



88 LA WEEKLY JULY 7-13, 2000

THE SQUARE

Portraying a blind barber and his long-time, once-rich customer, Soon-Tek Oh and Arye Gross break our heart in Chay Yew's *Scissors*, while Elizabeth Ruscio and Jodi Thelen amaze and tickle us in Jessica Hagedorn's *Silent Movie*, a flapper-era melodrama featuring lesbians in a Chinatown opium den. Such are the stylistic stretches apparent in the 16 short works presented by the Asian Theater Workshop, whose director (Yew), and Lisa Peterson, commissioned the playwrights (both Asian and non-) and randomly assigned them eras, ethnic mixes and the number of actors to employ. The artistic results may be all over the map, but thematically, these are mostly Asian-centered vignettes set in a city square. The most successful are also conceptually the simplest, such as Craig Lucas' *Examination*, in which Barry Del Sherman seeks a date with his doctor, Dennis Dun, who both yearns for and retreats from his Chinese parents, touching on the immigrant's sense of disjunction and the universal need for connection. David Henry Hwang's *Jade Flowerpots and Bound Feet* comically questions ethnic "authenticity": Sandra Quarterman is an Amazon-dot-com rep checking out the claim by fictitious author Mai Lin (Thelen) — clearly a white chick in a bad pigtail wig — to have Chinese ancestry. Philip Kan Gotanda's *The Old Chinese Man* is also memorable, featuring Tamlyn Tomita who feels she's being stared at by Oh — who represents traditional cultural expectations — as she makes out with a white guy (Sherman). Under Peterson's inventive direction, the evening zips along, offering plenty of visual and textual surprises. Still, 16 plays is a lot to take in; several of the works are overly complex for the time allotted or seem abruptly cut off to fit within it. There may be too much of a good thing, but what kind of quibble is that? Taper, Too, at the Actors' Gang Theater, 6209 Santa Monica Blvd., Hlywd.; Tues.-Sun., 8 p.m.; Sat.-Sun., 2 p.m.; thru July 16, (213) 628-2772

LEGIT REVIEW

The Square

(Actor's Gang; 99 seats; \$20)

A Taper, Too/Center Theater Group/Mark Taper Forum/Asian Theater Workshop presentation of 16 one-act plays. Conceived by Chay Yew and Lisa Peterson. Written by Mac Wellman, Han Ong, Philip Kan Gotanda, Maria Irene Fornes, David Henry Hwang, Craig Lucas, Diana Son, Bridget Carpenter, Yew, Ping Chong, Robert O'Hara, Jose Rivera, Jessica Hagedorn, Kia Corihron, Constance Congdon, Alice Tuan. Directed by Lisa Peterson. Set, Rachel Hauck; costumes, Joyce Kim Lee; lighting, Geoff Korf; sound, Nathan Wang; dramaturgy, Yew; casting, Amy Lieberman; stage manager, Erika H. Sellin. Opened, reviewed July 1, 2000. Closes July 16. Running time: 2 HOURS, 35 MIN.

With: Marcus Chong, Dennis Dun, Arye Gross, Emily Kuroda, Soon-Tek Oh, Sandra Quarterman, Elizabeth Ruscio, Barry Del Sherman, Elizabeth Sung, Jodi Thelen, Tamlyn Tomita, Greg Watanabe

By STEVEN OXMAN

A compilation of 16 brief plays about the Asian-American experience, "The Square" represents a significant achievement in cross-cultural contemplation. Conceived by playwright Chay Yew and director Lisa Peterson, and five years in the making, this piece manages to skirt all the obvious pitfalls of taking a specific racial minority as its subject, skillfully evading the pedantry and the complain-

ing. Of the playwrights, half are Asian-American, half are not, and along with ethnic diversity they bring to the table, or in this case a bare stage, a wide variety of stylistic approaches. This very lack of a unified point of view in "The Square," along with a clear willingness to experiment with form, creates a work that is evocative, intriguing and, ultimately, deeply insightful. If it's true that the best art makes the best politics, then this elegantly staged piece of theater, with some truly exquisite writing, is very fine politics indeed.

All set in and around a square in New York's Chinatown, the plays range in period setting from post-Civil War America (Ping Chong's "Excerpts From the Diary of a Chinese Envoy") to the present day, with stops in the Victorian era (Diana Son's very beautiful story of forbidden love, "Handsome"), the 1920s (Jessica Hagedorn's lesbian-themed, sweetly stylized "Silent Movie"), the Depression (Yew's startlingly layered "Scissors," Jose Rivera's "Pediatrics") and a few in that ever-provocative decade, the '60s (Bridget Carpenter's sharp monologue "Kismet in a Square on a Wedding Day in Spring," Robert O'Hara's clever "The Spot" and Constance Congdon's surprising "New").

Representing the varied periods and settings with a minimum of fuss, the design team does exceptionally fine work. At the start, the ensemble marks out a square in white sand, which becomes the primary playing space, surrounded by the chairs and benches that will make their way into the square when needed. Joyce Kim Lee's costumes are more elaborate than Rachel Hauck's necessarily austere set, but they're still very successfully unobtrusive. Each play's title and author are projected onto the exposed back wall.

The short play, like the short story, is a form all its own, with a multitude of practitioners and few masters. While not all of the contributions are completely fulfilling — some are bland (Craig Lucas' "Examination," Alice Tuan's "Crick-ct") or transparent (Maria Irene Fornes' "The Audition"), while others are too elliptical (Mac Well-

man's "My Old Habit of Returning to Places") — there are some genuine gems here.

Philip Kan Gotanda's well-crafted "The Old Chinese Man" is perhaps the play most on the nose in terms of its subject matter — we've seen the clash between the second-generation Asian-American and the traditional old man many times before — but the writer confronts the familiarity by giving his play the tone of a parable. David Henry Hwang provides by far the funniest piece, the provocative "Jade Flowerpots and Bound Feet," about a white woman who has written an Asian "memoir" and the publisher who's seeking authenticity, whatever that means. "Handsome," "Scissors," "Silent Movie" and "New" are also especially memorable.

Peterson demonstrates an amazing capacity to handle the diversity of styles while still giving a sense of a singular whole, using the entire ensemble for transitions, relying on the actors for sound effects and in-

corporating music with great efficiency to establish changing tones. There's an easy, fluid grace to the evening.

Above all, though, "The Square" is remarkably well cast, and the actors inhabit their characters with stunning sensitivity to the needs of each individual play. It's difficult even to select a few who stand out, since there are so many fine performances. Soon-Tek Oh is perhaps the show's singular anchor, playing the older male Asian characters with enormous dignity and specificity. Overall, though, the women outshine the men, perhaps more because of the roles than the talent. Tamlyn Tomita brings to her pieces a spirited innocence, Elizabeth Ruscio a carefully calibrated sophistication, Emily Kuroda and Elizabeth Sung a notable versatility, Jodi Thelen a special comic flair and Sandra Quarterman an impressive ability to be both stylized and grounded at once.

Stage



Chop Suey

The Square rambles off in 16 directions in its attempt to get to the heart of Chinatown, U.S.A.

BY EDMUND NEWTON

Beware the treacherous waters off the Cape of Merging Ethnic Currents. They can rise up and scuttle communities, swallow friendships, turn ancient cultures into soppy jumbles, and swamp entire cities. No place has seen more of that kind of cultural turbulence than the nation's Chinatowns, where old and new, foreign and native chop into each other like mighty rivers rushing together. The Asian Theater Workshop, under the auspices of the Mark Taper Forum's Taper, Too program, has devised an experiment to dramatize those buffeting forces of Asian culture meeting non-Asian culture. The outcome, now playing at The Actors' Gang, is called *The Square*.

Here's how it was supposed to pan out. Sixteen playwrights were commissioned to write short plays about a square in Chinatown, New York. Eight Asians and eight non-Asians all wrote 10-minute sketches, each with no more than four characters. The playwrights, including David Henry Hwang, Maria Irene Fornes, and Jose Rivera, are as diverse intellectually as ethnically. Each drew a historical period from a hat; there are sketches set in the 1880s, the 1920s, the 1960s, and the present.

