

Red

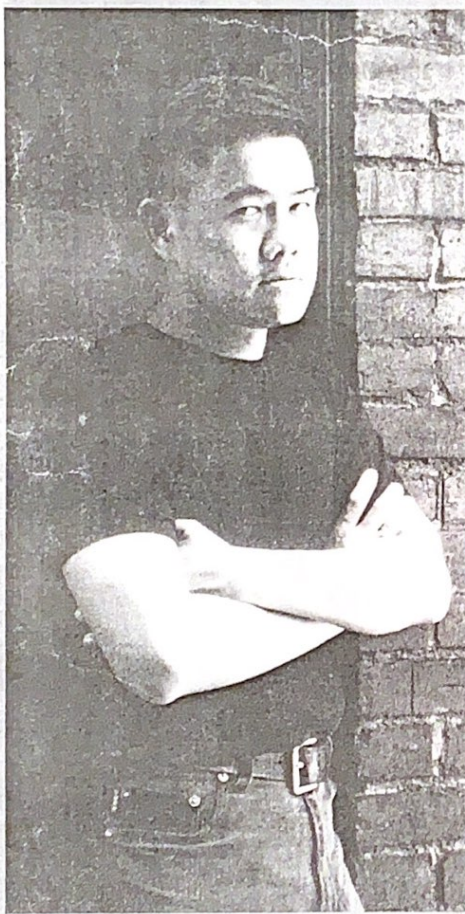
"A weighty undertaking, but one beautifully distilled into three elegant, engaging characters." – USA Today

Red (Asian Premiere)
Singapore Repertory Theatre

Written by award-winning Singapore-born playwright Chay Yew, *Red* explores the themes of personal, political and cultural history and how these are irretrievably interwoven.

The ghost of a Beijing Opera star haunts an abandoned theatre 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 writer whose body of work includes hits like *Love in The Jade Pagoda* and *Bound Feet, Bound Lives*. Sonja, while searching for a cure for her writer's block, finds herself coming to terms with herself, her art and her history.

Established as one of Asia's leading English-language theatres, Singapore Repertory Theatre (SRT) produces popular and acclaimed productions featuring Asian performers, including *M. Butterfly*, *A Twist of Fate* and *Sing To The Dawn*. SRT has also the distinction of becoming the first Asian theatre company to be an Associate Producer on Broadway – with David Henry Hwang's *Golden Child*, which was nominated for three Tony Awards.



Chay Yew, playwright

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21 JUNE 22 JUNE 23 JUNE

Red
8.00pm, SRT Theatre
23 June (additional matinee at 2.30pm)
Tickets: \$22, \$32, \$42
Duration: 2 hrs 30 mins

Tangled 'Red' Works Magic

By MALCOLM JOHNSON
Courant Theatre critic

At the zigzagging, receding and moving ending of "Red," Chay Yew's look back in anger at China's murderous and destructive Cultural Revolution, the stage floor is strewn with white sheets of paper. The scattered papers symbolize disorder and, simultaneously, art overthrown and defianced.

They also illustrate the method and emotional meaning of this sometimes perplexing and repetitive but brilliantly designed

memory play, which opened Wednesday at Long Wharf Theatre in New Haven.

Written by Yew in response to the censorship and budget cuts imposed on the National Endowment for the Arts by a conservative Congress, "Red" also tells a deeply personal tale. At its heart is the story of a father and daughter divided by the repressive Red Guard (Gang of Four) regime under the aging Chairman Mao. Hua, set forth in a virtuosic, mannered, imperious, absurd but dignified perform-

ance in the American embodies the forgotten traditions of Chinese art as the star of the Peking Opera. His daughter Ling, danced with quicksilver grace and acted with passion and ambiguity by Liana Pai, is a member of the Red Guard who both reveres and rebels against her father and his dominant male traditions.

Both Hua and Ling are refracted through the glittering prism of a visitor from the West, a self-styled Chinese American Barbara Cortland, Sonja. Effete and self-mocking as played by Jodi Long, the writer of such bestsellers as "Love in the Pagoda" and "Bound Feet, Bound Lives" has come to

China to research her book on 19th-century Chinese Opera.

After a humorous preamble in which Sonja introduces herself in a flippant, chic style, "Red" grows more mysterious and tangled. The stylized setting by Michael Yeargan becomes an abandoned theater that is curiously pristine, with its patterned red-and-gold curtain, black lacquered dressing table and matching hat tree; umbrella stands that hold costumes and props. The former opera house is also haunted. It is still the domain of Hua, who

Please see A TRAGIC, Page F8

A Tragic Tale Of Art Turned Propaganda Unfurls In 'Red'

Continued from Page F1

STAGE REVIEW

RED, written by Chay Yew, directed by David Petrarca, set designed by Michael Yeargan, costumes designed by Anita Yausch, lighting designed by James F. Ingalls, sound designed by Jeffrey S. Carlson and Rob Milburn, original music by Milburn, production stage manager, Michele A. Kay. Presented in association with the Manhattan Theatre Club by Long Wharf Theatre. Doug Hughes, artistic director, Michael Ross, managing director.

Sonja	Jodi Long
Hua	Pic Young
Ling	Liana Pai
Opera Actor	Jamie H.J. Guan

sometimes appears in his most celebrated role—a woman with white hair raped by a feudal landlord.

The story of Hua and Ling emerges in fragments that shuttle back and forth in time, with 1966 as the crucial date. That is the year when the Cultural Revolution commenced its wanton wreckage of China's art and literature, and began to convert the theater into an instrument of propaganda.

"Red" echoes a memorable film from post-Mao China, the remarkable if fabled "Farewell My Concubine" by Chen Kaige, who used the Peking Opera to focus on the relationship between two boys apprenticed as children to the demanding art. But for those who have not seen the film detailing the boys' rigorous training and their older selves' encounters with the Red Guard gang, Hua's account of the experience will be instructive as well as poignant.

At times during director David Petrarca's constantly shifting, highly theatrical production, "Red" suffers

from its seemingly haphazard structure. But as Yew weaves together the almost dreamlike encounters among its three central characters and the "Opera Actor" impressively played by Jamie H.J. Guan, he builds to a strong Act I curtain. After intermission, Yew plays affectively with "Uncle Vanya" (the blizzard of papers is a Maoist revision of Chekhov) and delivers more surprises, which Petrarca and his small cast play dynamically and poetically.

Commissioned by The New York Shakespeare Festival, workshopped and premiered by Seattle Intiman Theatre and presented by Long

Wharf in conjunction with the Manhattan Theatre Club, which will open the same production this spring.

"Red" shows a major talent, a man driven to delve into difficult themes. Yew writes with wit and with passion, as he probes a father's sacrifice and a daughter's guilt. Though less flamboyant, his investigation of the world of Chinese opera ultimately proves more cogent and emotionally satisfying than David Henry Hwang's "M. Butterfly."

Though it sometimes seems that Yew has thrown his pages of dialogue into the air, he has in fact constructed an elaborate set of Chinese boxes that at last fit magically together.

"Red" will continue through Feb. 7 on the Newton School, Mainstage of Long Wharf Theatre, 222 Soient St., Exit 16 off I-95, New Haven. Performances are Tuesdays at 7 p.m., Wednesdays through Fridays at 8 p.m., Saturdays at 1 and 8:30 p.m. and Sundays at 2 and 7 p.m. Tickets: \$22 to \$11, half-price rush tickets a half hour before the performance. Box office: 203.237.1282.

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In the 'Red'

TheatreWorks' ambitious drama grips both the intellect and the heart

by **Jeanie Forte**

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Chay Yew's play, though flawed in places, is persuasive and evocative enough to become an important work for our time.

A relatively new work, Yew's "Red" is the second offering in TheatreWorks' current season. Premiered at Seattle's Intiman Theatre in 1998, it has undergone several incarnations since then, but the basic premise has always been the same: A modern romance novelist, Sonja Wong Pickford (Allison Sie), tires of writing mass entertainment and travels from New York back to her homeland China in search of a significant story.

In Beijing, she seems to stumble fortuitously across her material, in the form of a Chinese opera star, Hua Mai Wun (Francis Jue), who was famous for his artistry in female roles -- until Mao's Cultural Revolution.

Sonja "interviews" Hua to uncover his life's work and what happened after he was arrested by the Red Guard. His sole crime? Performing Chinese opera, an art deemed to serve only Western imperialist interests. Hua must confess these crimes against the State or suffer dire consequences.

A third figure, a young woman named Ling (Grace Hsu), seems to be several different characters -- a 12-year-old girl seeing Hua perform his famous "White-haired Damsel" aria, a Red Guard recruit, a protegee of Hua's, his young daughter. Gradually we realize these are all the same character at different stages of her life.

