



AMERICAN THEATRE

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Triple Threats

Emily Mann and Chay Yew write and direct plays, and they run theatres. Not necessarily in that order.

BY ROB WEINERT-KENDT

The history of the world stage has seen theatres run by actors, producers, directors and that relatively recent creation, the artistic director. But apart from Molière and Brecht, one species of theatremaker we haven't typically seen at the helm of many theatres—par-

ticularly not U.S. resident theatres—is playwrights.

For 22 years, Emily Mann has been one notable exception, heading Princeton, N.J.'s [McCarter Theatre Center](#) while continuing to write and direct her own work there (*Having Our Say*, *Execution of Justice*, *Mrs. Packard*) and directing the works of Nilo Cruz, Edward Albee, Danai Gurira and Christopher Durang. When, this past year, two theatres—Baltimore's [CENTERSTAGE](#) and Chicago's [Victory Gardens Theater](#)—named playwrights to their artistic helms, it looked at last like Mann might no longer be so alone.

American Theatre sat down last month with Mann and Chay Yew, the playwright/director (*A Language of Their Own*, *Porcelain*, *Red*) who began this year as artistic director of Victory Gardens, to see if these two writer/producers—one seasoned at the juggling act, another just starting—had advice or questions to share.

AMERICAN THEATRE: Kwame Kwei-Armah just started as artistic director at [CENTERSTAGE](#), but I can't think of many other playwrights who run theatres in the U.S.

EMILY MANN: George Wolfe is not running a theatre anymore, and he told me that one of the reasons he stopped [heading New York's [Public Theater](#)] is that it prevented him from writing. There's Carey Perloff [at [American Conservatory Theater](#)], and Tony Taccone [at [Berkeley Repertory Theatre](#)], who has just started writing. But in terms of people who are known as playwrights, it's a smaller group.

Why is that?

MANN: A lot of reasons. I'm very concerned about the leadership of our theatres right now. I think artists *should* be running theatres, that the artistic director should be on some level a creator, an artistic voice. Now, very few playwrights actually have the administrative gene as well; it's a rare group.

CHAY YEW: You think there's been a trend that artistic leaders are not artistic?

MANN: Yes. And I'm very worried about it. I think you have to have a vision for your theatre. I can see why it's very rare to have a creative producer in charge, because it takes so

much time to run a theatre well, and it's hard to keep your writing going and/or your directing going. You're working all the time, also because you know what your colleagues need—you know what your fellow writers need, and you know what your fellow directors need, and you want to provide that for them so they do their best work.

YEW: It's really true. I see running a theatre as if you're directing a play that never opens.

MANN: That's great! Yes.

YEW: Or writing a play that never ends. It is artistic; it takes up your time. I wake up every morning thinking about the deficit.

MANN: Hello—we all do.

YEW: The wonderful thing, ultimately, that keeps me wanting to do this is that we have to keep those doors open for the next generations. If artistic leadership or producers are getting less artistic, those doors get shut more frequently. I mean, the theatre is only a building, and it's ultimately run by artists, because it's the work that we celebrate and that we come to. So when we're more machinery than art, it's disconcerting—and at some point, the more we do not support the artists, they're gonna go away to Hollywood, as we've seen. And then what are we going to do for the future? That's frightening, not only for the field but for the art form in this country.

MANN: I agree. That's what's at stake.

YEW: I feel kind of awkward, because I feel like it's a little test. I can't afford to fail, because I do want artists to be thought of as candidates for running theatres in the future. They will say, "Emily did it, Chay did it, Kwame did it, so why can't we think outside the box?" It's good—and it's a little frightening.

And there are sacrifices. I remember at the [Mark Taper Forum](#), when I started directing or dramaturging things, I couldn't write, because the dramaturg was sitting on my shoulder.

MANN: That's what I've been wrestling with. It's hard.

YEW: Maybe the best thing is just to go away for a while, like you have done.

