

Bang the Gong Slowly

Asian-American theater's great leap forward BY SANDRA ROSS



Yew and Hwang

TED SOGON

AT THE BLANDLY INSTITUTIONAL MUSIC CENTER ANNEX, playwrights David Henry Hwang and Chay Yew are both wearing blue jeans and sipping specialty coffee — but that's where the outward similarities end. Family man Hwang, properly attired in a pinstriped Oxford shirt, meticulously chooses every word like the high school debate star he once was, at times slipping into academic jargon. The skintight-denim-jacketed, openly gay Yew vaguely resembles a hustler in one of his own plays, cracking off-the-cuff jokes in a perky style that sometimes makes Hwang blanch, despite the obvious fun both men have in playing off one another and in citing each other's works to illustrate their points.

Although Singapore native Yew, now 34, moved to Los Angeles in 1981, the two would not meet until the mid-'90s. They've since collaborated on several projects, including last year's *The Square*, produced by Taper. Too at the Actors' Gang Theater, and *Golden Child*, at East West Players. At the moment, both have work running downtown: Yew's *Red*, at East West Players, and Tony Award winner Hwang's much-anticipated adaptation of *Flower Drum Song*, at the Mark Taper Forum. Yew's play is about an Asian-American novelist — a cross between Danielle Steel and Maxine Hong Kingston — who stimulates her creative juices by revisiting the Beijing opera, while 44-year-old Angeleno native Hwang updates the Rodgers-and-Hammerstein musical about generational conflict by focusing on a struggling Chinese opera theater that morphs into a nightclub.

Although local stages have long benefited from a large pool of Asian-American actors, never before has Los Angeles seen two Asian-identified plays simultaneously performing in larger theaters — in this instance, within the same square mile.

"The two plays are so different, the thought that they would compete for the same audience has never occurred to me," says Hwang, a bit disingenuously, though he may be right: *Red* is a three-character presentational drama, while *Flower Drum Song* is a new adaptation of a second-tier musical. *Red* is set in China, while *Flower Drum Song* takes place in San Francisco's Chinatown.

But what if the two productions do cut into each other's attendance? "Bring on the helicopters!" Yew playfully suggests, referring to the gaudy, crowd-pleasing spectacle of *Miss Saigon*. But he's also winking at the casting controversy surrounding the blockbuster's 1991 Broadway debut. Hwang bristles at Yew's allusion, for when Cameron Mackintosh announced that non-Asian actor Jonathan Pryce would star as the Engineer in what is essentially the play's key narrative role, Hwang was at the forefront of organized protests.

Reminded that African-American actress Juanita Hall put on yellowface to play Madame Leong in the 1961 film

of *FDS*, Hwang explains his own complicated relationship with the musical: "As a kid I thought the film was really great, but then I went to college in the '70s and '80s, a time when we all became 'Asian-Americans,' and the film became demonized. I saw this as an opportunity to write my own *Flower Drum Song* — write the book that ideally Hammerstein would have if he'd been Chinese-American." (Hwang's version is, in fact, based on Hammerstein and Joseph Field's original book, which was adapted from C.Y. Lee's novel.)

Hwang, moreover, is also acutely aware that most members of his *Flower Drum Song* cast have appeared in productions of *Miss Saigon*, though he is quick to point out that Mackintosh, who stuck with Pryce, cast Asian-American actors as the Engineer later in the Broadway run and in the touring productions.

The cultural significance of *Flower Drum Song* is undeniable, it being the first film in which most of the lead Asian roles were actually played by Asian-Americans. "The film was the only place you could see Asians who sort of acted like regular Americans," says Hwang. "There wasn't another movie about Asian-Americans until *The Joy Luck Club* in 1993. This gives you a sense of the size *Flower Drum Song* occupies in the consciousness of Asians."

ONE PLACE WHERE THE WRITERS DIVERGE IS ON WHAT constitutes Asian-American theater. When Hwang mentions the Taper's production of *Sansei*, a theater piece about the seminal Asian-American band Hiroshima, Yew chimes in, "That's not Asian! Hel-loooh!" Hwang smoothly counters: "You can argue that it's not a play, but you can't argue that it's not Asian-American."

Hwang's remark alludes to the difference between "Orientalist" and "Asian-American" theater. According to Hwang, Orientalism is dehumanizing because it reduces a culture to an "exotic" atmosphere, filled with gongs, dragons, even helicopters.

"But there's a language of symbols in Orientalism that I find kind of interesting." Indeed, Hwang's play *M. Butterfly* comments on Orientalism, what he calls "its appeal, its seduction . . . [But] with *Flower Drum Song*, I'm dealing with a kind of show-biz Orientalism, which we derived from the Chop Suey circuit of the late '50s and '60s, so my version of *Flower Drum Song* appropriates some of these symbols but gives them some humanity."

For Yew, the important distinctions rest on truthfulness: "If something is Oriental, it's not completely truthful, not fully formed. Something ornamental. Something that adds spice to a theme."

Hwang concurs ("Aesthetic judgments have political implications") and cites Yew's *A Language of Their Own* for its absence of an Orientalist vocabulary ("It's not about dragons, and it's not about gongs").

Yew flippantly replies that he is considering adding gongs, dragons and helicopters to his next production to ensure a long Broadway run — suggesting that he sees Orientalism as one way to attract non-Asian patrons. But on a more serious note, he adds, "Even Asians in Asia are glomming onto Orientalist art forms. People are painting themselves into yellowface."

BOTH PLAYS SUBVERT THE GRIP OF THE ORIENTALIST stranglehold on the popular imagination, but in diametrically opposed ways. Hwang has ushered in an updated, "authentically" all-Asian, all-singing, but very old-fashioned, musical to the stage, thereby challenging Orientalist motifs in a mainstream genre. (*Flower Drum Song* was originally slated for the much larger Ahmanson Theater.) But in *Red*, Yew has crafted a play that he views as Brechtian in its application of alienation theory, though others — including strangers on the streets of Singapore, where the play was performed — have remarked on the "Chineseness" of his form. All three roles are played by women, with Jeanne Sakata playing a man playing a woman. (Yew says, "I went with my gut instinct and cast Jeanne — and because David took all the best actors for *Flower Drum Song*!") *Red*'s unorthodox production history includes a brief West Coast tryout, a New York run and the Singapore run.

Besides playing with cultural stereotypes, the two playwrights explore gender conformity in their work. Echoing a sentiment in Hwang's *M. Butterfly*, Yew says, "Men do drag very well because they like to epitomize the ideal woman. Everything is accentuated and exaggerated, and it's funny and dramatic and campy."

But Hwang makes it clear that gender role-playing is very different from ethnic role-playing. "There's often a reward for acting your assigned gender role, but there aren't a whole lot of rewards for acting your ethnic role," he says as he finishes his coffee. Yew has also drained his cup. Both have assiduously avoided the Taper's institutional java. Neither has chosen tea.

Paraphrasing Oscar Wilde, Hwang says, "Man is most himself when he hides behind a mask."

If there's anything that binds these two productions, and their playwrights, it's the truthfulness that comes from concealment. □

Red is performed by East West Players, at the David Henry Hwang Theater, 120 N. Judge John Aiso St., downtown; Thurs.-Sat. 8 p.m., matinees Sat.-Sun. 2 p.m.; through Oct. 28; call (213) 625-7000. *Flower Drum Song* is performed at the Mark Taper Forum, 135 N. Grand Ave., downtown; Tues.-Sat. 8 p.m., Sun. 7:30 p.m., matinees Sat.-Sun. 2:30 p.m.; through Dec. 2; call (213) 628-2772; TDD, (213) 680-4017.