As Hua and Ling enact scenes from their lives, Pickford wanders through time with them, seeking information, piecing together the shards she can unearth. At times she debates with them, at others she reveals bits of her own life. At one point she even tries to prevent Hua's story from continuing, when it becomes difficult to watch.

Structurally, the fluidity of time and character is at first a bit confusing. But as Act I unfolds, the drama is so intriguing that one simply decides to keep watching and let the puzzle come together as the playwright intends.

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There is also a welcome thread of comedy throughout, much needed to release the mounting tension as the plot develops. By the end of the first act, one is drawn in, infused with a growing fondness for the characters and a desire to know what happens next.

Act II does not disappoint, but I won't reveal any more. The action evolves into a powerful, compelling and ultimately quite affecting story.

The three actors are flawless, delivering superb characterizations and emotional performances that are vigorous and riveting. It's a joy to have Jue back on TheatreWorks' stage. His embodiment of Hua is apparently effortless, even though it must be exhausting in its physical and emotional demands. His flair for comedy is put to wonderful use in an otherwise dark fable.

Hsu and Sie are both ideally cast, matching their characters so aptly that it's hard to imagine other actors in the roles. Sie perfectly captures the Americanized immigrant in both the denial and ultimate reclamation of her former self. Hsu's expressiveness breathes marvelous, chameleon life into the many faces of Ling, handily dishing up comedy as well as pathos.

Other production elements greatly enhance the overall effect, particularly the splendid choreography by Jamie H.J. Guan. Director Robert Kelley's staging is lively and imaginative, making excellent use of a bold set design by Ching-Yi Wei. Sound, costume and lighting all conspire to create some stunning stage pictures.

Yew's ambitious play grips both the intellect and the heart, encompassing a significant cultural event by examining its indelible, bruising effect on two individuals caught up in history.

The human drama serves to highlight the embedded debate concerning the artist's relationship to the state, or ideology, or government or social convention -- whatever terminology works for you in describing the prevailing standards of what constitutes appropriate art. Countless numbers of artists have suffered fates similar to Hua's, in far too many places and times.

Whenever a government or ruling class seeks to repress alternative versions of "the truth," artists are among the first to undergo "purging." As Ling correctly points out to Pickford, "All art is political," either in its support of the status quo or its challenge to it. In recognizing the power of art, Mao's revolution sought to control it.

Pickford's dilemma as an artist hinges on this very understanding: Continue to serve a fawning public, or choose to serve a greater truth that is risky and challenging but more faithful to human experience? At some point, all artists face this dilemma -- and for many, it has been a choice that involved risking one's life, as well.

What: Chay Yew's "Red," presented by TheatreWorks

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Review

Searing, disturbing 'Red' ends the season at Wilma

By MARK COFTA

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The Wilma Theatre ends its season with the area premiere of *Red*, a fascinating drama by Chay Yew that unfolds like a delicate flower in Director Blanka Zizka's graceful production.

Red is told by Sonja Wong Pickford, a successful romance novelist — "the Asian Danielle Steele," she jokes — who returns to Shanghai and encounters her past in a decrepit Beijing opera

theater. Sonja seems to be researching a new novel, but a more intimate story emerges as she meets — or is she remembering? — Hua Wai Mun, an aging opera star, and Ling, a young woman in China's notorious Red Guard.

During the Cultural Revolution, thousands of years of "decadent" art and culture were destroyed, and dissidents were violently purged. Traditional works like Pickford's were forbidden, replaced by new

IF YOU GO...

Red.

Wilma Theatre, Broad and Spruce streets, Philadelphia.

Through June 22.

\$9 - \$41.

215-546-7824.

operas that dramatized the class struggle. *Red* contrasts the delicate beauty of Chinese opera with the destructive idealistic

fervor of the Cultural Revolution, and Zizka's production captures both vividly. Klara Zieglerova creates a vast, shadowy environment that accommodates the sort of visually exciting surprises one expects from a Wilma production. Russell H. Champa likewise sculpts boldly with his lighting, and Hiroshi Iwasaki of Bryn Mawr College creates beautiful costumes. Choreographer Jamie H.J. Guan explores the delicate mysteries of Chinese opera.

Francis Jue as Hua and Lydia Look as Ling bounce forward and backward in time with ease as their relationship to each other and Sonja, played by Jade Wu, gradually emerges.

Red explores a frightening history that has relevance to our own culture and tells a powerful personal story about how artistic passion can survive political upheaval. The Wilma's production presents the political reality well but successfully focuses on the personal story.

REVIEWS

RED

at the David Henry
Hwang Theater



Reviewed by Laura Weinert

Best-selling author Sonja Wong Pickford (Emily Kuroda) has decided it's time to write something important, something that goes beyond the slick appeal of her exotic, fluffy romances, which market Asian-ness to the American buying public. So she returns to China. She falls asleep in a decrepit Beijing Opera House, where she encounters the imposing ghost of opera star Master Hua (Jeanne Sakata), who is suddenly berated by a fierce representative of the Red Army (Page Leong). Pickford must have this story for her book.

So begins the play—so unassuming, so gentle, that one expects a simple series of moving recollections and heart-to-hearts between author and subject. Yet writer Chay Yew has set his sights on much grander themes. He guides us beautifully through the unhappy relationship between art and political ideals, through the history of modern China and the confines of gender, through the suffering behind parental love denied.

Told out of chronological sequence, *Red* presents its characters as a set of boxes within boxes, each darker and more troubled than the one before. Yew turns his characters inside out, allowing us to see them in their harshest moments, allowing us to trace their journeys to discover purpose in their lives and art.

As Yew states in a press release, *Red* centers on "what you would do for your art and at what cost." As Hua, Sakata gives an awe-inspiring portrayal of a proud practitioner of a dying, outlawed art based on distant folk legends. Under attack by the Red Army, which has forbidden all art that does not depict the class struggle, Hua resists, openly condemning the revolution for "the ruthless and senseless murder of our civilization." Giving Hua a



Photo by Michael Leonard

A night at the opera: Jeanne Sakata and Page Leong in *Red*.

severe exterior, Sakata teaches us what it means to equate one's life and art entirely, yet releases Hua's buried humanity gracefully in his most desperate moments.

As Ling, Leong beautifully reveals a conflicted heart that has chosen to embrace the revolution with all its promises of a better life, a more relevant art, and a freer world for women, despite the brutality the movement demands. Leong shifts magically from period to period, from a yearning child to a frustrated adult.

In the complex role of Sonja, Kuroda exudes smug confidence in herself and her clichéd art form, while hinting delicately that this confidence is a wall behind which unseen demons lurk. Kuroda handles her comic lines with aplomb, using the odd self-deprecating remark to endear herself to her acquaintances while revealing a sharp discomfort with herself and the stories she is destined to follow.

Yew's direction is clean, sparkling, and rhythmical. Each scene builds gracefully to an emotional apex, then rests for a beat. Chua Soo Pong and Li Xiu Hua provide elegant choreography that is simple but evocative. Anita Yavich's costumes, from Hua's silken robes to Ling's functionally tailored uniform, lend color and style to Myung Hee Cho's stark, symbolic set, which consists of chairs that are constantly rearranged.

A fine-tuned, inspired work, *Red* simply could not be in better hands.

Red, presented by East West Players at the

David Henry Hwang Theater at the Union Center for the Arts, 120 Judge John Aliso St., Downtown Los Angeles. Thurs.-Sat. 8 p.m., Sat.-Sun. 2 p.m. Oct. 3-28. \$15-30. (213) 625-7000.

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theater

Art and revolution

Chay Yew's *Red* explores the gray areas of political and cultural life.
By Robert Avila

In the United States, China's Cultural Revolution offers a fairly black-and-white picture (increasingly favored colors over here), with not much room for ambiguities. In 1966 Mao unleashed the extragovernmental mass purging of "intellectuals" and "imperialists" (and Mao's political enemies) from public life. The movement's mostly teenage frontline forces, known as the Red Guards, began that year systematically destroying ancient art, artifacts, and books, replacing a priceless human legacy with the worst of human excesses. Over the next 10 years, an ever wider circle of internal enemies faced unemployment, mass roundups, detentions without trial, confinement to work camps, torture, and murder.

There are vast differences in history and political traditions between China and the United States, of course. But it should be harder by now, given the galumphing American empire and burgeoning police state, to dismiss such events as something entirely alien to our experience or imagination. Watching a scene onstage recently, in which a patriotic Red Guard teenager uses bamboo poles to "interrogate" a man wearing a gunnysack over his head, evokes more than a window onto Chinese history. Some of our own reflection inevitably stares back at us in the glass.

