

# The Uneasy Dance

Chay Yew delights in tweaking our ideas about Asian culture and Asian Americans. Take his new play, *Red*. One of the characters, Sonja Wong Pickford, is a bestselling author who makes no bones about spicing up her "Oriental" love stories because she knows it sells. Fu Manchu, samurai warriors, geisha girls, Chinese wives with bound feet, whatever—her readers will buy it, she says, because she's Asian American. "I thought it would be kind of cool for her to blatantly admit that," says Yew mischievously.

"I love his smart and smart-alecky point of view," says David Petrarca, who's directing *Red* at the Manhattan Theater Club. "His writing is feisty in a way that is refreshing and challenging." Of course, the 33-year-old, Los Angeles-based playwright is no mere provocateur. In *A Language of Their Own*, produced Off-Broadway in 1995, he explored the dynamics of three interlocking gay relationships. In *Wonderland*, a new play that premieres this fall at San Diego's La Jolla Playhouse, he examines what "home" means to the members of an Asian American family. *Red*, which is set in the world of the Beijing Opera, started with Yew wanting to express his anger at the anti-arts-funding crusades waged by Congress.

The idea for *Red* came during a

## *A Purge of the Beijing Opera in Chay Yew's Red*

BY GERARD RAYMOND

conversation Yew had with his friend Tsai Chin (an Obie winner for David Henry Hwang's *Golden Child*). Yew was venting about the defunding of the NEA when the Shanghai-born actress remarked that government has always had a complicated relationship with the arts. She told him about her father—a kind of Laurence Olivier among Beijing Opera stars—who was purged during the Chinese Cultural Revolution. Both of Chin's parents perished in that bloody period, while she was in London being feted as the star of *The World of Suzie Wong*. Years later, Chin was invited back to China to deliver a eulogy at an official ceremony honoring her father.

Chin's story spurred Yew's interest in what he calls the "uneasy dance" that exists between rulers and artists, irrespective of ideology. In *Red*, Sonja arrives in Shanghai to write the biography of a famous Beijing Opera star. Digging into the past, she reconstructs the story

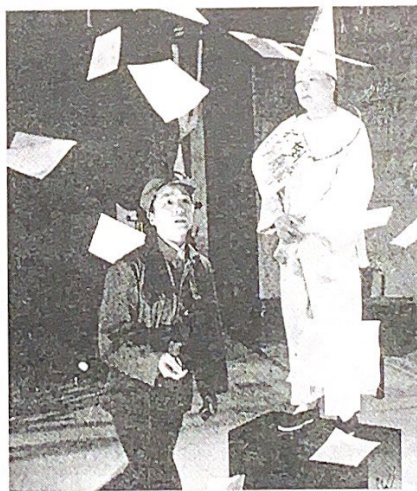
of an actor, Hua Wai Mun, whose career in the theater was snuffed out during the Cultural Revolution—one of the most extreme instances of government repression of the arts in history.

In *Red*, Yew's first play with a historical setting, he revisits the world of

core of the play is the story of Hua and his daughter, whose close bond is severely tested by the unfolding political events. The victims as well as the perpetrators (the young soldiers of the Red Guard) cope with the horrors by stoically learning to endure—a particular

Chinese concept called *ren*, a self-protective emotional restraint. But the process is damaging as well. "It's about the price one pays when one tries to erase one's past—both from a personal and historical point of view," says Petrarca.

Yew keeps the audience off guard with impish humor, and he's devised a structure for *Red* whereby the story sneaks up on the audience—it's revealed in chronologically jumbled episodes. The memories of Hua, the Beijing Opera star, and the terrible times through which he lived, accumulate in ways that surprise both factually as well as emotionally. "I think the audience must be the glue for the story," says Yew. "If I keep telling you everything," he smiles, "what's the point?"



Liana Pai and Ric Young in *Red*

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