

# Union-Tribune.

## THEATER REVIEW

# Music Man

Chay Yew mostly gets it right in vocally expressive 'Wonderland'

By Anne Marie Welsh  
THEATER CRITIC

At the opening of Chay Yew's "Wonderland," a narrator ominously named Young Man describes his father at the dawn of his career, winging his way toward Singapore, wondering if his "ancestor Chinese railroad workers made the very same journey across the same ocean almost two hundred years ago."

Quickly, Yew lances the sentiment. No, this will not be another nostalgia trip. The father, an architect, steps forward. He admits his company sent him to Asia to help sell to Chinese clients, but "Thank God it turned out the Chinese there spoke fluent English and they didn't even bow."

Director Lisa Peterson has given Yew's "Wonderland" a truly fine production for La Jolla Playhouse, impressively acted by a cast alive to the rhythmic twists and turns of Yew's language. Here, as in his earlier shocker "Porcelain" and his less effective "A Language of Their Own," Yew creates vocal music, his actors facing the audience more than each other, as if they were singing, or testifying, or declaiming a classic script or Chinese opera.

Tsai Chin plays Woman, whose chopped and broken English counterpoints the quiet eloquence of Man (Sab Shimono), the Asian-American architect she marries soon after they meet in a hotel bar in Singapore. Chin's Woman changes imperceptibly from a greedy, if loving, "sarong party girl," to a pushy Southern California wife, an inveterate

shopper ambitious for her son. When the family dreams disintegrate (too melodramatically and violently for my taste, though in a Tennessee Williams kind of way), it is Woman who learns a triumphant realism, nearly tragic in its resonance.

She's a beautifully detailed character, as "weird" as Son (Alec Mapa) says when she's acting out her Elizabeth Taylor fantasies with him as her Montgomery Clift. Yet she's increasingly sympathetic as the play moves

See **LA JOLLA** on Page E-5

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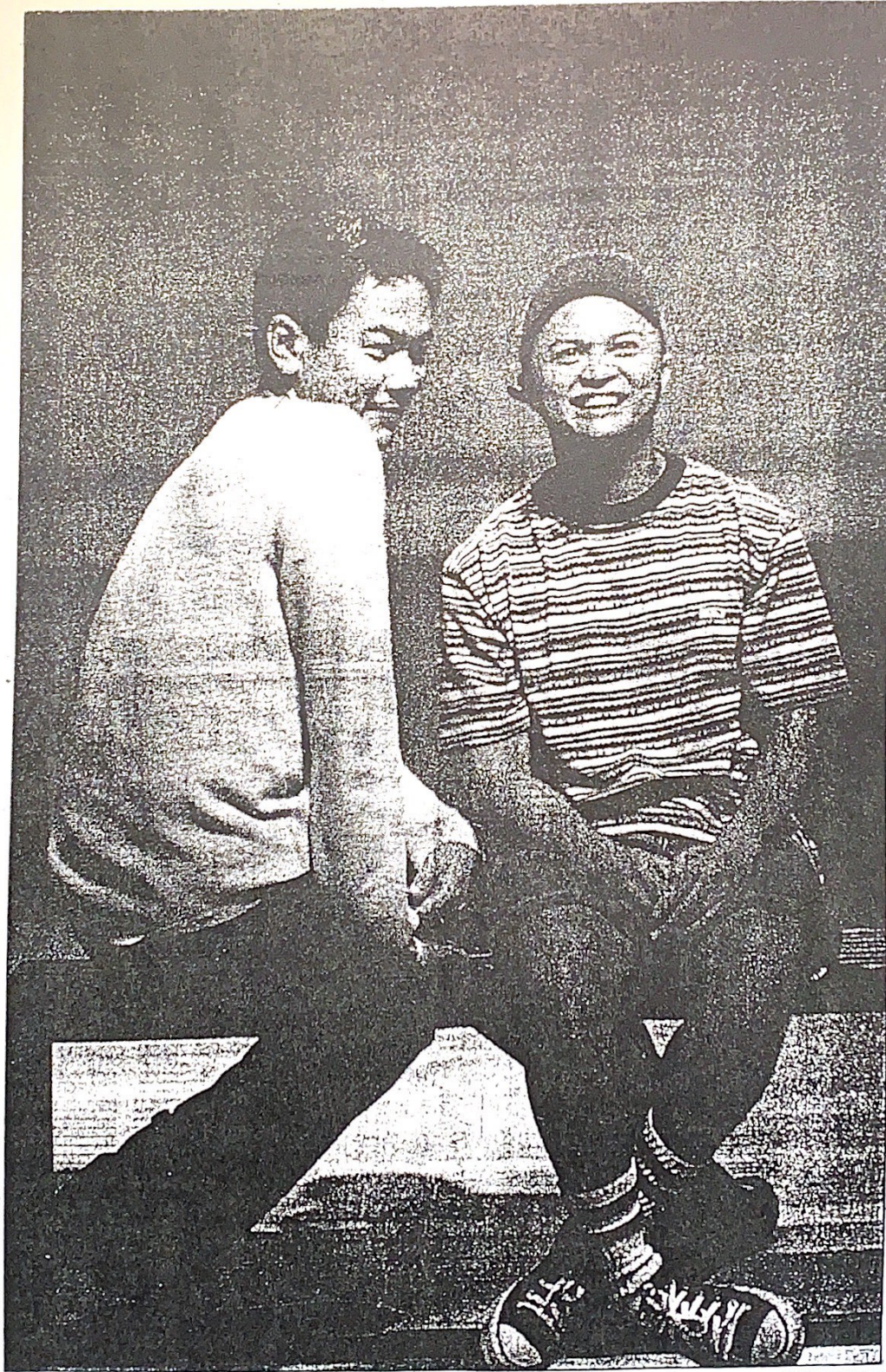
## THEATER REVIEW