Singapore-born American playwright Chay Yew's *Red*, in which the above scene occurs, reflects on the gray areas that make up the majority of social space, especially in a time of repression. It does so with style and intelligence, pulling up the immediate social-psychological roots of authoritarian systems (whether ancient or more recently spun) in what seems, only at first, a straightforward story.

Sonya Wong Pickford (Allison Sie) is a successful Chinese American author of lurid "ethnic romances." Once a poor and illegal immigrant, she now hunts for a serious subject. This and more she finds in the shuttered remains of a Beijing opera house, where memory and imagination brew her a heady history lesson (personal and political) in the shape of the great diva Hua Wai Mun (the excellent Francis Jue) and a young revolutionary named Ling (Grace Hsu).

Yew's drama, now gracing TheatreWorks' Palo Alto stage in artistic director Robert Kelley's well-

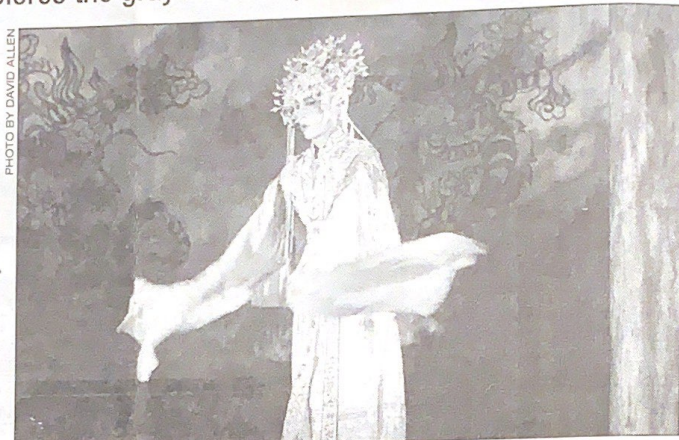


PHOTO BY DAVID ALLEN
Divalution: Francis Jue plays Hua Wai Mun, a man who onstage is a female opera star.

wrought and engaging production, contains the Cultural Revolution in a nutshell — or rather, in a cleverly refracted family melodrama simultaneously played out on the stages of high art and high-as-a-kite politics.

Hua readily embraces the idea of having a book written about him — he's intent on not being erased from history. As the play moves dreamlike between different periods of time, for example, we see how the master artist hides his own painful apprenticeship, recapitulated in another form with his onetime student Ling. His total commitment to his art merges with a desire to be a willing foot soldier in Mao's revolution. His famously passive female stage roles belie a formidable patriarchal streak. Jue relates Hua's intriguingly incongruous aspects with exceptional flair and keen insight.

The smooth incorporation of elements of Beijing Opera lends Yew's sly but essentially realistic story of an artist in a time of repression a stylized, almost allegorical dimension. As we watch Hua go from the artifice of his greatest operatic role ("the white-haired damsel") to the imposed artifice (including dunce cap) of a public confession, the classical form morphs into agitprop — the same stage serving as platform for both art and politics, even as the line between the two blurs. And still, behind both dramas lies a deeper, hidden, private reality.

All three characters, in fact, develop by contradictions (dialectically, you might say). Pickford (played by Sie with a vague agitation beneath a serenely intelligent surface) is in Shanghai to write a serious book, yet shies away from the disturbing details of Hua's story. Meanwhile, Ling (who gains considerable depth in Hsu's formidable performance as her charac-

ter's story unfolds) is a willing executioner of China's traditional ("counterrevolutionary") culture, and — as the play travels in time — a child who dreamed only of the opera stage.

These tensions play into a debate about the role of art in society. If Pickford's career serves as a foil to Hua and Ling, aghast at the trade in literary exotica, she justifies her work as giving Asian Americans (adrift like everyone else across the shoals of American mass culture) "a sense of belonging — a history." This idea shocks the young revolutionary, who shouts back at her, "All art is political! Decadence, filth, lies — we want art to have responsibilities!" Prompting Pickford to respond, penetratingly, "Who's 'we'? You?"

Such dialogue, while provocative, is ultimately heavy-handed. Yew moves beyond rhetorical thrusts and parries, however, in the fluid relationships between the characters. Here the dynamic between art and politics arises from a set of social roles and power relationships — between master and apprentice; parent and child; state and subject; torturer and victim — that get reversed more than once in the course of the evening. Yew subtly underscores the point when pet phrases, like Master Hua's injunction to "put some heart into it," come back later in the mouth of a former underdog, who's now having her day: in the gray areas mapped by these relationships, freedom and authority create both individuals and monsters. ❖

'Red' runs through Aug. 8. Tues., 7:30 p.m.; Wed.-Sat., 8 p.m. (also Sat., 2 p.m.; Aug. 7, show at 8 p.m. only); Sun., 2 and 7 p.m. (Aug. 8, show at 2 p.m. only), Lucie Stern Theatre, 1305 Middlefield, Palo Alto. \$20-\$50. (650) 903-6000, www.theatreworks.org.

'Red' performance breathtaking

Audience spellbound by startling stagecraft



Author Sonja Wong Pickford (Emily Kuroda, background, left) observes as Master Hua (Jeanne Sakata) teaches student Ling (Page Leong, right) the art of femininity in Chinese opera.

Photo by Michael Lamont

By Shirle Gottlieb
Special to the Press Telegram

All the action in "Red" takes place on Myung Hee Cho's stark, barren, and dramatically raked stage.

Completely empty except for a few broken chairs, the crimson floor is flooded by exposed spotlights that are deliberately

shined in your eyes — as a part of Jose Lopez's daring light design.

THEATER REVIEW
Suddenly, a woman in a trim black suit marches down the aisle, mounts the stage, and addresses the audience. Introducing herself as Sonja Wong Pickford, she informs us that she is an award-winning Chinese-American novelist who has returned to Beijing after a 25-year absence.

Emily Kuroda is outstanding in her portrayal of this successful writer. Author of the best-seller "Bound Feet, Bound Lives," Sonja has come to China in search of new material for her next book.

While wandering the city's crooked streets, she stumbles into a deserted, broken-down building that once housed the Beijing Opera. Exhausted from her long flight, Sonja falls asleep — or into a deep reverie — where she meets the ghost, or the spirit, or the memory, of Beijing's renowned opera star, Master Hua.

For the rest of Act I, Sonja acts as the omniscient narrator for the tragic events that unfold. Standing in the shadows of time, she sees Master Hua denounced, then brutally murdered during the 1960s People's Revolution.

PLEASE SEE 'RED'/C6

'RED': Spellbinding performance

CONTINUED FROM C1

Playing against type, Jeanne Sakata turns in a brilliant performance as the highly disciplined male singer, Hua Wai Man, who was world famous for his female impersonations in the ancient art of Chinese opera.

When "the people" took over during the '60s, all traditional art forms, including Chinese opera, were forbidden and labeled subversive. But Master Hua was strong-willed

Page Leong is incredible in her flawless performance of this brainwashed young female soldier

and stubborn. He continued to perform his lifelong profession, so was purged in the name of "the people."

Leading the fight to convert him to communism was a young woman named Ling. Page Leong is incredible in

her flawless performance of this brainwashed young female soldier who, aspiring to be a Red Guard, has to dole

out the Master's punishment. Back and forth we go, from present to past and back again, getting glimpses of

what "might have happened" between Ling and Master Hua. Or did it? Just when we think we have it straight, new information comes along that spins the story in a different direction. As always in real life, there are no black and whites — only various shades of gray, some of them more viable than the others.

Under the superb direction of Chay Yew (who also wrote the script), the three actors are so convincing their pain is palpable. When they speak,

their words ricochet through the audience like weapons; and when they're silent, the deafening void underscores the meaning of "Red."

As for exquisite craftsmanship: Act I lays out Yew's captivating plot, then Act II rips it apart like a thunderbolt from left field. And when it's all over, the audience sits there speechless.

Shirle Gottlieb is a Long Beach free-lance writer.

THEATER REVIEW

What: "Red," written and directed by Chay Yew

Where: East West Players, David Henry Hwang Theater, 120 Judge John Aiso St. (formerly San Pedro Street) at the Union Center for the Arts, Los Angeles.

