to be giving *Red* its world premiere at Intiman. With future productions already planned in Portland and New York, I know Chay's play will have the long and prosperous life it so richly deserves."

Written by Steve Alter