

FOREWORD

You can have a play without scenery. You can have a play without expensive costumes or special lights, without music and projections and video screens. You cannot have a play without actors.

Actors and a story.

If you take away all the special effects in a movie, all the close-ups, the long shots, tracking shots, the music and editing, take away the camera and the film, then and only then can you begin to approach the power of theater—what it's like to be on a movie set watching the performers right in front of you, not looking through the lens. Our eyes already have lenses. Our ears already have sound equipment. Our concentration is the most sophisticated editing machine on the planet: Look here! Now look over here! Why would we want someone to do all that work for us? Can we become any less alive?

Chay Yew knows all this in his bones. How you have to be there. Really be there. What could be more transporting than a man, a woman, a young man, standing before us enacting the story of a family—playing all the parts, assuming new shapes, new perspectives, nationalities, histories, desires, secrets. What do you have? *Wonderland*. Chay Yew treats the audience to the wonderland that is the shifting ground of being alive, reinvented for the darkness of theater. It's a paradox: we sit in the dark in order to be illuminated. No character is to be trusted, nor are they ever to be diminished by judgment. All things are possible and nothing is certain. Things change.

Another unique property of theater is its ability to take us places without literally showing it to us—everything is by inference, suggestion. (Plays on TV are not plays, they're TV. Plays that take to TV like a duck to water were already TV, at least in part.) We must put the pieces of the puzzle together ourselves. Who are

these two men in Chinatown, sharing a haircut? The play doesn't tell us, it shows us their separate perspectives, even though one of them is blind. The blind man can see as much as the seeing man if he knows how to listen and pay attention to the details.

The meaning of the Cultural Revolution in the lives of three individuals who do not fit anyone's preconceived idea of what makes an artist, a journalist, a student, a pawn in a terrifying game outside of one's control—these things are not easily captured, they must be teased out of behavior, behavior, behavior. And one must know how to look and to listen.

Chay Yew knows how to look, listen, and even more thrillingly, how to tease us into doing the same for ourselves. No two audience members can have the same experience of any of these remarkably different plays (and I mean different from each other as well as from the wide and banal landscape of most English-language theater today), because the plays do not tell you what to feel or think. The violin music is never present, even in the most poignant moment. Listen: the air is clear. One can always step back and think, or lean forward and get lost. It's up to you, it hasn't already been decided upon. The string section is inside you. Or not.

These plays are why I wanted to be in the theater.

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