MANN: I had to actually leave town—this past summer I went off to a tiny little village in France, a house that was given to us by one of our new board members. She heard I was dying to get away, and she said, "I'd be so honored if you used it." And so my husband and I went, and I wrote the first draft of my new play.

YEW: Congratulations! That's exciting. I got the job in Chicago and I was supposed to start in July. I was actually in Asia on a project at the time, but with the wonders of e-mail, oh my God! Do you know how many plays I had to read that were sent to me electronically? E-mail and Skype have destroyed the writer's life.

MANN: They have.

YEW: But I know this intensity is because I'm starting up. Right now, I'm getting to know everything, every *pore* of the building, basically, which has been great and frightening at the same time.

MANN: I find it thrilling to be constantly faced with these challenges. It keeps you very alive.

YEW: But it wipes out your creativity, does it not?

MANN: It does. I started at the theatre in 1989 and didn't write a play till '94. That's how long it took just to learn how to run the theatre and simultaneously direct—like, while you're in rehearsal, how does the rest of the theatre run? Do you really want, on every one of your breaks, to have your assistant come running up to you saying, "So-and-so called!" I feel like I have three jobs.

YEW: More than that—being a mom, too.

MANN: But now he's 28.

YEW: He should be giving *you* money now.

MANN: Well, he did go to law school.

Neither of you are from the places where your theatre are. Can you talk about the communities you make your work in and for?

YEW: I've been to Chicago once in a while—it's a learning curve.

MANN: It's a great city. My mother still lives there.

YEW: She must come visit the theatre! I love the history of Chicago, but there is self-segregation—a very quiet segregation, no one talks about it, but it's there. So how can I start doing plays of color in Lincoln Park, which is north of the Loop and is predominantly middle-class and white, while the Mexican neighborhood is south some way, and the black population is south and west? And then what about ticket prices? These are the things I'm wrestling with. I've realized that my transitional season is just going to be about building audiences, so the season is very diverse. That's going to be my entire year's work, trying to build bridges to these communities.

MANN: I can give you some names; there are a lot of different African-American communities. But a lot of those folks go to the theatre.

YEW: Chicago is a theatregoing town. I'm very surprised, in a very pleasant way: I go to the small theatres, and audiences come and they talk about the plays, and they actually go not to one theatre or one show, but multiple—they have multiple subscriptions.

MANN: My mother and all her lady friends, they're in their nineties now, and they go to everything. It's a theatregoing town. In fact, it's a little heretical to say it, but I find it to be the most exciting theatre town in the country. I find the diversity of voices and styles in Chicago incredible. You can put together a week of theatregoing in that city that rivals

what you have in New York.

YEW: And it's strange, because everyone's really nice. Isn't it weird? I'm from New York and L.A., and I feel like, "They must want something; they have a something sharp behind their backs and they're going to chop me to pieces." But no, they're really nice.

MANN: And they want to do the work; there's no neurotic stuff coming at you.

YEW: They are basically tribes, but friendly tribes that want each other to succeed; they support each other while carving out their individuality. I still feel kind of strange there; the rhythm is very different.

Years ago, I was there—I get done once in a while in Chicago, but Chicago is a pretty closed shop, or at least it was back in the '80s and '90s. And I was at the [Goodman](#) during the play workshop, and [Time Out Chicago](#) had this cover that was all white, and the headline said, "[Why is Chicago theatre so white?](#)" And I was like, "Wow, what kind of dialogue is this city having about theatre and diversity?" I thought it was good for them. Well, I can tell you, it started incrementally changing, surprisingly, and wonderfully so. In just one year, Timothy Douglas [of [Remy Bumppo Theatre Company](#)] and I are made artistic directors, and you just say, "Well, interesting." More women and people of color *aren't* being made artistic directors on both coasts in the big theatre towns, but in Chicago...

MANN: I was just so thrilled to be at the Goodman for our [2007] co-production of *Radio Golf*, and seeing such a diverse audience—I mean, very stimulated, and very upscale, upper-middle-class and middle-class black folk. And I'm glad to be going back to the Goodman after all these years, with Danai Gurira's play *The Convert*. When I was coming up in Chicago, when I was in there in my teens and early twenties, you did not see this. The town was so fascinating, with all the different kinds of people living in it, but the theatres were not reflecting that.

