

THEATER

An Outsider Determined Not to Be Someone He's Not

By RACHEL L. SWARNS

HE is wry and witty, the very picture of a promising young playwright, with his blue jeans, his black leather jacket and his California cool. But in his mind's eye, he is still clumsy and awkward, a gawky crow craving acceptance from a tribe of graceful sparrows. And it is this metaphor, he says, that best reflects his existence as a gay Chinese-American writer struggling to succeed in a white world.

"It's how I see myself in America, living on the periphery and longing to be in the midst of it," said Chay Yew, 33, one of a handful of critically acclaimed Asian-American writers working in the theater in this country.

"It's like when you go to a bar," said Mr. Yew, whose newest play, "Red," opens on Tuesday at the Manhattan Theater Club Stage 2. "You see all these guys. They're having a good time and you want to be like them. But you know you never can. I've learned to actually say, 'It's O.K. to be who you are.' But it hasn't been easy."

Feeling alienated in three different ways — as an artist, as a gay man and as a Chinese-American — 33-year-old Chay Yew funnels his anger into his plays.

For years, he explained over coffee in midtown Manhattan, he felt pressured — by Americans and by Asians — to be someone he was not. His parents urged him to abandon art for medicine. A white professor refused to cast him in a college show because he didn't "look the part." When he started writing plays, some Asian-American artists rallied against his gay themes. The actors refused to audition. A theater board member quit in protest. And Mr. Yew's blood began to boil. From that fury, "Red" was born.

The play, directed by David Petrarca, explores the Cultural Revolution in China and the brutal crackdown on artists that began in the 1960's. It reflects Mr. Yew's

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Jodi Long, above left, and Ric Young in "Red" by Chay Yew (inset) at the Manhattan Theater Club.

outrage at society's efforts to rein in his own artistic sensibilities and, he said, at Republicans in Congress who have sought to regulate artists by reducing support for the National Endowment for the Arts.

In "Red," the ghost of a Peking Opera star haunts an abandoned theater in Shanghai, where he was murdered for refusing to recast his songs for the Communist regime. He is discovered by Sonja Wong Pickford, a best-selling Chinese-American romance author who writes bodice-rippers like "Love in

the Jade Pagoda" and "Bound Feet, Bound Lives." She visits the theater to research her first serious book and ends up coming to terms with herself, her art and her history. The cast includes Jodi Long, who portrays Sonja, and Ric Young, who plays Hua, the opera singer.

"Red," which grapples with broader issues than Mr. Yew's previous works, was presented last year at the Intiman Theater in Seattle; the current production was produced at the Long Wharf Theater in New

Haven in January. Mr. Yew's earlier plays include the well-received "A Language of Their Own," about gay men struggling with relationships, AIDS and society. "Red" takes on government censorship and also critiques Asian-American artists who censor themselves and their stories to appeal to Western and Asian audiences.

Mr. Yew pokes fun at artists who exoticize the Asian experience with clanging gongs, silk robes and swooping women rescued by handsome white Americans. "I call

them 'Chinky-American experience plays, and I hate them,'" he said cheerfully.

When it was pointed out that gongs, somersaults and rapidly unfurling red silk curtains figure prominently in "Red," he grinned and said, "But I destroy them all by the second act."

David Henry Hwang, perhaps America's most prominent Asian-American playwright, said that today more young writers were using their ethnicity as a point of entry

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to explore broader issues beyond identity. Mr. Hwang, who lives in Manhattan, mentioned Mr. Yew as well as Diana Son, who wrote "Stop Kiss," a widely praised play about a brutal attack on a gay woman, recently seen at the Joseph Papp Public Theater. The play depicts the budding romance between two women, one white and one Asian, but never discusses race.

"For a lot of writers in my generation it was a new idea to think of ourselves as Asian-American, and that's what we focused on," said Mr. Hwang, 41, who won a Tony Award in 1988 for his play "M. Butterfly." "The younger generation sees it simply as one piece in the larger mosaic. And Chay is the most powerful voice out of this wave of Asian-American playwrights."

Mr. Yew, whose home is in Los Angeles, said he still felt like an outsider in America and in Singapore, where he was born and lived until he was 16. But increasingly, he said, he uses "a larger canvas."

"There will always be elements of

The empowering idea of being an Asian-American artist is just part of a larger picture for a new generation of playwrights.

gayness and Asian-American-ness in my work," he said. "But I think I'm concerned with the world a lot more. After the 60's and 70's, there was this questioning of who and what we are, where we come from. In the 90's, we say to ourselves, 'We now know who we are, but how do we live with ourselves and the world at large?'"

To explore the issues of art and censorship, Mr. Yew had only to look at his own life. When he was a boy, his grandmother took him to Chinese street operas in Singapore, where actors erected stages in bustling markets and old men painted their faces to become warriors or concubines. It was his first taste of the theater.

Growing up under an authoritarian government in Singapore, Mr. Yew was aware of the power of censorship. But as a teen-ager at Pepperdine University in Malibu, Calif., he learned first hand, he said, when a professor refused him a part because he was Asian. Mr. Yew re-

called, "I told him, 'You think I'm going to be playing 'The King and I' for the rest of my life? No way.'"

In Singapore, where he staged his first play in 1987, government censors rejected the work because it included a gay character. Mr. Yew said he rewrote the play, eliminating obvious references to the character's sexuality, but encouraged the actor playing the part to hint at the character's sexual preference. And in Los Angeles, during auditions in 1995 for "A Language of Their Own," he found himself forced to post special signs so Asian actors would know what they were getting into. "They were coming in and saying, 'It's gay?' and walking out," Mr. Yew said. "So we had to put up a sign, like a warning. 'Gay-themed play.' It made me so angry."

Perhaps the most painful for Mr. Yew was the reaction of his father, who refused to discuss his son's homosexuality or to see any of his plays, Mr. Yew said, adding that his father has since apologized for missing them.

Despite the obstacles, or maybe because of them, Mr. Yew developed an authorial voice. Speaking of "A Language of Their Own," which had its first reading in New York at the Public Theater, George C. Wolfe, the theater's producer, said, "Chay finds the intimacy in the characters and the language. And that's what affects people. You find yourself in it."

Praise for Mr. Yew's work has not been universal. Tsai Chin, the actress who played Auntie Lindo in the film "The Joy Luck Club," gave Mr. Yew the idea for "Red" when he told her he wanted to write about censorship. She shared the story of her father, a Chinese opera singer who played male roles and was purged during the Cultural Revolution. But in the end, she complained, Mr. Yew employed the very stereotypes he deplores, creating a male character who performs as a woman and playing into Western stereotypes of Asian-American men as effete.

"People tend to put emphasis on the female impersonator because that's the only thing Western people understand," Ms. Chin said by telephone from Los Angeles. "It's perpetuating the cliché. It's exactly what I didn't want to happen. I wanted a good playwright to project another image of Chinese art."

Mr. Yew said he used "familiar" images in the first act of "Red" so he could destroy them later to make larger points about censorship, father-daughter relations and art. And he dedicated "Red" to Ms. Chin, even though she dislikes the play. He is, after all, no stranger to criticism. □



Francis Jue, left, and B. D. Wong in "A Language of Their Own" by Chay Yew, presented at the Joseph Papp Public Theater in 1995.