

# Asians Get Theater Notes a Proponent at the Taper

By Don Shirley

Chay Yew's Australia-based father wanted his son to take business courses—and "hit the roof" when transcripts mailed home from Pepperdine University revealed that the young Yew was taking courses like "theater movement," Yew recalled.

This year, however, the 30-year-old Yew was able to tell his father that he's working as an administrator, not just as a playwright. "You could hear the cash register ringing" in his father's delighted response, Yew said.

When Yew pointed out to his father that his post as director of the nonprofit Mark Taper Forum's new Asian Theatre Workshop is not exactly a get-rich-quick scheme, it didn't appear to sink in. "To him, this job is like the first step toward McDonnell Douglas," Yew said.

Yew was named one of three Mellon Fellows at the Taper last June and chose to use his two-year fellowship to spearhead the Taper's new project for Asian American writers. "They seemed to have wings for every other minority group," he noted.

The Singapore-raised Yew said he wants to introduce new themes and new writers into

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Asian American theater. "instead of the traditional Japanese American internment camp play that we keep doing over and over."

The "pioneering" Asian American playwrights—identified by Yew as Philip Kan Gotanda, David Henry Hwang, Wakako Yamauchi and Velina Hasu Houston—"talk about identity," Yew said. "The new writers take identity for granted."

Which is not to say that Yew takes the pioneers for granted—"Tea" writer Houston opened the Asian Theatre Workshop's new Lounge Series of discussions and performances on Dec. 5 at East West Players. But last week's installment of the series focused on "in-your-face" performance artists, to quote from the press release announcing the event. One of those artists, Justin Chin, also performed his solo piece "Born" last Monday as a project of the new workshop, again at East West.

Although East West Players might appear to be in competition with Yew's new workshop in the search for new Asian American writers, Yew scoffs at the idea. Not only is East West hosting some of his workshop events, Yew realizes that Taper economics dictate that certain plays "that are more out there" won't be done on the Taper mainstage and are better suited for East West or other smaller theaters such as West Coast Ensemble.

Then again, there are plays that

might be too big for East West—such as a musical epic about Filipino migrant workers in the '50s that Yew has on his mind—and therefore should be geared toward eventual production in a Taper-sized space, he said.

East West is producing Yew's own "Whitelands" trilogy in March: the brand-new "Half Lives," plus the previously produced "Porcelain" and "A Language of Their Own." Yew said that his own plays won't go to the Taper. "If I start promoting my own work," he said "artists will look at me in a different way. They don't need to compete with me."

Yew wants the plays his workshop develops to be quite different from the two plays on Asian themes that Center Theatre Group, the Taper parent organization, presented this year. Take "Miss Saigon" for example. For Kim, the central character to survive so many ordeals and then kill herself in the last scene—"I don't see the point," Yew said. "That's a very romanticized version" of an old story.

Yew also had questions about "The Woman Warrior," the play based on Maxine Hong Kingston's works presented by CTG in January at the Doolittle Theatre. "Ultimately, there is a lot of mythology there," he said, pointing to the use of gongs, exotic costumes, elements of Chinese opera. "Are we really using our culture, our mythology, to enhance our work? Or is it a result of perpetuating a stereotype? It's perceived as Orientalia.

I'm interested in different types of stories, aside from going back to mythology."

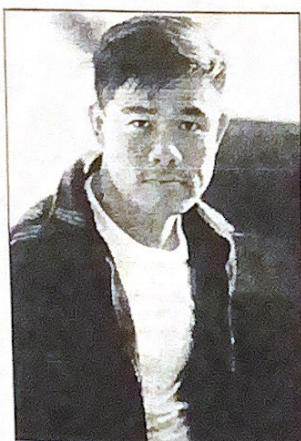
One collaborative effort on Yew's list is "The Square Project," which would be an evening of short plays by eight Asian American and eight non-Asian writers, about perceptions of each other's cultures. "I don't believe in isolationist policies," Yew said. "It would be fascinating to see what Tony Kushner [one of the eight non-Asians] comes up with."

Yew is also working on a project that would be done in conjunction with the Japanese American National Museum in Little Tokyo, in which 20 stories from Little Tokyo history would be assigned to performance artists, who would work up on-site performances based on the historical material. Here, too, Yew noted that this would not be exclusionary. For example, there were Latino families who looked after the businesses of Japanese American families when they were sent to the internment camps.

For now, Yew plans not to worry about turning out candidates for the Taper mainstage. "I don't want a mediocre work onstage. I have to know in my gut I can back it 100%."

Instead, his "basic concern," he said, is "to redefine Asian American theater" and "create a home base for Asian American writers"—and, in the meantime, to help raise enough money so that the workshop will survive his own two-year fellowship. □

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JOSE POMBO

HOME BASE: Chay Yew heads the Asian Theatre Workshop.

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