

FIRST ACT

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IT HAD TO BE YEW

Chay Yew wrote his first play when he was a teenager living in Singapore. Titled *As If He Hears*, the piece dared to address homosexuality and AIDS and was banned by the government for nearly a decade. Yew's latest play, *Red*, which is currently running at Manhattan Theatre Club, is about a Beijing Opera performer who is censored, then purged during China's Cultural Revolution.

"When I hear the word 'censorship,' my hair stands up," says the 33-year-old playwright, who is now based in Los Angeles. But it wasn't political suppression in his native land

or in China that initially inspired *Red*. "As much as you want to say, 'Oh, it's those Chinese people, it won't happen to us,'" Yew says, "you look in

your own backyard and you have the burning of *Catcher in the Rye*, you have 'Let's not do *Angels in America*.' There was just recently the young girl from Charlotte, NC who won a playwriting contest, but her

play was not allowed to be produced or given a r e a d i n g because it had lesbian content. I came to this

country when I was a kid really believing that there was freedom of speech and freedom of expression. And I find that it's only [true if] what you have to say doesn't disrupt certain lifestyles or beliefs."

Yew also cites the recent controversy over Terrence McNally's *Corpus Christi*, which was produced right next door at MTC's Stage I. "Why is this so complicated?" he asks in exasperation. "I'm not saying that you shouldn't preach in the pulpit about things that I may not believe in. Why should you stop someone else?"

Red is Yew's first production in New York since the critically acclaimed *A Language of Their Own* (1995), starring B.D. Wong and David Drake. His next project, *Wonderland*, opens this fall at San Diego's La Jolla Playhouse. After that, he wants to write a musical, which the playwright surprisingly refers to as his "forte."

"It's how I came into American theater," he explains. "I love the musical. I'd save my money, come to New York for a week from L.A., see all those big goddamned musicals, and dream. Now that I'm in my 30s — oh God, I sound like an old fart — I'm thinking maybe I should think about my past and go back to certain things that thrilled me."

— Andy Buck