When: 8 p.m., Thursday-Saturday, 2 p.m. Saturday-Sunday; through Oct. 28

How much: \$25-\$30; senior/student, \$20-\$25; Thursday, \$15 with ad; rush tickets, \$15 one hour before curtain
Information: (213) 625-7000

THEATER REVIEWS

See Red

The Wilma production of Chay Yew's rich and intense play, *Red*, is, in a word, magnificent. Under Blanka Zizka's impeccable direction, three fine actors and four fine designers combine their talents to provide some splendid theater. A small part of what makes it so good is that it is genuinely surprising, which makes this a tricky review to write, since to reveal any of the clues leading up to the resolution would be to spoil your pleasure. Suffice it to say that all the stuff that you'll be wondering about during intermission will be clarified by the end of Act II.

In Act I, a best-selling author, "the Asian Danielle Steele" who writes formulaic romance novels with titles like *Bound Feet*, *Bound Lives*, decides to return to her homeland. She arrives in Shanghai, finds an old abandoned theater and discovers the subject of her next book: Hua Wai Mun, former star of the Beijing Opera. As she interviews him, and then his protégé, Ling, the relationships among the three become more and more complex. All the human drama is played out on the political as well as the theatrical stage — this is China, after all, in the 1960s when Mme. Mao, the wife of Chairman Mao, led the Cultural Revolution, which "purged" China of thousands of years of culture by burning books and commandeering theaters.

We see the vivid contrast between Ling, a young woman with braids in a severe Red Guard costume (and what else is a uniform but a costume in the world's political drama), and the young woman who is the central character of one of China's best-known operas, *The White-haired Damsel*, ornately gowned in brocade and jewels and a long white braid. This contrast is complicated by

the fact that the damsel is played by a man, adding gender politics to the mix.

We are further asked to consider (although you don't consciously pause long enough to "consider" since the play is so engrossing) the collision not only between male and female but between old and young. All family drama is generational, but here that is made immensely important by the ideology of Communist China: The Red Guard was a youth army, shining young faces intoxicated by vicious power, committed to cleansing China of its antiquated ideas (including the patriarchal bias against women — an idea fostered by the old operas, especially *The White-haired Damsel*). So the personal and the historical and the artistic merge in this extraordinarily ambitious play.

RED
Through June 22,
The Wilma Theater,
Broad and Spruce sts.,
215-546-7824



WHITE-HAIRED DAMSEL IN DISTRESS:
Francis Jue stars as Hua Wai Mun.

And then add theatricality to all this: Yew uses Chekhov and Brecht — playwrights inhabiting opposite ends of the dramatic spectrum — both symbolically and structurally. *Red* also

demonstrates the way two different kinds of writing exert power on the mind: When Sonja narrates her story, we see it happening, even as our author is still there in the background — exactly the theatrical representation of the act of reading a novel.

The actors are wonderful: Jade Wu as the novelist manages to give subtle depth to a character protected and defined by clichés and superficiality. Lydia Look is deeply moving as she slides from a sweet 10-year-old to a rebellious teenager, from violence to tenderness, and her tiny, lithe physical presence on stage makes you think she might actually fly (a la *Crouching Tiger*). Francis Jue, as Hua Wai Mun, is astonishing; whether he is paternal or theatrical, whether he is demonstrating the exquisite hand movements of traditional choreography or lying broken on the floor, he is always passionate and elegant.

Set designer Klara Zieglerova's dilapidated theater onstage evokes a world both familiar and exotic, where the simplicity of the dressing table and two chairs echoes those same traditional elements in Beijing Opera sets. Russell H. Champa's lighting is moody and clever in what it illuminates and what it hides; James Sugg's sound design can wrap the audience in a shouting crowd or make us collectively hear a pin drop and Hiroshi Iwasaki's costumes speak volumes.

Wilma has told us that their mission is to introduce us to playwrights who bring different cultural experiences alive on stage in hope of fostering human sympathy; *Red* does exactly that.

—Toby Zinman

(t_zinman@citypaper.net)

'Red' offers satisfying puzzle

Characters straddle time and complex relationships during China's chaotic Cultural Revolution

By **BARRY JOHNSON**
of The Oregonian staff

After first opening at Seattle's Intiman Theatre, the world premiere production of Chay Yew's "Red" arrived at Portland Center Stage on Saturday night — earnest, nostalgic and ultimately moving.

This is postmodern, post-MTV theater in many ways. The narrative jumps back and forth in time in a series of short scenes, and the play's three characters have conversations that couldn't possibly take place because of the time shifts. They also appeal directly to the audience at times, helping us keep the story straight or hoping for our understanding.

The set, designed by Rachel Hauck, is dramatically divided front to back by a scrim with two openings, but it's otherwise clean, almost empty — a table, a chair, a few props. Instead, the production relies on the effective costumes of Michael Olich and sound design of Nathan Wang to establish specific atmosphere and a sense of place, a theater in China during the Cultural Revolution.

But too much could be made of these up-to-the-minute stage stylings. "Red" works finally because of its heartbreaking story of devotion, betrayal and the search for redemption. Although history and generational politics figure prominently, the real hook is a good old-fashioned exploration of character.

Still, "Red" jumps back and forth in time often enough to keep us guessing about the real relationships of the characters. Some effort is involved in keeping the narrative line straight. The play is something of a puzzle, and it's easy to jump to the wrong conclusions about the action on stage.

The play first introduces Sonja (Jeanne Sakata), a successful writer,



CHRIS BENWON

Sab Shimono plays a Peking Opera actor who takes on female roles in Chay Yew's "Red" at Portland Center Stage.

smart and sophisticated. She's the Asian American Barbara Cartland, author of such books as "Bound Lives, Bound Feet," ethnic romances, with just a hint of real life buried beneath the prose.

But Sonja wants more — a serious book. So she's in Beijing researching the life of Hua Wai Mun, a star of the Peking Opera known for his ability to play women's roles. She wanders away from her hosts to the dilapidated theater where Hua once performed. She enters, and the audience enters a time warp because Hua (Sab Shimono), long dead, is applying makeup at a dressing table backstage.

Suddenly, a Red Guard, Lin (Michi Barall), enters, and she's de-

Theater review

Red

COMPANY: Portland Center Stage

WHERE: Newmark Theatre, 1111 S.W. Broadway

WHEN: 7 p.m. Tuesdays-Wednesdays, 8 p.m. Thursdays-Saturdays, 2 and 7 p.m. Sundays through Nov. 21

TICKETS: \$10-\$36 (274-6588)

termined to roust Hua from the room he commands as an opera star. After all, it's 1966, and the Cultural Revolution has upset all of China's arts institutions, especially the older ones. The revered Hua, the man who once made Chairman Mao weep with his arias, has suddenly become an enemy of the people.

Lin is tough, and she seems to be a gifted torturer. Hua resists, but he seems certain to break under the pressure.

But then "Red" goes back further in time, and the relationship between Hua and Lin is scrambled. She's an apprentice, trying to learn the craft of Chinese Opera from Hua, and he's the taskmaster now, demanding obedience and hard work. He's insulting at times, and the exercises he gives her seem like a form of torture, too.

So we begin to realize that "Red" isn't what it seems, that we shouldn't assume anything about the relationship between Lin and Hua: that the issues between them and the ties that bind them are complicated and deeper than we imagine at first. Sonja begins to become more enigmatic as well, and placing the three of them in the flux of the flashbacks and flashes forward is an interesting mental exercise.

Great demands are placed on Shimono, Barall and Sakata to tell this story as they bend themselves around the choreography and sing

the songs that the star of the Peking Opera would enact. Shimono is best arguing for the preservation of his culture, stubborn, knowing that he's headed for disaster, and in telling the depressing story of how he became an actor.

Barall as Lin has the difficult chore of going down the wrong path — namely, joining the Red Guard — with the best of intentions, only to discover that she's made a horrible mistake. But she brings a toughness to the task that nicely balances the sweetness.

Sakata, as Sonja, is blessed with the funnier moments and a breezy, ironic, near parody of a character to begin with. She gradually reveals that her relationship with Hua and Lin is more than simply that of an author.

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CALENDAR THEATER

PICK OF THE WEEK

RED

A mixture of agitprop and melodrama, Chay Yew's play about the closure of a Shanghai opera house in the grand sweep of Chairman Mao's Cultural Revolution spends its first half immersed in obvious dissertations on the dogged relationship between art and politics. The second half, however, delves into the trials and tribulations of its characters, building to a potent if somewhat sentimental transformation of the play's protagonist — a successful, aging Asian-American romance fiction author named Sonja (Emily Kuroda). (It's in the second half that Yew exposes not only the unwitting evils of the Cultural Revolution but also the oppressive, sexist legacy of the Chinese operc; both institutions tear Sonja apart.) Sonja has built a life dishing out Asian platitudes, stereotypes and some lies to a white readership hungry for something exotic in its trashy fiction. She travels to China, where an excursion into the depths of the dilapidated opera house triggers a confluence of time and space in which she learns the story of Master Hua (Jeanne Sakata), an elder virtuoso in the Shanghai opera, and his apprentice, Ling (Page Leong), who, frustrated with the restrictions ??[placed] on women in the opera, joins the Red Army. Despite a troubling miasmic quality to the piece, Yew's light directorial touch and the cast's sheer intensity make for a provocative night of theater. East West Players at the David Henry Hwang Theater, 120 Judge John Aiso St., dwntrwn.; Thurs.-Sat., 8 p.m.; Sat.-Sun., 2 p.m.; thru Oct. 28. (213) 625-7000.