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### "Wonderland"

8 p.m. Tuesday-Friday, 2 and 8 p.m. Saturday, 2 and 7 p.m. Sunday, through Oct. 17. Mandell Weiss Forum, La Jolla Playhouse, UCSD campus. \$19-\$39. (619) 550-1010.

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RUSSELL CALDWELL

**Golden states:** In Chay Yew's "Wonderland," Alec Mapa (right) returns to La Jolla Playhouse as Son, a Malibu beach kid, with Joel de la Fuente as Young Man.

# La Jolla

Chay Lew ventures into 'Wonderland'

*Continued from E-1*

on, her innate exuberance still shining at the end.

Yew directs the Asian-American theater lab at L.A.'s Mark Taper Forum, where Peterson is director-in-residence. There's a seamlessness about the staging that suggests the best kind of collaboration: It's difficult to know where playwright ends and director begins, so deeply has Peterson gone beneath the skin of Yew's riff on the American Dream Gone Bad genre.

Instead of Miller's "Death of a Salesman," Sam Shepard's "Angel City" or David Mamet's "Glengarry Glen Ross" from an immigrant point of view, Peterson found what's strongest in Yew's writing: its confident, darting movement from poetic lyricism and intense emotion to street smarts, its veiled longing of parents to know their children, and children to be accepted.

Mapa's Son is a sensitive smart-aleck, thoughtful enough to appreciate his father's soulful secret, the "golden carpet" of every sunset gloriously reflected on the ocean, yet hip enough to sling slang and campy undercuts. A knockout in last year's "Dogeaters" at the Playhouse, Mapa is here most effective as the childish Son, a beach kid in baseball cap forced to play the bored leading man to his mother's Liz. They even call their Malibu Beach home "Sandpiper."

Later, when Son is literally on the run, Mapa's performance becomes more tentative and mannered.

Shimono brings lovely dignity and subtlety to his role as Man. His character is a lover of the Old Testament, a Christian whose belief is not shaken even as his life falls apart. Having rejected his gay son with a quotation from Leviticus, he later seeks what he has lost in the secular



RUSSELL CALDWELL

**Family dreams:** Singapore-born Woman (Tsai Chin) and her husband, the long-time American called Man (Sab Shimono), imagine an accomplished future for their son.

hell of Hollywood strip shows. Yet neither father nor son can reach out. In such scenes, "Wonderland" achieves an emotional truth that Yew elsewhere deflects.

The reminiscences from Arthur Miller especially — even to specifics of plot — are probably intentional, though Yew's invocation of the American Dream wears thin, especially when his language sinks to cliché or fills with repetitions. There are other problems too. Scenes of Son on the casting couch are familiar, either laugh-getters or horror stories that feel tacked on to please an audience, not move the drama.

There's at least one false ending. And by framing the story of these four as a screenplay narrated by aspiring writer Young Man, Yew raises questions about autobiography and art that he's unwilling to explore. We understand the author Young Man to also be the real-life son of the real-life man who is the model for Man in the screenplay. But is Young Man the grown version of Son in the screenplay, and if

so, why do they seem so utterly different?

The framing device thus creates a very difficult role for Young Man, here played appealingly by Joel de la Fuente. Mostly he's a narrator, mixing florid or funny descriptions of the family and their setting with movie technique talk: montage, tilt, dissolve, smash cut. The device doesn't quite work.

Yew may be avoiding the emotional transparency he needs to truly distinguish himself, but in Peterson's good hands, with Rachel Hauck's austere beautiful set, Geoff Korf's lighting and Mark Bennett's unobtrusive music, "Wonderland" delivers a compelling and very often original evening of theater. The future looks very bright indeed for Chay Yew.

Writer: Chay Yew. Director: Lisa Peterson. Set: Rachel Hauck. Costumes: Joyce Kim Lee. Lighting: Geoff Korf. Music and Sound: Mark Bennett. Dramaturg: Elizabeth Bennett. Cast: Tsai Chin, Joel de la Fuente, Alec Mapa, Sab Shimono.

# THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

## OCTOBER 15, 1999

### 'Wonderland' a tragic triumph

**REVIEW:** Powerful writing and a surprising change of tone grace the play about assimilation.

By **PAUL HODGINS**  
The Orange County Register

#### 'Wonderland'

- **When:** Through Sunday. 8 tonight, 2 and 8 p.m. Saturday, 2 and 7 p.m. Sunday
- **Where:** La Jolla Playhouse, 2910 La Jolla Village Drive, La Jolla
- **How much:** \$19-\$39
- **Availability:** Good
- **Length:** 2 hours, 10 minutes
- **Suitability:** Adult themes and language
- **Call:** (619) 550-1010

A middle-age man stares dejectedly into the distance, pondering his fate — a dark place that, judging by the look on his face, lies just ahead. "It's cold there, in the shadow of the man you thought you were meant to be," he murmurs quietly. It's a devastating moment, and the core of what makes "Wonderland," receiving its world premiere at the La Jolla Playhouse, such a surprisingly powerful work.

Playwright Chay Yew is a brilliantly calculating writer, disguising a heart-rending family tragedy in the bright, familiar clothes of a run-of-the-mill tale of assimilation into the American melting pot. (The play is an expanded reworking of Yew's "Half Lives," which appeared as part of his Whitelands trilogy at L.A.'s East West Players in the 1995-96

season.)

"Wonderland" has every bit of the tragic gravity of, say, August Wilson's "Fences," and shares its message that minority disenfranchisement can defeat even the most persistent ambition to achieve the American Dream. But it's a message that we don't see coming — and that makes its sad conclusion pack a double wallop.

Sab Shimono plays an architect with big plans. As the play opens we meet him at the beginning of his career. It's 1965; he's a 25-year-old American-born Asian, sent to Singapore to oversee a big commercial project. ("My bosses think that since I'm Asian I can speak Chinese," he complains.) Sitting at the bar in the Raffles Hotel one night, he meets his future wife — an opportunistic young woman (Tsai Chin) with plans of her own and a keen eye for exploitable foreigners. She is impressed with his dream to build strip malls — "the new city centers," he says proudly.

As the man prepares to leave Singapore, the woman tells him she is pregnant. He does the honorable thing, marrying her and taking her back to America with him. Back in his cramped L.A. apartment, things get more complicated. The pregnancy was a white lie; the woman quickly turns into a materialistic harridan, bullying her husband into buying a Malibu beach house he can't afford and whiling away her days shopping and obsessing over movie stars. Elizabeth Taylor is a favorite.

Soon, a son comes along (Alec Mapa). But it's not a happy household. His mother is demanding and needy, forcing him to re-enact scenes from her favorite Taylor movies. His father is reserved and distant, qualities not helped by his gradual midcareer slide into mediocrity and alcoholism. Trouble looms on the horizon.

In the second act it arrives, with the force of an earthquake. Everyone's life comes flying apart with a fury that is as unexpected as it is intense. Yew may delve a bit too frequently into the melodrama pot in the play's latter half, but he gets away with such indulgences through sheer talent. His writing is spare, assured and perfectly tailored to the story. There are flights of lyricism — the father's "shadow" speech is one example — but they come at exactly the right moments. They never seem forced or unnatural. And the play's denouement is grimly inevitable — even though it will break your heart.

Director Lisa Peterson helms a strong cast, including veterans Shimono, whose iconic face projects such a soul-deep sadness

it's almost unbearable at times; and Chin, who finds her character's restless, hungry emotional center. It's Mapa, though, who shines. Diminutive and pixie-voiced, he's a born scene-stealer.

As the son, he paints the most tragic portrait of all — a naturally comic, fun-loving soul nearly destroyed by his parents' problems. His painful descent into his own hell will stay with you long after the lights come up.

This is the first playhouse production in too long that seems confidently directed, stylistically seamless and synergistic in terms of its design components. Rachel Hauck's elegant, streamlined set hints at the family's emotional distress without making the symbolism obvious. Mark Bennett's plangent sound design, too, undergirds emotional flashpoints without overdoing it (Bennett also liberally borrows from the music of Steve Reich and John Adams without crediting them — an annoying and frequent practice in theater music). Perhaps the playhouse's fondness for stylistic non sequiturs and effect for effect's sake are, finally, history.

# GAY & LESBIAN TIMES

www.gaylesbiantimes.com

10•7•99 issue #615



RUSSELL CALDWELL

(From top left) The cast of La Jolla Playhouse's world premiere of 'Wonderland' is Alec Mapa, Joel de la Fuente, Sab Shimono and Tsai Chin.

## Facets of things real

by Charlene Baldrige

In his world-premiere work, *Wonderland* (La Jolla Playhouse through Oct. 18), gay Chinese-American playwright Chay Yew (interviewed in *Gay & Lesbian Times* Sept. 23) holds up a wonderland (the United States), and refracts without flaw, as if through a prism, facets

### On Stage SAN DIEGO

of things real to each of three characters. If one counts the Young Man, who stands slightly aside, looking for angles, framing and calling the shots, and who never quite affects nor takes part in the action, there are four.

