

Chay Yew talks about his plans for making Victory Gardens grow

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For most of its 37 years of existence, Chicago's Victory Gardens Theater has been synonymous with, and run by, Dennis Zacek and his wife, Marcelle McVay. Beginning this fall, a new artistic director takes over at Victory Gardens, 46-year-old playwright and director Chay Yew.

On the face of it, the Singapore-born Yew has a tricky job. If any major theater in Chicago could be said to be a mom-and-pop show, it surely was Victory Gardens. Not only did Zacek and McVay nurture playwrights and plays, they enjoyed similarly close personal relationships with a good portion of their audience.

"Well," Yew said over lunch this week, "if you want to call Victory Gardens a mom-and-pop shop, then I'm the son that Dennis and Marcie never expected to show up."

"I'm part of Dennis' legacy," Yew went on, warming to his point. "His fight for new plays. His passion for diversity."

But, based on our long conversation, it would clearly be a mistake to assume that Yew wants only to continue down the path that Zacek and McVay forged. Yew said he wants to make changes — both to the playwrights' ensemble and to the Biograph Theater.

"I am very blunt," he said.

Victory Gardens has long been synonymous with its playwrights' ensemble, a loosely affiliated group of writers whose relationship with the theater company has been structured similarly, say, to the relationship between Steppenwolf Theatre and its acting company. Names have been added, but they have not really been subtracted.

There have never been cast-iron guarantees. But the writers — a group that includes James Sherman, Charles Smith, Jeffrey Sweet, Gloria Bond Clunie and Lonnie Carter — have been able to count on their new works enjoying a kind of preferential consideration for productions during the theater's season. In return, the writers have generally been expected to give the theater the first right of refusal on their new works.

Issues have cropped up. As with most ensembles of artists, the quality of the plays has varied widely. The

younger generation is under-represented. Some of the writers are prolific; a few remain in the ensemble even though, as Yew points out, "they no longer really write plays." The Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright Nilo Cruz was added to the ensemble by Zacek, but his connection to Victory Gardens has remained peripheral. In the case of John Logan, one of the most respected and highest paid screenwriters in Hollywood, the writer does not appear to need the theater anymore. Logan premiered his hit play "Red" at Donmar Warehouse Theatre in London, and it then moved to Broadway. This fall, the Chicago premiere will take place at Goodman Theatre, not Victory Gardens.

Yew acknowledged all of those complexities and said the main change he wants to make to the ensemble is to add names, especially young writers from diverse backgrounds. "I would like to see us do more plays like 'Chad Deity,'" Yew said, referring to the hit drama "The Elaborate Entrance of Chad Deity" by Kristoffer Diaz. That show — fluid, youthful, experimental, diverse — went from Victory Gardens to New York's Second Stage and is soon to open in Los Angeles. Although it would be reductive to say that the new plays at Victory Gardens have tended to be realistic in style, it's surely fair to note that "Chad Deity" was not a typical product.

Yew, clearly, does not plan on formally ending relationships. He said he believes that playwrights should have a home. But audiences at the Gardens will be seeing very different seasons from now on. He is not, he says, a big fan of traditional American realism.

"The ensemble is made up of Dennis' writers," Yew said. "I respect that. They should have rights. They should have a voice. But they also should know what it is like to be an emerging writer. I intend to amplify the ensemble, bringing on a new generation of writers and offering more diverse voices."

So who would be Yew's writers? Aside from Diaz, he mentioned a long relationship with Craig Lucas, and with Dael Orlandersmith.

Yew's arrival in Chicago from New York is not, of course, the only big change at Victory Gardens in recent years. The theater's move to the newly renovated Biograph Theater was similarly transformational: the larger mainstage offered more opportunity to do bigger plays but demanded more sophisticated production values. And the move to the Biograph also left the theater — and now Yew — with an ongoing budget deficit. The audience did not grow with the size of the new theater. Rarely has the Biograph mainstage been sold out.

"I think the space needs to feel more intimate," Yew said, arguing that it is worth losing 20 or 30 seats in the mainstage if it can bring the plays closer to the audience. He said he is exploring how to make the modified proscenium-style theater into more of a thrust stage — building the performance area into the audience space.

The physical changes are still under review. And Yew will have to wait until the 2012-13 season before he can program the theater entirely to his taste (although he said he has made a point of reaching out to Cruz, in an attempt to make him feel more like a part of the ensemble). But you can get a sense of where Yew wants to go by looking at how he has filled the two open slots on the 2011-12 Victory Gardens season.

In January, Yew will restage "Ameriville," which he developed with the poetry- and hip-hop-based performance ensemble known as Universes, headquartered in the Bronx. It's a piece based on the aftermath to Hurricane Katrina and designed to probe whether America would be ready if such a thing happened again.

And in June, Yew will direct Luis Alfaro's "Oedipus el Rey," which re-imagines the classic tragedy in the ganglands of LA.

With these and all other productions, Yew said, he plans to pay close attention to the quality and intensity of the acting, and also to the design work (a theatrical element that generally has not been at the top of the list of the Victory Gardens priorities). He also said that he understands he has to reach out to the current Victory Gardens subscribers — another one of the Zacek-McVay legacies — and explain himself and say where he now wishes to take them.

"We are going to be a little more playful with form in the future," Yew said. "I think Victory Gardens exists somewhere between the fringe theaters in Chicago and the major institutions. Our season should have that kind of look."

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