—Luis Reyes



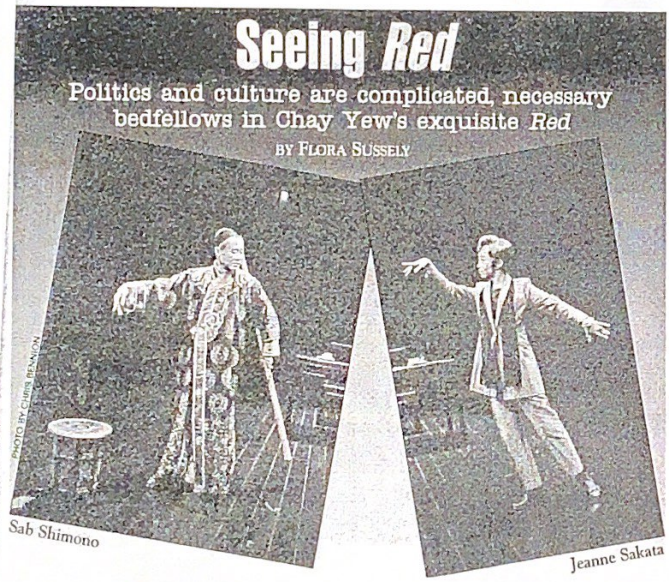
NEW REVIEWS

THEATER Just out
November 6, 1998

Seeing Red

Politics and culture are complicated, necessary bedfellows in Chay Yew's exquisite *Red*

BY FLORA SÜSSELY



Sab Shimono

Jeanne Sakata

In every political revolution, the intellectuals and artists always pay the highest price. And so it is that culture and history are raped. That is what *Red*, now playing at Portland Center Stage, is about.

Chay Yew's play is about the Chinese Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution that waged its ugly war on art and artists between 1967 and 1977. Like Milan Kundera, who writes about the Czech revolution, and Isabel Allende, whose books deal with the Chilean version, *Red* paints the picture of art twisted and destroyed, artists and intellectuals persecuted, tortured and held up as examples to discourage deviance from the New Order.

In *Red*, the story is woven through a series of flashbacks that take us by surprise at the end. It is funny at first: We follow the "Asian Barbara Cartland" on a journey to China, where she will research a Chinese opera star for a biographical novel. It is witty and sets the stage for the juxtaposition of the courage it takes to be a real artist and the fear that breeds conformity in those who have witnessed atrocities.

The cast of *Red* is marvelous. Michi Barall as Lin plays a girl from the age of 10 into adulthood. Her journey takes her from innocence to feminist anger to creative restlessness, fear and remorse, rage and elation, guilt, terror and, always, great love. Likewise, Sonya (played by Jeanne Sakata), moves from self-satisfaction to shame, grief, egoism, confusion, pain and resolve. Sakata's performance begins and ends the play; she is our host, our conscience, our cultural tour guide. She makes us laugh at how silly our concerns are and makes us aware of how great are the sacrifices of our fathers.

Hua, the Chinese opera star, is elegantly played by Sab Shimono. His is the character that symbolizes tradition, art, courage, dignity and conviction. Shimono manages to play the role of martyr without playing victim. As in the famous Chinese operas in which he sings, strength of character saves the person from disgrace, even when disgraceful circumstances surround him. The parallel is always there, stating that—like the White Hair Maiden who is raped in the opera—strength and dignity win over evil. If not physically, certainly spiritually.

Red is a profoundly spiritual and political work. As in the film *The Official Story*, in which we see an entire family come to terms with their own participation in the raping of a culture (in that case, Chile's), *Red* brings home the ugly truth that, sometimes, in order to live

to tell the story, we are forced into complicity. In what is a rarely discussed context—the Chinese revolution—we see the same elements of Hitler's Germany and Pinochet's Chile. We also get to see that there is nothing original in evil. Indeed, evil's only tool is to crush the spirit. And that never lasts for very long.

In the end, when our three artists merge into one voice that must be spoken; when the one that is left cannot find the words, we hear: "Find it in the silence, in the cracks.... Go make history." And, with the Chekhov quote "we will live," we reach the understanding that history is truly made by the writers—not the book burners.

Red was beautifully underdirected by Lisa Peterson. There is a simplicity to the entire work. We are not looking at the spectacle of the Chinese opera. Instead we are listening to characters deal with creativity and freedom of expression. Things that, perhaps, we take for granted.

In many ways, we see and hear how women are denigrated and must fight for power. We understand the need to expand the circle of those who hold culture to their elitist standards. In *Red*, we can actually identify with the stirrings of revolution, the need for it, the fairness of it, the inevitability of making art accessible to the masses. This is the strength of this kind of play. We see how extremists can start out sounding logical. We find ourselves agreeing that classist supremacy kills artistic freedom. But we also hear the point of view of the traditionalists who want to preserve a culture that has indeed been shaped by a narrow group. That is how a work like this helps us understand how basically good people can be turned into warring factions. In an election year full of talk about morality, it is as timely as it is moving.

Red requires some thinking and a lot of listening. As an audience, our loyalties may shift philosophically, but the wonderful thing about this play is that, in the end, we understand how life can manipulate us into actions we will not control.

But we also come to terms with the opportunities life gives us to set the record straight, and "we will live."

■ *RED* is onstage at the Neumark Theatre, Portland Center for the Performing Arts, 1111 S.W. Broadway, through Nov. 21. Tickets are available at the PCPA box office and TicketMaster outlets.

Three viewpoints clash in 'Red'

By Julio Martinez
Correspondent

With "Red," East West Players, the oldest and largest Asian Pacific Islander performing-arts company in the country, has opened its 36th season with a powerful sojourn into a cataclysmic collision between an unyielding creative spirit and the cultural conformity demanded by a totalitarian government.

Within the cathartic confluence of three tortured souls, Singapore-born playwright

"RED"

Where: East West Players, 120

Judge Aiso St., Los Angeles.

When: 8 p.m. Thursday and Friday,

2 and 8 p.m. Saturday, 2 p.m.

Sunday; through Oct. 28.

Tickets: \$25 to \$30. Call (213) 625-7000.

Our rating: ★★ ★ 1/2

director Chay Yew has interwoven the jagged memories of one woman's nightmarish past, the conceit-driven integrity of a great artist and the idealistic but ambivalent passions of a

youthful member of China's hard-line Red Guard. The challenge of Yew's demanding, time-and-space-rending text is more than met by the transcendent portrayals of Emily Kuroda, Jeanne Sakata and Page Leong.

Aided greatly by Myung Hee Cho's nearly bare, raked stage and Jose Lopez's evocative lighting, Yew has wisely applied a minimalist point of view to his staging, allowing his three characters to move freely

See 'RED' / Page 6

'Red'

Continued from Page 5

in and out of each other's lives, flitting back and forth in time from the present to the 1966 beginnings of Communist China's stifling cultural revolution. The nonchronological, ever-shifting plot machinations never allow the audience to settle into any time period for long, but the performers never lose sight of the playwright's dramatic throughline.

The main protagonist is Sonja Wong Pickford (Kuroda), a middle-age Chinese-American author whose best-selling but lightweight Eastern-based romance novels ("Love in the Jade Pagoda," "Bound Feet, Bound Lives") have brought her the nickname the "Asian Danielle Steel." Creative burn-out has driven her back to her native Shanghai, where she stumbles into the decaying shell of a long-deserted opera. There she is confronted by the ghost

of legendary Chinese opera star Hua Wai Mun (Sakata, cross-dressing as a man who plays women's roles), whose aesthetic ideals are in direct contrast to the Americanized Sonja.

What might have been just a clash of artistic differences becomes altogether more sinister with the arrival of youthful but dogma-driven Red Guard soldier Ling (Leong), whose presence whisks Sonja and Hua back in time to the early days of the Communist Cultural Revolution. Sonja is forced to become a spectator to the searing, often brutal battle of wills between tradition-bound Hua and Ling's uncompromising mandate to change this world-renowned artist into a conforming spokesperson for China's new order.