Technically, the Young Man is a theatrical device, employed by the playwright. Because the mechanics are smooth as silk, it is a coup de theatre that leaves one gasping.

*Wonderland* slips easily through time and space in the lives of a Chinese-American family, played with ardor by Tsai Chin as Woman, Joel de la Fuente as Young Man, Alec Mapa as Son,

and Sab Shimono as Man.

Time begins in 1965 when the fourth-generation Chinese-American Man, filled with dreams of changing architecture, travels to Singapore on a consultancy. There, in the bar of his hotel, he meets Woman, bedding and wedding her in that order.

Raised on American films, Woman's dreams include a seaside home named "Sandpiper" in Malibu and a life like that of her idol, Elizabeth Taylor. She takes English as a second language, visits the County Museum, and as disappointment sets in, daily shops the malls her husband designs, his grandiose dreams dashed.

There are screamingly funny moments when Woman insists that Son play Montgomery Clift to her Liz, while he longs for release to other kinds of play with his friend, George. There are many song-like moments of flight, during which each dreamer soars. The monologues, the duets, the trios, all fold in on themselves, contract-

ing, expanding, and creating a seamlessness in which each actor holds his/her character up to the light.

As in many families, the chasm between its members widens as Son reaches puberty, and the dreams of parents are tempered by reality. It is then that Yew's work becomes universal for it embodies the unrealized dreams of each one of us.

Especially brilliant is the aria over Mother Mammoth. One goes home remembering her eyes, glistening with tears. Son, beautifully portrayed by Mapa is beautiful, deluded and pitiable.

The Man is portrayed with appropriate reserve by Shimono. Unrelentingly righteous, his torment is beautifully stated in a tacit, protracted search for exact, feng-shui placement of a token bonsai.

Yew's words are poetic without pretentiousness. The script is as clean, spare and elegant as a scientific experiment, but filled with passion, pathos and cruelty. Yew does not flinch, and we, who have no choice, gasp.

Directed by Lisa Peterson, the production beautifully supports the script with a spare and elegant design scheme. Abetted by Geoff Korf's precise and lovely lighting, Rachel Hauck's set becomes everything needed, the ocean, picture window, blank architectural paper, Wonderland Mall, a golden carpet. Joyce Kim Lee is the costume designer. Mark Bennett contributes original music and sound design.

*Wonderland*, quite simply one of the year's best theatrical productions, continues only through Oct. 17. Phone (619) 550-1010. ■



Please note  
air date!  
- Josh

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THEATRE REVIEW: "WONDERLAND"  
at the La Jolla Playhouse

AIRDATE: OCTOBER 8, 1999

KPBS

A budding, young Chinese-American architect takes a business trip to Singapore. He meets a woman, they go to bed, and before you know it, she's pregnant, they're married, and they're winging their way back to America, to start a life together in the Land of Opportunity. That's the opening sequence in "Wonderland," a memory play narrated by the Young Man who is the grownup son in a doomed family.

The archetypal characters are known to us only as Man, Woman, Son and Young Man — because this is not just an Asian story, or an immigrant story. "Wonderland," an L.A. shopping mall designed by the Man, is just another name for the American Dream, and this family watches that dream come crashing down in nightmarish ways. Willy Loman meets the Master Builder in this melancholic meditation on success, morality, motherhood, mediocrity, identity, bigotry, fathers and sons. There's a lot on playwright Chay Yew's mind, and he reveals it in bright splashes of humor washed over huge swaths of dark rumination.

The structure of his latest play resembles his previous creation, "Porcelain," mounted in a starkly unforgettable production five years ago at Diversionary Theatre. Once again, brutal events are retold primarily in monologues and soliloquies. The power of the words mesmerizes the audience, and provocative staging underscores the poetry. Here, Yew's lyrical language is breathtaking at times, his images of California so gorgeous and precise you can smell the salt air. The ocean is almost a palpable presence in Rachel Hauck's dramatic set design — a huge wall with a window cutout, with a wood floor fanning out in painterly perspective. Through that window, we see, thanks to Geoff Korf's beautiful, moody lighting, the sea and sky change with the passage of time.

The Man looks through the window and sees a "carpet of gold" spread out upon the water, beckoning him to greatness. In Lisa Peterson's wonderfully imaginative, minimalist staging, we watch the Son grow up, we see the Mother try to assimilate by emulating Elizabeth Taylor, forcing her son to help her re-enact scenes from the movies. We observe the Man rise and fall like the ocean waves, ultimately drowning in his failure — as an architect, a husband and a father.

Through it all, focusing our attention and our emotion, a very solid Joel de la Fuente plays the dispassionate Young Man, looking back on his life and his family, framing the story by describing a series of closeups, wide-shots, smash-cuts and blurs. As his father, Sab Shimono is an understated presence, a sad and solitary Everyman, father too busy to help rear his son and too disappointed in the result of his procreation. Tsai Chin is



marvelous as the Mother Courage of the piece -- 20% clueless immigrant, 80% shrew, 100% survivor. Alec Mapa, despite a back injury that delayed the play's opening, appeared as fit, agile and arresting as he did last year in the Playhouse premiere of "Dogeaters." He achingly portrays a put-upon young boy growing into a restless, lost and misguided adolescent.