Emily, what about the Princeton theatregoing public?

MANN: We couldn't possibly survive if all we did was have Princeton audiences; it's a

town of 40,000 people. We've got five counties going all the way to the Jersey shore. And our audience has *become* my favorite audience anywhere in the country. They are so intent on listening, because they've learned a lot about new work.

My one goal before I die is to be able to have subscribers of color who come to the whole season, not just those shows that were by or about people of color. And it's beginning to happen. Ntozake [Shange]'s mother, before she passed, the last show she saw was *Stick Fly* by Lydia Diamond; these were her people, so she was all over it, and all of her friends came. But that same group of women, their favorite play was actually my play *Mrs. Packard*, because they suddenly understood that at one time women could be owned. So there was a whole dialogue going on about how men were owning women at this period of time, and how the suffragist movement partnered with Frederick Douglass and the abolitionist movement. So I started having really interesting talks with women of color, because those women of a certain age understood the play the way *my* mother understood the play; my mother was born the year women got the vote.

So suddenly getting different generations and different ethnic backgrounds speaking with such excitement together—that's when I sort of felt, I could die happy today. I never thought I'd see the time when people were sharing across culture like that. I think we're going to see it more and more.

YEW: I think so, too.

MANN: And young people coming up, they are all past everyone living in their own silo of ethnicity or race or gender. They're like, "Get over it—that was our parents." I'm loving what this new group of writers is doing, too. I must say, Danai Gurira—how can she, at her age, come up with this play, so whole—with the craft and the depth of what she has to say? I'm seeing this with a lot of folks in their twenties and thirties—mainly women and people of color—who have so much to say and the craft to say it.

YEW: She's great; I love her.

MANN: We have a hard time working together, because all we want to do is go out and

talk about men.

YEW: Now that's a play!

Another valence of diversity is aesthetic, and I'm wondering if you're able to vary your seasons along those lines, as well.

MANN: We have a couple of spaces; I made the Berlind Rehearsal Hall a place where we can perform. Danai's play *Eclipsed* started there. I would love to *only* do plays in that space. Remember doing just plays in a room?

YEW: Our space used to be an [old movie theatre, the place where Dillinger got shot](#). It's still funky in its construction—it's good and it's complicated, because the downstairs space is a mid-sized space, which is very difficult to fill. The upstairs space is cute—I love the 99-seat theatre. But then it's about the economics...

MANN: The numbers don't work.

YEW: Yes, I've been wrestling with that. Some plays cannot exist downstairs, but they do upstairs. And I want to give lives to these plays, but I cannot do it at the expense of future productions for this theatre. So it's a wrestling thing that I do, but I have to do it.

MANN: We have to do it. It is painful, and it is getting more and more painful. There are some plays that we're just dying to do, but we know they won't work on either of our two mainstages—the 360-seat mainstage or the 1,110-seat mainstage.

We were just having this discussion in the artistic staff meeting yesterday: What do we do about those people who are so hot now? We were working with Nilo Cruz and Dael Orlandersmith early in their careers, but in our lab space. Now we don't have the money to put those plays on; we have money for readings and to give commissions so people can eat and write, but we'd prefer to give commissions with the intent to produce. We're feeling the pinch in that some of the most exciting writers we ever worked with did some of their most exciting work in the little space, but we now can't afford to run the little space. We

don't have the money.

YEW: Two wonderful thoughts based on what you just said. Plays need to be in the right homes. Sometimes a small play in a big theatre is going to kill it. And I've had the experience where a play of mine I thought was going to be a 99-seat theatre play, I saw it die because it was meant to be in a bigger house. It makes a whole different experience.

The second thing is, you're not speaking as a producer. You're speaking as a playwright, like I do; from the outside, this is what we would like to have in our craft. