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'Version 3.0' Gives Platform to Asian American Playwrights



David Henry Hwang

About five years ago, Chay Yew, a playwright and the artistic director of the Victory Gardens Theater in Chicago, was approached by schools for copies of Asian American plays that could be taught and performed. Except Yew couldn't find a recent compilation of Asian American plays. So when Theatre Communications Group (TCG) approached him about editing a new anthology, he agreed, and the result is "Version 3.0," released by TCG yesterday.

"What was important was to platform the third wave of Asian American playwrights that had come out of a long tradition," Yew told Speakeasy. "These were writers that had different voices and different perspectives on what it is to be American and Asian."

Yew asked renowned playwright David Henry Hwang, author of "M. Butterfly," "Yellow Face," and "Chinglish," to write the foreword. Yew recalled first meeting Hwang in 1991, after a talk Hwang gave at Brandeis University. At the time, Yew had been writing small plays that were Caucasian-centric, he said, but after listening to Hwang and watching "M. Butterfly," he began to reconsider his own work in the context of being an Asian American.

Speakeasy caught up with Yew and Hwang by phone recently. Below is an edited transcript of the interview.

Speakeasy: David, what are the first, second and third waves of Asian American plays?

David Henry Hwang: Basically it's generally considered that the first wave are the playwrights who began working through the 70s or earlier. You have Frank Chin, Momoko Iko, Wakako Yamauchi, and I would say you count people like C. Y. Lee as well, who wrote the novel on which "Flower Drum Song" is based. You have these people who started doing it, the notion of telling Asian-American stories written by Asian Americans. Nobody had done that before. The second wave are writers like myself, Philip Kan Gotanda, Velina Houston, Rick Shiomi. We began to work more within both the growing Asian American theater structure around the country, and began to work in mainstream theaters. A lot of our work focused on identity and immigrant stories. In the case of Japanese American writers, stories about internment. Chay, do you want to take the third wave?

Chay Yew: The third wave is how we probably relate to each other outside of being Asian American. There's also another explosion of aesthetics too, and it's part and parcel with the influence of American theater in general. Sometimes these plays come in very different, wonderful forms — sometimes it's documentary theater, or forms where it's more cinematic, or forms where it's more surreal.

What about the future of Asian American theater?

Hwang: I find it interesting what people who could be considered fourth wave — Young Jean Lee or Lauren Yee, who wrote "Ching Chong Chinaman" — particularly in Young Jean's case, some of the work she does involves Asian characters and

stories, and some of the work she does, doesn't. If anything, she's identified within the theatrical community more as an avant-garde artist than as an Asian American artist. I think there is a certain amount of freedom that I see particularly in fourth-wave writers – they don't deny that they're Asian American, but neither does that necessarily dictate their subject matter. It's hard to know what's going to happen in terms of current events. If the rise of China leads to a big backlash against Chinese Americans and Asian Americans, that might change the nature of what people are writing about.

Are there many more plays written by Asian Americans than are being produced?

Hwang: I think there are a lot more plays being written period, than are being produced. That would include Asian American plays as well. I felt for many years that I was not able to get a production besides "M. Butterfly" and the big musicals in Chicago, which is arguably the most vital theater city in America. It's certainly one of the theatrical centers. This is where I feel like ethnic-specific theaters are useful even for someone who's midcareer like myself. That I was able to partner with an ethnic-specific theater in Chicago, Silk Road Theatre Project, and get to know the Chicago community. I think it's not a coincidence that because of the work Silk Road has done in Chicago, I had three plays there this summer. There are barriers and we have to be smart about strategizing how to deal with them and get our work done and move things forward.

Yew: There are also some challenges in terms of how artistic directors, people who run these theaters, embrace ethnic-specific work. We can easily say sure, some of these plays are not being done. But sometimes there's also the notion of the passions, the values of artistic directorship. For example, last season, in New York, off-Broadway, there were one or two works of color done on the stage. One was by Lynn [Nottage], who had written a Pulitzer Prize-winning play, and the other was Matthew Lopez, who had written a play about the Civil War. Not only was that a problem for Asian American playwrights, but I think it's a big question in terms of ethnic-specific work that is being represented around the country.



Chay Yew

Why do we not see much Asian American television and cinema in this country?

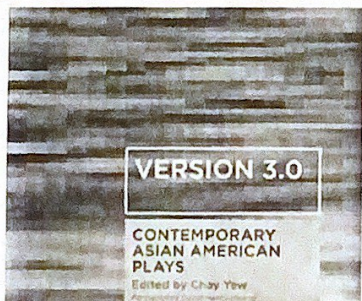
Hwang: I would say we see more Asians on TV now than 20 years ago, but it's not a situation where television reflects at all the reality of America, not only in terms of Asians, just in terms of any non-white group. Why is that? What I find interesting is if you look at reality television, it's more diverse than scripted television. What that says to me is, is that audiences are ready to accept a diversity among the people they watch on TV, but it seems to me the bottleneck is around producers, writers, directors, who are still primarily white men. I think it's not that they don't want to include more minorities, I think they do, I think they know that it's even just good business. But I think they're nervous about it, they maybe don't have so much contact with different groups. It seems to me what needs to happen is that there need to be more writers, directors and producers of color in Hollywood to change the situation.

Yew: I wonder if there's more people of color in reality television too because that's the way certain people want to see us, in a different way. Sometimes reality television paints a very ugly light, for example if you watch "Judge Judy" or "Cops," it's always interesting that they are after certain minority groups because we want see them behave badly.

David, which reality shows offer fair representations?

Hwang: I think most of the ones that are contests. I'm thinking of KevJumba [Kevin Wu] and his dad on "The Amazing Race." Just about every season on "American Idol," there's an Asian competitor who gets pretty far. Audiences don't go, "Okay I'm not going to watch this" because there's an Asian contestant and a black contestant. That doesn't seem to be a problem.

Yew: The one TV show that once in awhile you see something wonderfully Asian American is probably "Glee." The relationship between the female



and the male, when they make Asian American jokes it's actually very refreshing and original. Of course my thing is, how come the two of them don't get solos more frequently?

Hwang: Harry Shum just got upgraded! Harry Shum is now a series regular as opposed to recurring, so we may see more of him.

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