"Wonderland," a world premiere, is semi-autobiographical. Like the Woman in the play, Chay Yew was born in Singapore. Like the Son and his mother, he is enormously influenced by American pop-culture. Like the Young Man, he wants to create art. But this new work still needs some work; the second act is too long, the endings -- the one concerning a childhood friend and the one about the mother -- are too neat, too facile, too unworthy of the rest of this powerful piece. Still, even in its present form, Yew has written a haunting play of tender, painful truths that uncover the dark shadows beyond the deceptive brilliance of the California sun, the Hollywood klieg lights and the beacon of Lady Liberty.

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# La Jolla Light

Thursday, Oct. 7, 1999

## 'Wonderland' takes center stage

By Kathi La Due

The La Jolla Playhouse's world premiere of "Wonderland" by Chay Yew is an all-American tragedy with Asian faces. Using cinematic narration, the handsome Young Man (Joel De La Fuente) tells the story of his family. He begins with his father, a fourth generation Asian-American architect, portrayed with stoic sensitivity by Sab Shimono, sent on an assignment in Singapore.

Although he speaks no Chinese, his corporate superiors assume that he will know how to speak the language and bow correctly. He meets a Singapore party girl, and when she tells him she is pregnant, marries her and brings her to America. With their son (Alec Mapa), the family proceeds down the golden highway that leads to the American dream. The Man designs

grand buildings on paper while stuck in a corporate niche designing shopping malls. The Woman, influenced by Elizabeth Taylor movies, and played by Tsai Chin, realizes that no matter how many English classes she takes, she will always be an outsider.

When she is not coercing her growing son into playing a scene from "A Place in the Sun," (she is Elizabeth Taylor, he is Montgomery Clift - before the car accident) she spends her time and money shopping at Wonderland, a mall designed by her work obsessed husband. The Son grows up searching for an identity, not only in the American culture that mocks his Asian features, but also within his own family.

Director Lisa Peterson skillfully coordinates the narrative into a seamless interaction of actors and their environment. Rachel Hauck's clean design features a sparse hardwood stage, which is frequently transformed in time and space. The set becomes a Singapore bar, a bedroom, a museum, a mall, a small hotel room to the scene of a disaster, with help from Geoff Korf's imaginative lighting, Mark Bennett's sound design and a few ruthlessly efficient stagehands.

The actors are excellent. Joel De La Fuente narrates and directs the screenplay of his life with precision and authority while struggling to retain an emotional detachment. This mature self contrasts strongly with his younger persona, the

Son, portrayed by Playhouse favorite Alec Mopa, who starred in the title role in both the Broadway and national touring companies of *M. Butterfly*. Mopa gives the Son a sweet desperation as he searches for acceptance and love. Sab Shimono (Man) gives humorous and human touches to a man who works so hard for his family that he forgets what family is all about. Tsai Chin, whose many feature films include

"The Joy Luck Club" and "You Only Live Twice," is a delight to watch as the ambitious immigrant whose thinly veiled determination nets her a husband and a Malibu Beach house.

Yet these icons of success do not bring the promised happiness and she is unable to save her husband from self-destruction or her son from running away. Only when she is reduced to homelessness and basic survival does she declare herself happy. All of these characters "run fast, run far, run free." But unfortunately, mostly from each other.

Playwright Chay Yew, who is resident artist and director of the Asian Theatre Workshop at the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles, keeps his characters basic, even to their names: Man, Woman, Son, and Young man.

Regardless of the color of our skin, or the shape of our eyes, we cannot help but identify with this family's struggles for the illusive dreams of success, for "Wonderland" (closes Oct. 17).

For tickets, call 550-1010.

# RIVERSIDE PRESS-ENTERPRISE

October 6, 1999

## 'WONDERLAND' BRILLIANT BEYOND OUR DREAMS

Charlene Baldrige  
Special to The Press Enterprise

The seamless "Wonderland," having its world premiere at the La Jolla Playhouse, is a rare theatrical coup that leaves one gasping in horror, empathy and recognition, howling with laughter and beset by tears.

From a prism of differing realities, Chay Yew's play, refracts the disparate dreams of a Chinese-American family.

But it could be any family, any individual with passionately held dreams. Yew names his characters Man, Woman and Son.

A fourth character, the tangential and enigmatic Young Man, stands slightly aside, looks for camera angles, then frames and calls the "shots," which he never affects or enters.

Technically, the enigmatic Young Man, played with fluid grace by Joel de la Fuente, is a theatrical device, and yet, because the playwright's mechanics are smooth as silk, he is not apparently nor annoyingly so, as with many memory plays.