This all suggests a kind of symmetry, a neatness of design, doesn't it? The mission was to "create a theatrical portrayal of perceptions, experiences, and relations of Asian-Americans with non-Asian-Americans," as the program puts it. Yet what dis-

tinguishes the production at The Actors' Gang isn't any sort of unity of vision but, despite a lot of obvious cutting and pasting by director Lisa Peterson and dramaturge Chay Yew, a rambling incoherence. There's a plethora of different perspectives here, which is fine. But the show's underlying concept begins to collapse because of its very diversity. In the end, you're left with the impression that being Asian in America means all things to all people, which isn't very satisfying or even instructive.

Worse still, the one ingredient that seems to be missing is Chinatown itself. In one segment, some early Chinese settlers — those sad, womenless men who came to build the railroads and went on to establish the first Chinatowns — talk movingly about their loneliness and isolation. In another, a blind barber talks about his life in a modern Chinatown, being kept awake by the laughter of the drunks from the saloon across the street and the click of the mah jong tiles in adjoining apartments. But, for the most part, there's little sense here of the bubbling political and social ferment in Asian communities beginning in the 1960s, with the opening up of immigration and Nixon's bold expedition to Communist China. That's a big disappointment from a play that's supposed to be telling us something about being Asian in America. And there's little of any sort of sensuous connection to Chinatown, the actual place.

Still, there are flashes of insight and laugh-out-loud humor. Hwang depicts an "Asian" writer (Jodi Thelen) who, in full Chinese regalia including red satin cheongsam, is pitching a memoir to a dot-com publisher. She calls herself Kwok Mei Lee, but her real name, she finally confesses, is Ashley Winterstone. "I tend to think of that as my slave name," she tells the wary publisher, who demands a blood test as proof of ethnicity and finally pulls the writer's wig off, revealing blond hair under-



Greg Watanabe and Elizabeth Ruscio in "Handsome," by Diana Son, one of 16 short plays

neath. The point is that, in the dizzying cultural marketplace, ethnicity has acquired a certain cachet. If you don't watch out, Hwang suggests, the blue-eyed appropriators will even take over your culture, like a cowbird hatchling in a swallow's nest.

Fornes' play shows two Chinese actors auditioning for roles in a movie, illustrating the vast distance between ordinary Asians and the mainstream culture. "Not enough roles for Chinese actors," one of them says. So a slick casting director/acting teacher (Marcus Chong) instructs them on the stereotypes of other groups. They must adapt themselves to being, say, Latino, the man says, demonstrating how to

curse like a "Mexican," dance like a ranchero, and wield a switchblade like a *cholo*. The same theme is taken up, less successfully, later in the production by Robert O'Hara, who has an Asian woman and a black woman arguing about seats just before a Martin Luther King address. Ironic, eh? The two wof and curse each other in vile terms, but, it turns out, they're just rehearsing for encounters with *real* racists.

In a segment by Chay Yew, who is not only the production's dramaturge but also the director of the Asian Theater Workshop, an elderly barber cuts the hair of his former master. The two speak nostalgically of their

lives together before the great social eggbeater of massive immigration took over, when relations between master and servant were more formal. The formality, which the rich white gentleman (Arye Gross) stubbornly maintains with the haircutter (Soon-Tek Oh), may have emphasized the distance between the two men, but it allowed for depth of emotion, even a reserved kind of love and physical attraction.

But then there's Diana Son's sketch of a Chinese indentured servant (Greg Watanabe) and his mistress (Elizabeth Ruscio). The man kneels before the woman, who's apparently also his lover, and begs to cut off the symbol of his servitude, his pigtail.

Such accoutrements make little difference to her, the woman says. But when the servants cuts his hair, the power balance is threatened, and the woman reverts to a conventional mistress, sending the man off on an errand, chop-chop.

Gay attraction, violent racism, interethnic romance, the overnight relinquishment of centuries-old traditions — all of these themes and more are given a ride in *The Square*. A cast of a dozen, switching easily from despair to farcical gaiety, is top-notch. But not even veteran actors like Soon-Tek Oh, Emily Kuroda, and the ebullient Marcus Chong can turn this heap of chaff into gold. ●

The Square
Runs Tues.-Sun., 8 p.m., Sat.-
Sun., 2 p.m., through July 16, at
The Actors' Gang, 6209 Santa
Monica Blvd., Hollywood,
213-628-2772.