Though the emotional battle lines appear to be clearly stated, nothing is quite as it seems as Yew gradually reveals the layers of fact and fiction that permeate the lives of these three interconnected souls. It is a taxing tour de force for a small ensemble to pull off. And

it is probably no coincidence that Yew is utilizing three outstanding actresses who have worked with him before. All three performers are re-creating their roles from a recent production of "Red" at the Singapore Repertory Theatre.

Kuroda moves seamlessly between the personas of sophisticated, self-possessed novelist and helpless observer of the demons from her past that demand to be heard. Leong is quite believable as the humorless representative of the Red Guard, yet exudes a haunting vulnerability when reliving her early years as a worshipful protégé of Master Hua. Sakata is simply magnificent as the monumentally self-righteous artist who is determined to preserve the traditions of his past even though he knows it will mean his destruction. In the latter part of the second act, as the playwright reveals the true interconnection of these three, Kuroda, Leong and Sakata actually appear to meld into each other, becoming one soul and one voice.

Red

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editorial profile



Summary Thanks to strong performances, the solid writing of Chay Yew, and the fine direction of Lisa Peterson, "Red" triumphs -- despite the timely political undercurrent of censorship which drives the action of the play -- as an engaging, compelling, and very human drama.

Full Review It is against a sorry piece of China's history that playwright Chay Yew's "Red" spins its captivating tale.

Culture was one of the first things to go when the so-called Cultural Revolution bulldozed its way through China in the later half of the '60s. Armed with the blessing, encouragement, and outright command of China's revolutionary leaders, thousands of years of traditional arts and artifacts were mindlessly destroyed, right along with the talented artists who had kept those

traditions vibrant and alive into the 20th century. Those who survived did so by bending their skills to the dictates of Mao and his propaganda machine, churning out that soul-chilling, mind-numbing product known as "state-sanctioned art." The loss to China, and ultimately to the world, was immeasurable.

"Red" offers a closer look at this destruction and loss. Sonja Wong Pickford, a Chinese-American best-selling romance novelist, is our guide, taking us back to China for her interview with Hua Wai Mun, a great performer of Beijing Opera who apparently survived the annihilation of the Revolution.

Staged on Rachel Hau's exquisitely designed sleek and Spartan set, "Red" unfolds like a story told from erratic memory, with a succession of non-linear scenes that create a puzzle. But the pieces of the plot line snap into place, with several surprising twists and revelations that sparked audible "Aha!"s from "Red's" receptive opening night audience.

A lot of territory gets covered in this two-hour production, touching on numerous issues -- such as obedience, gender and identity, the profound importance of art and history, and the repercussions of censorship, to name a few -- yet the feeling of being lectured to is a rare occurrence.

Performances, as with all other aspects of this production, are on target. Jeanne Sakata's brassy, shamelessly self-promoting Sonja is great fun to watch, and her character provides a bit of levity with her hilariously titled novels, which she sprinkles with fabricated "facts" and lore for her gullible American audience. But don't be fooled by Sonja's cynical brand of off-hand humor -- hairline cracks in her fierce facade are destined to split wide open, in turn allowing Sakata to move beyond the caustic, amusing character who first leads us into the world of "Red."

Michi Barall as the young theatrical protege, Lin, hopes that one day she will be the first female on stage to actually play a female role -- men and boys are still doing all the roles at this point in history. Lin eventually falls in with the Red Guards -- think Hitler Youth -- as the Revolution gets under full sway, and she finds herself following orders to commit some shockingly violent acts. Barall accomplishes the daunting challenge to age and regress from scene to scene, and still keep a grasp on the volatile emotions of the aggressive, determined Lin.

Sab Shimono's imperious Beijing Opera star, Hau, may be famous for his female roles, but offstage he is demanding, impatient, and nearly impossible to please. As the magnetic center of the story for the two women and for the audience, Shimono keeps us glued to the stage with his commanding presence -- he is the essence of control, a master of the art and power of the small gesture, and blessed with an innate sense of perfect timing.

Thanks to these performances, the solid writing of Chay Yew, and the fine direction of Lisa Peterson, "Red" triumphs -- despite the timely political undercurrent of censorship which drives the action of the play -- as an engaging, compelling, and very human drama. -- Justin Lucas, CitySearch.com Contributor

All Area

Arts & Entertainment

Theater Review

'Red'

Masterful, subtle and very entertaining

By Russ Zabel



A free trip to China for a Chinese-American romance novelist leads to dramatic surprises as the past is peeled away in subtle layers of exquisite revelation in the world-premier production of *Red* at the Intiman Theatre.

Written by Chay Yew and directed with compelling flair by Lisa Peterson, the play is only nominally linear as scenes jump around in time. But the novelist's search for story material about a Chinese Opera star on her free trip both highlights the excesses of the Cultural Revolution and ultimately connects the characters in a very personal way.

The writer is Sonya Wong Dickers, and she's positively full of herself. Played with passion, humor and a brassy attitude by a focused Jeanne Sakata, Sonya introduces herself to the audience and insists that everyone should recognize her because she's famous.

Sonya has written best sellers that often get turned into movies of the week, and the Chinese government is honoring her for those books, which feature Chinese heroines who usually end up killing themselves.

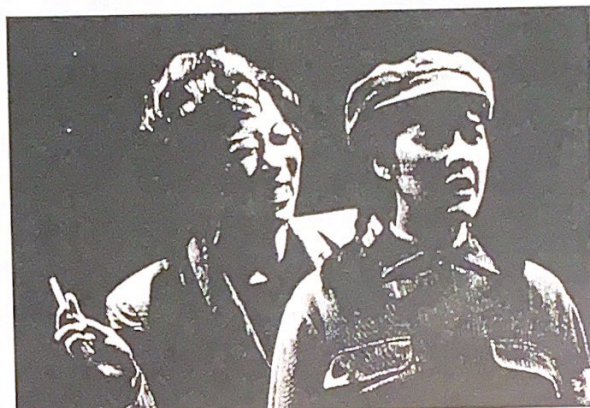
But Sonya's also been trying to work on something more serious than her usual fare. In fact, she's been trying to put something together for around four years about the famous Chinese Opera star, a man who gained fame in Shanghai.

And since she's in Shanghai on the trip anyway, Sonya takes the opportunity to find out more about the man. She slips away and goes to the opera house, which is now a dilapidated wreck. Amazingly, though, the very man she's looking for is there and still doing his act, which is a combination of song and stylized dance movements.

Hua is his name, and his specialty is playing female characters, an accepted practice in the old days because women weren't allowed to perform in the traditional Chinese Opera. Played with crusty flair and sensitivity by an intense Sab Shimono, he's not overly impressed at first with Sonya, especially when she starts going on about how famous she is.

Hua finally concludes Sonya is an artist, however, and he also decides to talk to the woman when he learns she's working on a book about him. Getting a write-up is about the only way Hua can achieve any recognition at that point because he's out of favor with the government and only performs to an empty house.

Just how out of favor Hua is becomes apparent when Lin, a young woman who's in the Red Guard, shows up at the opera house and reads him the riot act about performing when he's not supposed to anymore. The Red Guard was made up of radical students charged with enforcing the tenants of the Cultural Revolution, which among other things sought to rid



Jean Sakata (at left) plays Sonya, a Chinese-American novelist, while Michi Barall plays Lin, a member of the Red Guard, in Chay Yew's "Red" at the Intiman.

Photo by
Chris Bannion

China of all bourgeois influences, especially those in the arts.

Played with complex shifts in characterization by a sharp Michi Barall, Lin and Hua go way back it turns out and—in scene shifts that are a little confusing at first—Lin is Hua's personal tormentor. For instance, she forces him to sing the same song over and over again, she slaps him around a bit, and she tries to get him to confess to being a counter revolutionary.

In a sinister irony, Lin also turns out to have been Hua's apprentice in her younger days, and she tells Sonya how she pestered a reluctant Hua to force him to teach her his art. Lin and Sonya also talk about the role of art in revolution in a discussion that bogs down because it's too expository.

That's not the only exposition in the show. Hua also unloads on the Cultural

Revolution, complaining that thousands of years' worth of Chinese art and culture were sacrificed to the flames of revolutionary zealotry.

Sonya's dealings with Hua are marked by a spooky sense of uneasiness, and the relationship that develops between her and Lin is a strange one, as well. Just how strange and spooky the connections are between the three characters isn't revealed until near the end of the show, and the answer comes as a complete and shocking surprise.