The action begins in 1962 and slips easily through time and space, turning in on itself, becoming fraught with spare imagery that flows through character, imbuing each with a slightly surreal luminosity.

And yet, each is deeply human.

A fourth-generation Chinese-American, the youthful Man (Sab Shimono) is afire with a dream of revolutionizing architecture. Sent on a consultancy to Singapore (his architectural firm presumes every Chinese speaks the language), he meets the flirtatious, seemingly submissive Woman (Tsai Chin) and brings her to America.

Raised on American films, Woman's dreams include a seaside home named "Sandpiper" in Malibu and a life like that of her idol, Elizabeth Taylor.

She takes English as a second language, visits the museum, and, as disappointment sets in, shops daily in the Wonderland Mall designed by her husband, whose dreams are crushed by such creations.

Hilarity ensues when Woman insists that Son play Montgomery Clift to her Liz. As he grows older, the theatrically inclined Son longs for release to other kinds of play with his friend, George.

Yew provides lyrical moments of flight, in which each dreamer soars.

Monologues, duets, and trios fold in on themselves, contracting, expanding, and creating a seamless beauty in which each actor holds his/her character up to the light.

Especially brilliant is Chin's La Brea Tar pits aria over Mother Mammoth. Glistening with tears, her eyes are unforgettable.

Son, beautifully portrayed by Mapa, is beautiful, deluded and pitiable.

Portrayed with appropriate reserve by Shimono, Man is unrelentingly righteous, unfailingly ineffectual. His entire character is made manifest in a tacit, protracted search for the exact placement of a token bonsai plant, the only thing for which he has ever fought.

"Wonderland" is sensitively directed by Lisa Peterson, who gathers a remarkable design team to support her vision. Under the lighting of Geoff Korf, Rachel Hauck's spare set becomes a beach at sunset, the Wonderland Shopping Mall, the Sandpiper picture window, a producer's office.

Joyce Kim Lee's costumes and Mark Bennett's original music and sound design enhance all. \* \* \* Theater Review "Wonderland" Where: La Jolla Playhouse, Weiss Forum, 2910 La Jolla Village Drive, La Jolla. Performances and tickets: 8 p.m. Tuesdays-Fridays; 2 and 8 p.m. Saturdays; 2 and 7 p.m. Sundays. Through Oct. 17. \$19-\$39. (858) 550-1010.

WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 6, 1999

# La Jolla VILLAGE NEWS

## Facets of things real: wonderful 'Wonderland' at Playhouse



photo by Russell Caldwell  
Tsai Chn as Woman and Sab Shimono as Man, newly married and newly arrived in the United States, go hunting for a house with a view of the Pacific Ocean in a scene from La Jolla Playhouse's world premiere of "Wonderland."

By CHARLENE BALDRIDGE  
Village News

Chay Yew's "Wonderland," continuing through Oct. 17 in its world premiere at the La Jolla Playhouse, is a rare theatrical coup that leaves one gasping with empathy and recognition, howling with laughter, and beset by tears.

From a prism of differing realities, the work refracts the disparate dreams of a Chinese-American family that could be any family composed of passionate individuals.

Yew names his characters Man, Woman and Son. A fourth character, the tangential and enigmatic Young Man, stands slightly aside, looks for camera angles, and then frames and calls the "shots," which he never affects or enters.

Technically, the Young Man, played with fluid grace by Joel de la Fuente, is a theatrical device, and yet, because the mechanics are smooth as silk, it is not apparently nor annoyingly so, as with many memory plays.

The action begins in 1965, sweeping effortlessly through time and space, turning in on itself, and becoming fraught with spare imagery that flows through character, imbuing each with a rather surreal luminosity. And yet, each is deeply human.

A fourth-generation Chinese-American, the Man (Sab Shimono) is afire with a youthful dream of revolutionizing architecture. Sent on a consultancy to Singapore (his architectural firm wrongly figures every Chinese speak the language), he meets the flirtatious, seemingly submissive Woman (Tsai Chin) and brings her to America.

Raised on American films, Woman's dreams include a seaside home named "Sandpiper" in Malibu and a life like that of her idol, Elizabeth Taylor. Industrious, she takes English as a second language, visits the County Museum, and, as disappointment sets in, shops daily in the Wonderland Mall designed by her husband.

There is much hilarity when she insists that her prepubescent

Son play Montgomery Cliff to her  
Liz. As he ages, Son longs for  
other kinds of play with his  
friend, George. He affects blond  
hair and speeches from Oscar  
Wilde's "The Importance of  
Being Earnest."  
Yew provides lyrical  
moments of flight, during which  
each dreamer soars. Monologues,  
duets, and trios told in on them-  
selves, contracting, expanding,  
and creating seamless beauty.  
Especially poignant is Chin's  
La Brea Tar Pit aria over Mother  
Mammoth, who sank into the  
ground while her bull and calf stood  
by immobile. In a resonant later  
moment, Chin's eyes, glistening  
with tears, are unforgettable.  
Mapa, remembered by Play-  
house audiences in "Dogeaters,"  
imbues Son with beauty as well  
as the will to survive.  
Portrayed with steady reserve  
by Shmoneo, Man is unrelentingly  
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tual. His character is tellingly  
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picture window, and a producer's  
office. Joyce Kim Lee's costumes  
and Mark Bennett's original  
music and sound design enhance  
all.  
One cannot imagine a better  
realization of the playwright's  
dream.

Justifiably hailed as an impor-  
tant new voice in the American  
theater, Yew is director of the  
Asian Theater Workshop at the  
Mark Taper Forum and resident  
director at East West Players in  
Los Angeles. His other works  
include "Porcelain," "A Lan-  
guage of Their Own," and "Red."  
"Wonderland" was scheduled  
to open Sept. 22. Due to Mapa's  
injury during preview perfor-  
mances, it received its critical  
opening Oct. 1. During the inter-  
im, de la Fuente played both Son  
and Young Man.  
Do not miss this production,  
one of the finest seen in San  
Diego this season. It plays only  
through Oct. 17. Phone (619)  
550-1010.

## Life!

# Nothing half-baked in the Half Lives drama

Identity tale of Asian-American Man, Singaporean Woman and their confused son

### Drama

HALF LIVES  
TheatreWorks  
The Drama Centre  
Thursday

Elizabeth A. Kaiden

ANYONE bemoaning a lack of serious theatrical work in Singapore should catch TheatreWorks' production of *Half Lives* at The Drama Centre until Dec 14.

Written by Chay Yew, a Singaporean based in Los Angeles, the drama is about the Asian-American struggle with questions of identity. The production reasserts the company's commitment to the development of the art of the stage.

This time, they have made the acting discovery of the year. Wong Phin Wei, 19, a Ngee Ann Polytechnic student, creates a fabulously tormented American teenager, accent and all.

Lim Kay Siu directs and also acts as a fourth-generation Asian-American Man who marries a Singaporean Woman (his real-life wife, Neo Swee Lin) whom he meets while posted here as a young architect. She returns to the US with him and has a son (Wong).

Their story is related by a Guy (Ryun Yu, last in from the US to play Horatio in *Hamlet*) as he pitches it to a Hollywood producer. This modernisation of the "play within a play" into a "movie within a play" offers a delightful twist, and a perfect device for examining the Asian-American stereotypes in American culture.



Lim Kay Siu and Neo Swee Lin in *Half Lives*.

Ultimately, *Half Lives* is not about America but the pain of disaffection, and the loss of identity when you pull up your roots.

The only actual immigrant in the cast, the Woman, must function as the lynchpin for all the other characters' identity struggles. Chay has created a complex searching soul, which Neo explores devotedly. However, the playwright fails to bring her fully into focus.

The main drawback of an otherwise sophisticated and lyrical script, the rhythm of her lines is neither American nor Singaporean, but some construct of immigrant "broken English". The disharmony of her speech presents a significant obstacle for Neo. It also functions as a distancing element in a brilliantly Brechtian play.

German playwright Bertolt Brecht wanted the audi-

ence to study events on stage with a degree of intellectual detachment. To this end, he employed "unrealistic" elements, such as song, narrators, artificial-looking props and characters who arouse no empathy.

Chay introduces his own devices, such as poetic repetition. All the characters, for example, voice a desire to "run far, run free", repeating the lines to the point of irritation.

Similarly, the playwright strains the audience's belief, leading the immigrant Woman first into Elizabeth Taylor fantasies and later into homeless destitution.

Chay turns the life of her Son into a B-movie plot of extreme degeneration: The boy discovers he is gay, runs away from home, becomes a prostitute, practices unsafe sex and uses intravenous drugs.

It is over the top. If Chay is attempting, as I believe

he is, to debunk superficial Hollywood images of Asians with opposite, equally extreme depictions, then he is taking us into a complicated web of sociology and psychology.

The playwright seems to be asserting that such hyperbole is the only way to make Hollywood understand Asian-Americans who lead anything "more" than quiet, well-mannered, professional lives.

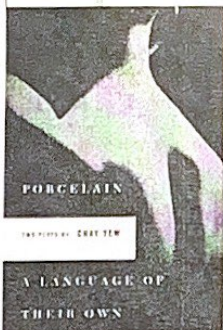
Lim's directing continues to mature. He allows the play to breathe, to speak for itself, by staging it with only a few stepladders for furniture and props. Such minimalism is intended to goad an audience, itself filled with mindless consumers of Hollywood's prefab images, into filling in the blanks with their own imaginations and associations.

The production, however, might benefit from more visual texture. Such crucial settings as the family's home and the bar frequented by the Man might come to life with a few well-chosen props or accents.

Kuo Jian Hong's lighting design and Tan Choon Ping's sound design are partly to blame for the flat atmosphere. Nevertheless, Lim has largely succeeded in integrating a tremendous number of themes and issues. And his American accent is impeccable.

The ensemble cast, with the exception of Neo's accent, has not one weak link. And, as with Brecht at his best, the playwright transcends himself. His characters gain humanity to spite him. This brought well-earned tears and cheers on Thursday night.





# 当新加坡女人 遇上美国华人



## 谢耀剧作《半命》探讨人的归属问题

今年31岁的谢耀出生在新加坡，现在却以洛杉矶为工作基地。他觉得这个戏虽然是关于亚裔美国人，最终探讨的却是归属问题。他说：“新加坡人真的觉得自己属于新加坡吗？”

剧作集  
在美国出版的

### 林仁余 报道

#### 3个角色

新加坡女人遇上美国华人，结婚，定居美国，生下儿子。《半命》就如此开始。

剧作者谢耀说：“朋友们常问：到底什么是亚裔美国人（Asian-American）？我不知道，我是以移民眼光来看这问题。”

剧艺工作坊已从12月4日起，在戏剧中心演出《半命》，由林耀修导演。

#### 他们在美国到底算什么

今年31岁的谢耀出生在新加坡，现在却以洛杉矶为工作基地。他觉得这个戏虽然是关于亚裔美国人，以及他们在

美国到底算什么，最终探讨的却是归属问题。他说：“新加坡人真的觉得自己属于新加坡吗？”

《半命》中的父亲、母亲与儿子，以介于自白与对话式的台词，半叙事半表白的一场场短戏，把20多年的事情呈现出来。

当建筑师的父亲负责建起当地最大的购物中心。母亲崇拜伊丽莎白·泰勒，整天要孩子与她扮演电影《A Place in the Sun》的片段。购物中心意外倒塌，父亲成为众矢之的。儿子感觉到他不被当成美国人。母亲孤单地自己打发时间。父母发现儿子是同性恋，儿子离家出走。

已经是第四代移民的父亲说：“我怀疑我为什么要做我正在做的事情，顶限永远在那里。我努力要融入，可是20多年了，我还只是办公室里那个不爱开口的亚洲人罢了。”

母亲：“博物馆中罗丹的雕塑《吻》是我的最爱。我站着几小时，雕塑的肌肉充满张力激情欲望，没有生命的石头竟可以有激情，失去激情的是我们。如果与这些雕像相吻，石头嘴唇是什么感觉？”

儿子说：“我要完美的生命，不要在醒来时发现自己50岁了却一点也不快乐。”

谢耀目前是专业剧场工作者，他刚获得资助成为美国“东西剧场”（East-West Players）的驻团导演；又得到美国国家艺术基金会（National Endowment of Arts）赞助，为华人社群开发新作品。

他16岁时到美国读传播与戏剧，1988年回新加坡当兵时创作了第一个剧本《好像他听到》（As If He Hears

16岁到美国读传播与戏剧的谢耀已是专业剧场工作者。

），本来是由剧艺工作坊演出，却因为同性恋题材而不能演出，经过一番修改后才于1989年上演。谢耀说：“有时候我喜欢叫人震惊。这样才能让人们了解到，这些事情可能发生在你的生活周遭，发生你认识的人身上。”

#### 剧作在美国获得肯定

第二个剧本《白瓷》（Porcelain）却在海外得到很好的反应，这原是在波士顿大学修电影硕士的电影作业。毕业后他到哥伦比亚电影公司担任剧本审读，负责推荐有潜力的新剧本，这时他的中学时代老同学魏铭耀（Glen Goei）在伦敦成立了本土剧团，邀请他担任驻团编剧，谢耀于是把《白瓷》发展为舞台剧本。

1992年在伦敦首演后，《白瓷》得到伦敦艺穗最佳剧作奖，并转到伦敦著名的王室剧院（Royal Court）续演。1993年《白瓷》在洛杉矶的伯格剧场（Burbage Theater）上演，也得到评论界的赞赏。

1995年，谢耀的另一个戏《他们自己的语言》（A Language of Their Own）由纽约公众剧场（Public Theater）上演，由新加坡的王根生导演。同一季上演的还有著名剧作家谢泼德（Sam Sheppard）的剧本与普林斯（Harold Price）导演的音乐剧。公众剧场是纽约重要的剧团，负责主办纽约莎士比亚戏剧节。

多年生活在美国，谢耀更多是通过剧艺工作坊言作，才与新加坡有所联系。谈到对新加坡艺术的想法，他说：“新加坡艺术的发展潜力可能超过许多人的想象，可是那必须是从内而生的，必须栽培那些年青艺术工作者，他们聪明有远见，相信会有一番作为。我不希望他们也像我一样，必须跑到老远地方寻找另一片天地。”

英语剧《半命》（Half Lives）  
日期：已于12月4日开始，演至14日  
时间：晚上8时  
地点：戏剧中心  
票价：20元、25元、30元与35元  
售票：SISTIC售票处（3386735）



↑《半命》中的父亲、母亲与儿子，以介于自白与对话式的台词，半叙事半表白的一场场短戏，把20多年的事情呈现出来。