Woodland Hills,
(Los Angeles C
Daily News
(Cir. D. 204,493
(Cir. S. 215,881

JUL - 7 2000

Allen's P.C.B.E.

Long Beach
(Los Angeles
Press Telec
(Cir. D. 106,
(Cir. S. 124,

JUL 11 2000

Allen's P.C.B.

Hip to see 'Square'

1656
Anthology of 16 plays
offers variety of views

By Evan Henerson
Staff Writer

Tucked away in the program of "The Square" is a telling little note that demonstrates the luxury of producing a play within a workshop format: "Plays and order," the program reads, "are subject to change."

Review

This line might otherwise be by-passed were it not for the fact "The Square" — the ambitious and quite intriguing second entry in the Center Theatre Group's experimental program, Taper, Too — is actually a bunch of short plays grouped around a single location.

With 16 plays by 16 playwrights presented in a work-in-progress structure, could things still change? Well, duh! Should they?

The facts

- **What:** "The Square."
- **Where:** Taper, Too at the Actors' Gang, 5201 Santa Monica Blvd., Hollywood.
- **When:** 8 p.m. Tuesday through Sunday, 2 p.m. Saturday and Sunday; through July 16.
- **Tickets:** \$20. Call (213) 628-2772.
- **Our rating:** ★★★

Unquestionably.

The good news for those fortunate enough to catch "The Square" (which runs only through July 16 at the Actors' Gang in Hollywood) is that it contains more wheat than chaff. This is, after all, 16 of the country's most significant contemporary playwrights all working toward a common theme and goal.

stages



Greg Watanabe and Elizabeth Ruscio star in "Handsome," one of the 16 short plays that form "The Square," at the Actors' Gang.

Immediate kudos, then, to co-creators Lisa Peterson (the piece's director) and Chay Yew (director of the Taper's Asian Theatre Workshop, and one of the 16 playwrights) for what must have been a highly difficult endeavor.

Dramatically, "The Square" may not possess the neat symmetry of its metaphor, but then again, 120 years of Asian-American history shouldn't fit neatly into a four-sided box.

The location is the same town square in Manhattan's Chinatown during four decades (1880s, 1920s, 1960s and 2000s). Using white powder, the 12 members of the cast — all playing multiple roles — line out a square on Rachel Hauck's largely bare stage. Then the space gets busy. In this

park and its environs, people of all ages and races meet for auditions, peace rallies, assignations, trysts and haircuts. Servants will learn English. Masters will drown their cares in opium dens. A representative from Amazon.com will even go to extreme lengths to expose the author of a dubious Asian-American memoir.

Talk about shifts in tone. David Henry Hwang's "Jade Flowerpots and Bound Feet" (Amazon.com rep vs. poseur) is an exercise in dark comic cynicism while Yew's "Scissors," three segments later, is a painful character study of a Caucasian high roller in the 1920s (played by Arye Gross) and the blind Chinese barber (Soon-Tek Oh) he sees every week. Contrast these with "The Spot," Robert

O'Hara's hilarious mixed-race double cross in which two women are staking out a piece of the park for a speech by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

What common strands connect these works? Sometimes several, other times, practically none.

The servant who learns the words "lonely, lonely, lonely" in Han Ong's untitled play is echoed by the servant looking to lop off his braid in Diana Son's "Handsome." The young gay doctor in Craig Lucas' "Examination" also knows how it feels to be "lonely, lonely, lonely."

So many of the characters who pass through the square feel isolated, threatened or abandoned.

Despite the rules of four that Yew and Peterson appear to be following (four playwrights writing for each of the four decades), "The Square" could use some judicious pruning.

A few of the segments feel like wayward musings rather than parts of the whole, and the play used as a framing device, Mac Wellman's "My Old Habit of Returning to Places" is just plain bizarre and a poor choice.

Still, "The Square" has much to offer. The ensemble is excellent and Peterson's staging is fluid.

I don't know what shape the play will ultimately take, but one day in the not too distant future, I expect the Center Theatre Group will have occasion to boast that "The Square" began its life here in L.A.