Yew sets the audience up for that surprise with a synergistic approach as the various scenes in time build up an impressionistic picture of national and personal tragedies in China. The result makes for a powerful and very entertaining show.

RED
continues
at the
Intiman
Theatre
through
Sept. 26.
Tickets:
\$10-\$32
Information:
260.1901

Seeing 'Red' at Long Wharf

By SHIRLEY MATHEWS
Theater reviewer

Playwright Chay Yew balances the quaint voluptuousness of language against the harshness of the blood-soaked Cultural Revolution to see into the heart of his remarkable characters in "Red."

"I wanted to feel the creaking floorboards beneath my dancing feet," says narrator Sonja, as she travels to Shanghai to research a famous Beijing Opera performer who died during Chairman Mao's reign.

Sonja is Chinese-American and writes trashy romances that are wildly successful. She is restless in her success, however, and wants to gain a literary legitimacy by tackling a subject of substance.

Using a writer as "Red's" narrator means the language tends to sound written as opposed to conversational. "Silent as the

Program

PLAY: "Red" by Chay Yew; directed by David Petrarca

THEATER: Long Wharf Theatre, 222 Sargent Dr. (I-95, Exit 46), New Haven

TIMES: Tues at 7 p.m.; Wed-Fri at 8 p.m.; Sat at 4 and 8:30 p.m.; Sun at 2 and 7 p.m. Runs through Feb. 7.

TICKETS: \$10-\$43

BOX OFFICE: 787-4282

broken chairs where people once sat," is how Sonja describes the abandoned opera house.

Yew's language is far lush than people actually speak and takes a masterful actress to make it sound — not just natural — but compelling.

Unfortunately, the words coming out of Jodi

Long's mouth sound uncomfortable and awkward, and she never gets under the glib, brittle exterior of Sonja. She struts around in hyperjaded sophistication, coldly calculating her books to maximize the marketing reach while denigrating their oriental flavor with one liners.

Long comes off as interchangeable with a million other commuter train babes with their Franklin Planners on their laps and cell phones in their ears. You would never know that "Red" is a torturous journey Sonja must undertake to set her demons at rest. There's never a feeling with Long that the hard, city girl armor she wears is protection against a darkness she finally confronts. Her aggressive superficiality never rings true.

Jamie H.J. Guan, as the opera actor, fared better as the stiff and imperious taskmaster who safeguards a tradition of thousands of years against the destruction of Mao's Revolution.

"Femininity is created by men for men," shouts Master Hua at Sonja. He is one of China's grand masters at portraying women and, in a flashback, we see him training a whiny young woman to follow in his footsteps, something forbidden in the ancient theater. But then, one thing Mao gave the country was some equality for women — they could now act on the stage.

What's confusing, at least in the first act, is



Contributed photo

Jodi Long in the role of Sonja, a successful Chinese-American novelist who returns to China to solve the mystery surrounding the life of an imperiled opera star during the Cultural Revolution in China, in "Red."

that Yew plays fast and loose with time and his characters. Are we in the present? Is Sonja a witness to the past? Is she talking to ghosts? What's real?

And indeed, once you finally get the drift of what is really happening in this play, the last question is the most satisfying to explore.

The reality of the characters is never what it seems. Consider this: The tyrannical woman member of the Red Guard forces Master Hua to sing until his throat is raw, humiliates him, screams out names, tries to force him to confess to crimes he didn't commit — or is she really performing acts of supreme sacrifice?

It's fascinating to see the layers peel away from the heart of this play.

Everything is an allusion to something else and conjures more than just the image in

front of your eyes. Even in the very beginning, when we first see Sonja, smoking a cigarette and tossing off cynical remarks in her office,

Michael Yeorgan's set evokes Chinese theater of the mid-19th century. The bare platform of 100 years ago is realized as a rectangle of light; the hanging curtain at the back could have been taken straight from the past; the table and chair become sleekly modern. The more you think about this play, the more you see.

Listening to Yew's words is very like getting the aural image while your eyes are getting the visual one of the horror of the Revolution and the glory of art in its highest expression.

It makes you long for seeing "Red" with a truly gifted cast.

Connie Chant Post

Red Censors Censorship

Chay Yew's Play Kicks Off East West Season

BY KRISTIN FRIEDRICH
STAFF WRITER

Pluck a teenager out of traditional Singapore and transplant him in liberal California. Give him an undeniable calling toward the arts (but parents who want him

THEATER PREVIEW

to practice medicine). When he pursues those arts at Malibu's sunny Pepperdine University, give him a professor who refuses him a part in a school play because he's Asian. Later, as a bona fide playwright, have Asian-American actors refuse to audition because they object to the gay themes in his writing. If a highlight film of Chay Yew's

coming-of-age were made, these would be just some of the scenes.

Predictably, then, the role of the artist—and that artist's relationship to things like politics, ethnicity and sexual orientation—has figured deeply into Yew's work. But he had never framed those ideas in a historical context before writing his play *Red*. Frustrated with shrinking National Endowment for the Arts funds during the 1980s, and the troubling notion that government powers were deciding what was (and more to the point, wasn't) art, Yew knew he wanted to write about censorship. He soon found the perfect backdrop in China's Cultural

Revolution during the '60s, and in the true-life stories of two performers who lost their lives when Mao's Red Guard sought to purge traditional Chinese art and culture.

Red follows the story of a successful Chinese-American romance novelist who makes her way back to China and happens upon a decrepit theater. Inside, she meets an old man who reveals his past through layered storytelling and flashbacks—he was a star of the Beijing Opera, murdered by the Red Guard when he refused to rewrite his songs according to the Communist Regime's requirements. As his past is revealed, hidden facets of the novelist's identity—as an artist and as an Asian American—begin to unfold as well. The play digs into themes of censorship, displacement, what art means in society, and how government and cultural tradition affects that art. It also finds the time

to poke fun at artists who romanticize the Asian experience with exotic robes, quaint customs and delicate Asian damsels-in-distress who need to be rescued by American men. Given the flurry of its themes and its flashback structural device, *Red* isn't exactly spoon-fed linear viewing—and that's exactly the point.

Yew recently directed *Red* in his native Singapore. Now he's back stateside, with the same Southern California actresses he insisted come with him for that overseas production (Emily Kuruda, Page Leong and Jeanne Sakata). The theme for the East West Players' 36th anniversary season is "Let Them Hear You." As such, *Red* is an appropriately bold choice for the company's inaugural performance—because Yew most certainly makes himself heard.

Red opens Oct. 3 and runs through Oct. 28. At the Henry Hwang Theatre, at 120 Judge John Aiso St. Call (213) 625-7000.

THE BUSINESS TIMES

SINGAPORE

Internet: <http://business-times.sbf.com.sg/>

Saturday, June 23, 2001

SATURDAY JUNE 23, 2001

The Arts

Just like a Red onion that peels away

SRT's play Red unfolds beautifully with great dialogue

By Parvathi Nayar
 ONE of the most pleasurable aspects of Chay Yew's *Red*, presented by the Singapore Repertory Theatre is the process of discovery woven into the writing. To narrate the story is to ruin what could be an engaging, personal discovery for the audience.

Suffice to say Yew's writing was extremely polished, the dialogue crisp, and the narrative lucid and very clever without being gimmicky.

Stepping gingerly around "plot" for fear of being a spoiler, it's still germane to talk about setting: Shanghai now and during the Cultural Revolution (mid 1960s-top). The Revolution was a time of politics appropriating art as a propaganda tool with tragic results. Witchhunts ensued with arbitrary and often vicious rules; artists were in extreme danger if they failed to comply with the authorities.

Our introduction to past and present comes via Song Wong Pickford (Emily Kuroda), a successful, self-tyrilled "Asian Danielle Steele" on a trip to China. Though her bodice-rippers like *The Jade Pigeons* have been runaway successes, she is in search of more meaningful literary material.

In Shanghai, she runs into a broken-down theatre and the ghost of Beijing Opera star Hwa (J Sakata), purged during the Revolution. Our sympathies are with Hwa but through his principal oppressor, Red Guard Ling (Faye Leong), we learn about the ideals behind the Revolution. The waters get murky.

BT guest reviewer Christian Huber says: "I loved the layers



STEVEN LIM

that slowly peeled away as the play progressed. Like peeling the layers off an onion, it may be difficult, but you get there. It was clever without having to be pretentious about it."

The three actresses had difficult roles but Sakata as the stubborn Opera star stands out as a portrait of willfulness and integrity. She captures the essence of Hwa, the product of a time when patriarchy went unchallenged and who then must face the prospect of complete destruction. Sakata's Hwa was a mixture of self-centred arrogance tempered with a real humanity.

