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Chay Yew.

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Chay Yew: Break the Table and Build a New One

After 9 years at Victory Gardens, the writer/director reflects on what he's learned from running, and fighting for, a theatre in Chicago.

BY JERALD RAYMOND PIERCE

Seen from the outside, the start of Chay Yew's tenure at **Victory Gardens** looked rocky, to say the least. Dennis Zacek, who was leaving Victory Gardens after 35 years in 2012, had handpicked his successor: associate artistic director Sandy Shinner. But the Victory Gardens board overruled Zacek's choice in favor of Yew, a writer/director with extensive

credits in Los Angeles, New York, and nationwide. The divisive period that followed was detailed in a [The New York Times](#) article, as Yew transferred a slew of award-winning playwrights out of the theatre's longtime Playwrights Ensemble into "alumni" status.

In the nine years since, Yew became a fervent champion of equity, diversity, and inclusion initiatives at Victory Gardens, including the establishment of the [Directors Inclusion Initiative](#), geared toward developing the talents of Chicago stage directors who identify as people of color, disabled, women, transgender, gender-non-conforming, or LGBTQ. And when Yew moved the theatre's storied Playwrights Ensemble into a new era, he brought in the now nearly household names like Ike Holter, Marcus Gardley, Luis Alfaro, Naomi Iizuka, Tanya Saracho, Laura Schellhardt, Philip Dawkins, and Samuel D. Hunter. Under Yew's guidance, Victory Gardens has continuously lifted the voices of women, POC, and folks from other marginalized communities. In fact, the theatre's planned production of *Heroes of the Fourth Turning* in 2021 would be the first play by a white male on the theatre's main-stage season since Robert Askins's *Hand to God* made its way to Chicago from Broadway in 2016.

Yew announced last December that he would [leave the theatre](#) at the end of the 2019-20 season, which was cut short in March, in the middle of his Victory Gardens directing swan song, [Dhaba on Devon Avenue](#) by Madhuri Shekar. Just as he came in with a controversy, there has been one around his leaving: When the theatre's board announced last month that it would restructure its management model, consolidating its artistic and executive leadership roles into a single executive artistic director [Erica Daniels](#), some Chicago theatriemakers and leaders at other U.S. theatres voiced criticism of the process and what they saw as a lack of transparency, and all members of the Playwrights Ensemble [resigned in protest](#).

I spoke with Yew in early March, before his successor was announced, and just before [nationwide theatre closures](#)—we were even able to sit down in face to face! We spoke about his career, his time at Victory Gardens, and his future.

JERALD RAYMOND PIERCE: You've had a great nine years here at Victory Gardens.

Why leave now?

CHAY YEW: I think that's the reason why. I remember, at one point quite early on, looking at the budget and realizing it wasn't the same budget I was given during the interview. It turned out to be a seven-figure deficit, and it took me two or three years to get the ship up and running. There was also a moment where—many people don't know, and it's safe to say it now because the board laughs at it—there was a moment when we had weekly meetings trying to determine the fate of this theatre. Should we shut it down? Do we merge? Do we actually sell the theatre and rent space? So by weaning and also trying to grow the theatre, we finally found a way out of it into the last three years of being in the black.

The second reason was probably the most interesting experience at a board meeting, sitting back and looking at all of the things that we had done. I said, 'Did that, did that, did that. I'm done.' There was a moment I said, 'I'm done.' I think it gives them a very good place for a new leader to take it to the next level. And because I was given space, it's important to me to give space to the next generation of leaders. When I came in, I was one of a handful of artistic directors that were of color, and **now there are more**, which is very thrilling. But they too are being saddled with a lot of debt. So I'm handing over a theatre that is ready for someone to take chances because we're in the black.

I was looking back at the *Times* piece from 2012, right after you came in, talking about the contention between you and the theatre's old guard of playwrights. Can you tell me a little bit about how that situation played out in those early years?