'The Square' dares to break out of the box

REVIEW: Sixteen playwrights look at the Asian-American experience from many angles, with mixed results.

By **PAUL HODGINS**
The Orange County Register

There were times in the past few years when the Mark Taper Forum's vast new play development machine seemed to be running out of gas. This summer, though, the Taper, Too

'The Square'

- ▶ **Where:** The Actors' Gang, 6209 Santa Monica Blvd., Hollywood
- ▶ **Continues:** Through July 16. 8 p.m. Tuesdays-Fridays, 2 and 8 p.m. Saturdays-Sundays
- ▶ **How much:** \$20
- ▶ **Length:** 2 hours, 40 minutes
- ▶ **Availability:** Good
- ▶ **Suitability:** Adult subject matter
- ▶ **Call:** (213) 628-2772

program of new work seems to be infused with a dynamic, fresh energy.

That excitement is everywhere in "The Square," a curi-

ous and exhilarating collection of 16 playlets by some of America's best playwrights, which opened for a short run last week at the Actors' Gang.

On paper, "The Square" reads like a playwriting 101 exercise. Every participant was given a common location (a town square) and overarching theme (the relationship between Asian-Americans and other Americans). The writing team was evenly divided — eight Asian-Americans, eight non-Asian-Americans.

Specifics were chosen at random from a list of four choices: time period (1880s, 1920s, 1960s, the present), theme (destiny, order, chaos,

tradition), cast size (from one to four), and racial makeup (Asian, non-Asian or mixed race).

The result, as might be expected, is wild and woolly. The 16 plays, none longer than 10 minutes, run the stylistic gamut, from free-form experimentalism to traditional realism. Some playwrights seem remarkably comfortable working within such strict confines. Others flounder.

The best plays deal with relationships fraught with tension and hidden agendas.

An old, blind barber (Soon-Tek Oh) and his longtime customer, a troubled businessman (Arye Gross), share a hid-

den intimacy in Chay Yew's "Scissors." An Asian-American teen-age girl (Tamlyn Tomita) dating a white boy (Barry Del Sherman) is driven to distraction by the disapproving stares of an old Asian man (Oh) in Philip Kan Gotanda's "The Old Chinese Man," an exquisitely structured miniature drama with a surprise twist at the end.

Others find success with comedy and parody. David Henry Hwang has wicked fun with minority wannabes in "Jade Flowerpots and Bound Feet," a silly if amusing tale about a white woman (Jodi Thelen) who desperately wants

Please see **SQUARE Page 5**

SQUARE FROM 3

to convince a skeptical publisher she is Asian-American, the better to sell her lurid (if largely fictional) autobiography. Robert O'Hara lampoons transparent racial stereotyping in "The Spot," a fiery argument between a black woman (Saundra Quarterman) and an Asian woman (Elizabeth Sung) that isn't quite what it seems.

Not surprisingly, some playlets are unsuccessful. As a whole, structural and tonal experimentation work less well than straightforward presentation in this crazy-quilt context, since it takes time for an audience to tune in to a non-traditional approach. In "Excerpts From the Diary of a Chinese Envoy," playwright Ping Chong chooses an austere, recitational approach that would work better in another context.

And sometimes, a subject proves too potent and complex to be handled in just a few minutes. Jose Rivera's "Pediatrics," about a young Chinese girl trapped and almost killed

by racist 1920s thugs, can't rise above situational stereotype.

But the nice thing about this is that if you don't like a play, simply wait a few minutes and another one will be along.

Director Lisa Peterson, who has been working on the concept for "The Square" with Yew over the last five years, goes for a simple if sometimes overly stylized and self-consciously artsy presentation. At the beginning of the evening, the performers draw a square on the stage, using salt to define its boundaries. While it's a beautiful, ritualistic moment, the resulting space is treated fussily by the actors, who take frequent and obvious pains not to disrupt the square's fragile parameters.

Still, the enthusiasm of the project, and the remarkable collective talents involved, muscle through all such faults. "The Square" is a gutsy experiment in the fine tradition of Taper, Too. After several seasons of half-hearted efforts, it seems like a return to the spirit of risk and unbridled fun that used to distinguish the event.