Opening night jitters were apparent, but the actors created passages of emotional connection which suggest they will settle into their roles and allow their creative currents to flow steadily. *Red* reopens next week for a regular run.

BT's other guest reviewer Eleanor Wong has seen Yew's other plays, and comments how different each work is, though informed by recurrent themes like the Asian commute to America, or

gender issues. She calls *Red* accomplished and finely crafted, as far as the theatrical component of this year's Arts Festival goes, she says, they saved the best for last.

Non-linear and non-chronological, *Red* in many ways, is a meditation on art and creativity. Or as playwright Yew said in a previous interview with BT, it's a play about "what you would do for your art and at what cost."

Yew sets up these themes, then skillfully subverts the structure as a way of talking about families and the ties that bind. He sidesteps resolutions but the play was none the less moving for that. When the curtains closed, *Red* wasn't a play that melted away as a sweet meringue on the tongue, but a flavour that lingered.

Red will be performed today at 2.30pm and 8pm at SRT Theatre. Tickets at \$22-\$27. It reopens on June 28 for an extended run at the same venue.

Clever: non-linear and non-chronological, *Red* is a meditation on art and creativity in many ways. Playwright Chay Yew sets up themes then skillfully subverts the structure to talk about family ties. Despite his sidestepping of resolutions, the play was none the less moving.

BT SCORECARD

Rank	Scorecard Item	Score
1	Snob Appeal 0 to mention two awards - 10 (culturally aware well done!)	8.8
2	The Snore-o-Meter 0 to snore - 10 (no snoring)	9.5
3	That Cutting Edge 0 (draws a conclusion) - 10 (effective artistic boundaries)	8.2
4	The Audience Speaks 0 (no audience) - 10 (audience engaged)	8.8
5	The Write Stuff 0 (ign back to writing school) - 10 (from standard, shows)	10.0
6	Look! The Show! 0 (no show) - 10 (great show)	7.7
7	Putting on a Good Act 0 to the best of a bad act - 10 (best show - the Oscars)	8.5
8	Keeping up the Pace 0 to the best of a bad act - 10 (no act - the Oscars)	8.5
9	The Right Direction 0 (no direction) - 10 (great direction)	8.0
10	Gut Feel 0 to feel for these stars - 10 (feel for the spirit of them)	9.7
Overall Rating		8.8

New play "Red" as startling as the color

By *Suzanne Sigmund*
The Asian Reporter

After so much has been written and said about China's Cultural Revolution, it sometimes loses its power to impact us. Fortunately for us, L.A. playwright Chay Yew brings such a powerful freshness to this chapter of history, the experience may likely leave you gasping for breath. This is visceral theater, as invigorating as a cold splash of water in the face.

The first of three characters introduces herself to us as Sonja Wong Pickford: well-dressed, ultra-confident. Though her roots are in China, Pickford is now a writer living in America and delights in informing the world of her splendid success. A 40-something, self-professed 'Asian Barbara Cartland', she's made her name as a writer of ethnic romances. Money, fame, the New York Times Best Seller list: she's got it all.

When asked to speak at a "rinky dink" banquet in Shanghai, Sonja relents with the jaded ennui of those who can afford the very best. Why not go, she reasons; at least she'll get an all-expense-paid vacation at a luxury hotel. Besides, she's been working on a biography of the famous Beijing opera star, Hua Wai Mun, for four years and this trip will bring her closer to the source. As it turns out, she journeys into the very arteries and blood-red heart of China's and her own past.

We leave real time behind while Pickford's family legacy and cultural history intertwine irrevocably. As she rambles through Shanghai's abandoned opera house, Pickford meets up with the legendary Hua, resplendent in his thespian finery. He rehearses, postures with regal grace like a grand rooster of the opera stage.

Playwright Yew quickly takes us full throttle into the painful events of the Revolution: the persecution of China's artists, zeroing in on the ill-fated Hua. After

a third character (Hua's young daughter), enters the picture, Yew never lets the audience relax into the ho-hum posture of the detached. With his deft hand for pacing, we are caught in the maelstrom and the delicious tension never lets up for a second.

Okay, I'm going to resist the



Playwright Chay Yew

urge to spill the whole story. (Pet peeve: movie or theater critics who feel compelled to tell me everything, leaving no shred of mystery.) Yet, I will tell you this: the play is fiercely exciting because, like a well-crafted wrist watch, all the parts fit together seamlessly, synchronized to perfect harmony.

The acting is uniformly riveting. The cast of three Asian actors: Michi Barall, Sab Shimono and Jeanne Sakata have each cut their teeth on stage, TV and in film, and it shows. Beyond their individual talents, this play is, in the finest sense, an ensemble piece. They all carry the momentum forward with equal velocity.

Yew's dialogue feels believable, real-life; sometimes as biting as the prick of thorns on your bare summer limbs. The stage and set are simple yet evocative of both the opera palace and the inner recesses of the mind. Blood red diaphanous scrim center stage with two doorways, like two eyes ... leading both into the past and the present as characters enter and disappear, return, depart. An original soundtrack by composer

- Continued -

Nathan Wang quickens the pulse like thunder. Traditional drums bring a sense of foreboding, the delicate flute speaks of the artist's creativity: a single ephemeral rose.

Opening night

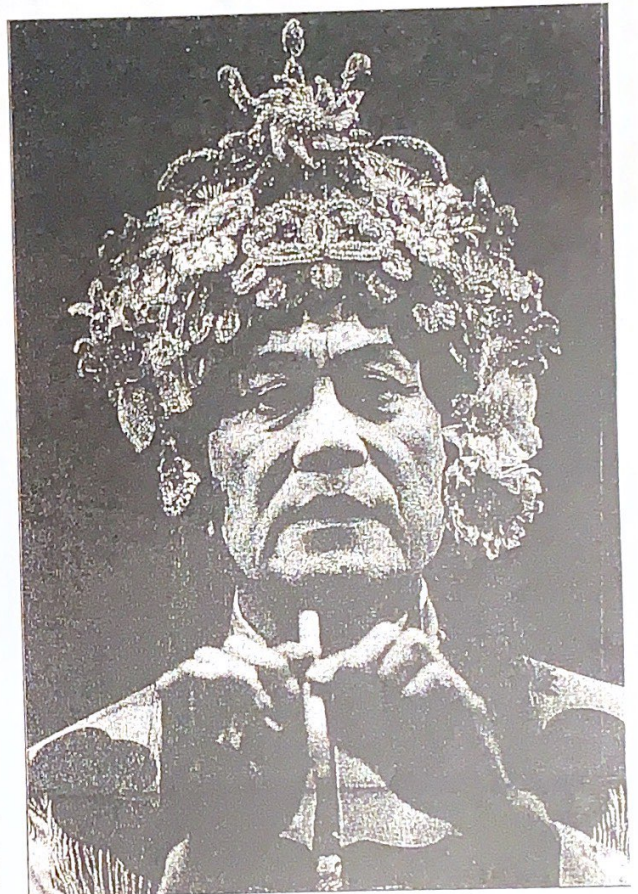
Unexpected pleasure: a cele-

bration in the lobby after the play. Jazz combo, complimentary drinks, big bowls of fresh fruit, dark spice cake with applesauce, steaming coffee in tall silver urns. The best part: Yew's actually in town for opening night, I've got a chance to meet him! (A brush with greatness? I'll take it.)

Artistic director, Liz Huddle, points Yew out for me and I approach him. First impression: maybe 30, looking very hip and New York in black leather jacket, spiky black hair. He's affable, none of that 'I'm somebody, you're nobody' you sometimes find in the very talented. Director of the Asian Theatre Workshop at the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles, Yew's plays have been produced by the New York Shakespeare Festival, the Royal Court Theatre in London, and Theatre-Works in Singapore, among others.

I comment about the impressive acting performances. "We worked the actors to death," Yew grins, swishes the red wine around in his glass. "And tonight they finally got it." Yes, the long rehearsals have most assuredly paid off in spades. Still reeling from Yew's gift for meaty, straight-from-the-gut dialogue, I have to ask: how does he do it? "I try to kill the editor in my head," Yew responds in a millisecond, "If you try to make it sound 'poetic' or a certain way, it comes out sounding false. It has to come from the heart and the mind."

If you see nothing else this season, see this one. This is theater which honors the ancient power of drama to bring about catharsis, transformation. A jump-start for the heart and mind, "Red" continues at Portland Center Stage through November 21. For tickets, call (503) 274-6588.



Sab Shimono is Peking Opera star Hua, persecuted for his art in Chay Yew's "Red," playing through Nov. 21 at Portland Center Stage. Photo/Chris Bennon