In hindsight, it looked like I was the gay foreign student who came to a new school and nobody wanted to sit with me. It's also the nature of ultimately understanding what Chicago is. **Chicago is segregated**, and it's always been that way, looking at the history of this city and why we love our little tribes, our little groups, our little ensembles, and our little theatres. So I was the outsider, and I was mentioned by the press as being the outsider a couple of times. I think that environment of someone coming in trying to find a way to create change was obviously very difficult for a lot of people. As a result of that, there was resistance. I don't think this is unique to all my peers right now who are of color and women who are going to theatres trying to create change. Change seems easy, because people want to say they want to be a part of it. But ultimately it's very hard to do.

To be fair, I don't really talk about it, but now I can step back and say, you know, some of the stuff that was done to me was racist. I didn't want to call it out, because it felt like an excuse or it felt like it was a thing that I had to combat. I just wanted to make sure that it was the theatre I was most interested in. I mean, some of the press—very veiled. But it was definitely fascinating.

What I loved about the city was—when I first came in as a guest director at the Goodman, I remember one summer walking downtown and picking up *Time Out* and on the cover was a cover that said, [why are theatres so white?](#) I thought, wow, this is a city that is actually daring to ask the big question. It was that that actually inspired me when the moment came to run Victory Gardens, that was the right place to do it. But these little factors are all a part of change. And I don't think it's unique, unfortunately. The most important thing is to say to yourself, this is the mission of the theatre. The theatre belongs to the people. It's not about you. So what are you going to do to make it a space for everyone?

This was your first time leading a theatre, and you came into this with such a strong vision for Victory Gardens. How did seeing the press and expectations around your leadership affect your plans?

I believe in the long game. That's why I think it's important to look at what you really want to achieve. I also feel that artistic directorship isn't a job, it's a service. I don't really need to run a theatre. But after the '80s and the '90s of multiculturalism—that real amorphous thing where everyone had a seat at the table—we laughed at and thought: Well, what's the next step? It must be better. Then there were 10 or 15 years of nothing; we were excluded on all levels. So when an opportunity came to run a theatre, I felt it was almost a responsibility. I needed to ensure the legacies of [George C. Wolfe](#) and [Gordon Davidson](#), two of the people whom I feel were my mentors, by keeping the field [moving] forward by actually leading a theatre. So once I start thinking that way, every little battle is not an important thing, because at the end of it, there's the war.

So for me to change the theatre—and not change the theatre radically, let's be honest, Victory Gardens has always had the idea of, "What is diverse theatre work?," except that maybe some of that work is a little more 1.0, a little more stuck in the '90s. I see Black au-

diences, brown audiences, even our Asian audiences not connecting with the works of their community that have been placed on the stages here. So the question is: How can we actually get poets from the community, and the community to see themselves on their stage, and to claim the space as theirs? That was something I think was important.

You have to have a vision of what you want the world to be through the art that you do. That's why I have that fighting spirit that will say, "Screw you, I'm still gonna do it," because it's not about me. If it's about me, everything becomes personal. So all these complications that come with change, I'm willing to bear, because I just know that theatre ultimately belongs to the next generation.

Where do you see Victory Gardens' place in, and responsibility to, Chicago theatre and the national theatre landscape?

I think of size, actually, because we are not the biggest theatre and we're not the smallest theatre. What I love is that we are in the middle. My job in my head has always been: Who are the next generation of leaders and artists I can support? Those who have come out, who have done their work, and who have paid their dues in the storefronts, I want to get them to the Goodman. I don't really care if they bypass me or see me as a steppingstone, because that's my job. All the directors and all the artists that I have championed, produced, and encouraged, I hope they would have used this space to move from a 99-seat to a 300-seat, ultimately to a 1,000-seat. If I'm not doing that, then I'm not doing my job.

What do you feel like were the biggest accomplishments you've had, or the ones you were most proud of?

