

# INTRODUCTION

The four plays collected in this remarkable volume demonstrate why Chay Yew, a Los Angeles-based playwright, is at the forefront of American theater. Chay Yew's theater brings to the foreground the lives and experiences of those he calls the "hyphenated American," people who live at the intersection of multiple and overlapping worlds: Asia and America, citizenship and exile, migration and home. The hyphenated American also describes those for whom the nomenclature "American" needs to be further marked by yet another term. In most cases in Yew's world this other term is "Asian." While an earlier generation of Asian-American playwrights, artists, and activists felt it necessary to name themselves and their work and movement "Asian-American," Yew feels it necessary to call the stability of "Asian-American" itself into question. Yew's theater sets out to unsettle our comfort with the normative world of Asian-America. He writes plays that while informed by the traditions of Asian-American theater, set out to move that tradition forward. "It's your turn now, go make history," an elder character tells a younger one in *Red*, one of the plays published in this volume, in an emotionally charged scene marking the shift from one generation to another. *The Hyphenated American* captures this sense of history in the making; it is a dynamic collection of plays showcasing the dramaturgical versatility of Chay Yew's theatrical vision.

Chay Yew is the generational and artistic heir to such prominent Asian-American playwrights as Philip Kan Gotanda, David Henry Hwang, and Velina Hausa Houston whose work began appearing in the early 1980s. These important and still relevant foundational writers, often named "first generation" Asian-American playwrights, provided the vocabulary for self representations of Asian-American experience on stage and thereby helped shape

the political and artistic space within which Yew's work would later emerge. He no longer carries the burden of representation that these earlier playwrights faced. Yew's work is less bound to positive images of Asian-Americans and less interested in explaining what it means to be "Asian-American" to others. In this sense, it is important to note that Yew is also the generational peer of midcareer playwrights such as Suzan-Lori Parks and José Rivera whose interest in artistic innovation and formal experimentation departs from traditional realist forms. These playwrights are also "hyphenated Americans" in that they emerge from particular U.S. racial and cultural minorities. But it would be a mistake to think that their dramaturgy only ruptures traditional ideas of African-American theater, Latino theater, or Asian-American theater. These playwrights challenge us to reimagine American theater, and by extension, American culture. In other words, the hyphen works on the terms on both of its sides. In Yew's plays, for example, we are asked to rethink not simply what is "Asian-American" but more broadly what might constitute "American."

In *Red*, for example, the protagonist Sonja Wong Pickford, an established and immensely successful writer of ethnic romance fiction, decides to return to the China of her youth in order to break out of a pattern of predictability and write something new, something with more weight and importance. Rather than recirculate yet another set of Orientalist tropes for her both white and Asian-American audiences, Sonja decides to embark on a creative journey that will transform her sense of self. Sonja's success in America might stand in for the success of an earlier model of Asian-American experience. But rather than dwell on how Sonja has maneuvered through American culture, Yew brackets her narrative of migration and exile to tell the story of Master Hua, a star of the Beijing Opera, who during Mao's Cultural Revolution fought to preserve his theater and his art form. Amidst a climate of cultural suppression and censorship, Hua's efforts to sustain the traditions of a historic but fragile cultural practice re-

mind Sonja of the serious political stakes involved in artistic practice. Sonja's interest in Hua's story is shaped by an increasing need for her to come to terms with her past. Sonja's journey from China to Hong Kong to America and then back to China is haunted by a troubled history of political and personal betrayals. Written in response to the U.S. culture wars of the late 1980s and early 1990s, *Red* asks us to consider the role of the arts in our own society. What is the function of art in a time of cultural conservatism? Are the arts primarily a means of entertainment and leisure or might they help us to imagine and articulate a more just world? *Red*, which is framed by Sonja's perspective, asks its audiences to attend to the lessons of history and the role of the artist to shape history.

*Scissors*, Yew's exquisite short one-act play about two characters living through the Great Depression of the 1930s, cuts through the racial barriers that keep white and Asian America separate. Set in New York immediately after the crash of the stock market, *Scissors* concerns two older men, one "Asian" and one "American," who meet for a ritual haircut. Yew fleshes out the often-demeaning trope of the Asian worker who must serve the white master—"the Asian houseboy" stereotype—so that the connection between these men becomes profound and lasting. The two characters, named A and B to signal that the play will not dwell on their personal pasts, but rather rely on their own shared history of friendship and their ritual of the scissors to preserve the dignity of their lives. This intragenerational alliance is in stark contrast to the intergenerational tension between parents and children. The economy of the dialogue between these two men calls attention to the possibility of friendship and community across racial identities. Despite intensifying economic constraints and sustained inequities of power, A and B are able to forge ahead together through mutual affection and respect.

*A Beautiful Country* is a collaboration between Chay Yew and Cornerstone Theater, a Los Angeles-based company that accord-

ing to its mission, “builds bridges between and within diverse communities.” The play recovers a history of Asian-American immigrant experience through dance and drama. *A Beautiful Country* chronicles a 150-year history of Pan-Asian immigration and exile to the United States; from Filipino migrant workers in the 1930s to Hmong refugees in the 1970s and 1980s; from the effects of the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Acts to the internment of Japanese-Americans during World War II; from the Negro Alley Massacre in Los Angeles in 1885, where fifteen Chinese men were hanged and four others were shot and stabbed to death during an interracial riot; to recent hate crimes against new Asian immigrants. A multiracial cast, composed of professional actors and community members from the Chinatown neighborhood where the play was presented, performed these stories. *A Beautiful Country* is neither a chronological history play nor a docudrama of Asian-American history. Rather, Yew stages the various contradictions of Pan-Asian American experience, the ways in which racial and national identities are historically constructed. At the heart of the play is the character Miss Visa Denied, a Malaysian drag queen searching for a sense of identity and home. Visa, much like *Red’s* Sonja Wong Pickford, must negotiate the hyphen and work against a cultural logic that positions her as foreign in both Asia and America. After a lifetime framed by the question “Stay or go? Stay or go?” Visa finds respite in Los Angeles. Visa’s final triumph is a tribute to the historical and political legacy of Asian-Americans in the United States and *A Beautiful Country* is Yew’s celebration of this achievement.

Visa’s queerness adds a distinctive and theatrical twist to *A Beautiful Country* and marks Yew’s continuing interest in writing about queer sexuality in Asian-American communities. This theme was introduced in *Porcelain* and *A Language of Their Own*, two earlier plays from Yew’s career that have been previously published by Grove Press. The final play in this collection, *Wonderland*, was initially written as the last play of a trilogy that began

with these earlier works. The trilogy highlights the lives and experiences of queer Asian-Americans and provided one of the first sustained explorations of this theme in American literature. *Wonderland* focuses on a family of three—man, woman, son—who buy into the promise of America only to find themselves destroyed by it. Through a stunning series of moving and poetic soliloquies that help structure the play, we learn of their dreams and aspirations and of their efforts to survive amidst the increasing pressures of life in America. The man, an architect interested in designing “monuments, skyscrapers, concert halls,” instead finds himself building suburban strip malls with impatience and growing apathy. The woman, an ambitious and idealistic new immigrant whose sense of America is disproportionately informed by the films of Elizabeth Taylor, finds herself by the end of the play identifying more with an earlier casualty of Southern California, the imperial mammoths of the La Brea Tar Pits. The son, an adventurous gay teenager, grows increasingly alienated from both of these disconnected parents and finds an alternative home in Hollywood’s subcultural world of drugs, pornography, and the sex industry. Each of these characters must “run far, run free” in an effort to escape the constraints of an increasingly tragic world. “She crossed her ocean, and you crossed yours,” the son acknowledges of the woman in a moment of heartbreaking epiphany. Like most of Yew’s characters, these are people on the move from place to place, sometimes by choice and sometimes not, searching for a sense of home and identity often against the odds. The costs of their migrations are many, all testaments to what we must do to survive in the wonderland we call America.

These are brave and beautiful plays that have moved multiple audiences both in the United States and abroad. I have been fortunate to have seen these productions throughout these past years in Los Angeles, New York City, and Seattle in some of the most accomplished regional theaters in the United States. Each time I am in Yew’s audience, I am impressed by the extraordinary care

of his writing and the innovative theatricality of his plays. Yew's plays are striking both in their poetics and in the audacity of their critique of Asian and American culture. He also has a wicked sense of humor that undercuts the solemnity of some of his themes. This combination of irony and insight, camp and profundity makes reading the plays highly enjoyable. *The Hyphenated American* is an extraordinary achievement by one of America's most gifted playwrights.

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