Sentimentally, it's the artists. I look at [Isaac Gomez](#), who's now doing what he needs to be doing after slogging with me the first few years. I look at [Monty Cole](#), I look at [Joanie Schultz](#), I look at all the artists who have come here and now have gotten bigger projects. I think that is the proudest I can be, because I see them grow beyond me. And in answer to your question too—everything that I was given, I want to replicate, if not better. Whatever I was not given, I need to open that door. Being an immigrant coming to this country, the only family I ever had was the theatre. I had been taught by playwrights and artists of different communities to recognize my citizenship, my politic, and also my place. So if that

dies, if that does not continue, then I'm not sure of my place and my role in the field.

Is there anything that you implemented here that larger theatres should or could learn from?

It takes leadership to understand that the world is constantly shifting. How is your organization reacting and relating to this world if the world is hungrier for representation? Are your leaders looking like the world, or is it basically white leadership and just producing plays of color? If you're doing that, I'm not really sure at the end of the day it would be the right course to take. At some point someone's going to say it's colonial. Are you sharing the power?

I was once given the idea that there is a table and there's a seat for you at the table. At some point I said that's not good enough, because at the end of the dinner I'm asked to go home. So the question is: Whose table is it? Do I have a say in the menu? Which guests can I invite, and can we make the table bigger? If we can't, can we share more space with each other? I'm not asking someone to be kicked out. I'm asking us to make room. And if no one gives you that opportunity at that table, you need to break that fucking table and build your own.

It's important for a lot of people to know, especially people of color and women, that if you have no place at that theatre, don't do it. Find your own, found your own, create your own party. Some of these bigger flagship theatres, I think they're slowly doing it. The question is how you're grooming leaders, because to some extent, if your leadership is all white and you're doing works of color, there is a disconnect. Equity, inclusion, and diversity should happen top down from your board all the way down to your audiences. It's a commitment. It's not only diversifying your artists and your plays. What else are you doing? It's opening doors and that, for a lot of people, can be hard.

What's next for you?

Finding another table. I don't know what that is going to be. I mean, when I left, it wasn't, "I'm going to find another job, I already have another job, I want to do big projects." It was that moment when I felt like I was done. I didn't think about myself until the next day. And I

realized once I gave my notice, “Shit, what am I going to do for my health care?” You know, we still are getting older. You freak out. I do know that it’s going to be another chapter of creating work. I do know that the things that this theatre has espoused are going to continue to define me. I’m still going to be mentoring people. I am still going to be doing a lot of work that’s going to question the way that we are in this world. I just don’t have a home, and I think it’s fine. I’m trying to see where the next projects take me. I’m looking at projects that keep feeding me as a human being. It could be a small theatre, it could be a big theatre, I just don’t know. I just need to be challenged. I need to figure out more about me through the theatre.

Is there anything else about your career and time at Victory Gardens you would like to add or let the readers know?

When I first came to Chicago, it was important that I learned about what the audiences were and who the people were. Sometimes leaders just go into a theatre company and just say, “Hey, this is what I’m going to be doing.” I had that thought originally and I realized at some point it was selfish. The theatre had to relate to the people. That’s been really humbling as well as very gratifying.

I’ve also learned I probably would miss the idea of audiences who are completely, 100 percent invested in what’s in front of them. I’ve never experienced an audience that listens as hard as Chicago audiences. The other joy that I’ve always had is the opportunity to meet socially conscious audience members, people in the community, organizers, artists who believe in social change. I find that so thrilling. Let’s figure out how we can bring groups of people to this theatre. How do we give you a platform? You’ll realize Chicago is full of these wonderful people trying to create change, and theatre can be a part of it, because we are the front lines, we tell stories. What the others do will probably be more of the backbreaking work: How do you change, how do you vote? But there is a partnership, and that’s a very unique thing about the city I’ve learned, that I’ve somewhat made Victory Gardens a part of. That’s something I will miss. It’s been a great, great gift for me.

CORRECTION: An earlier version of this story said that most of the Playwrights Ensemble had resigned. The entire Playwrights Ensemble resigned in protest.

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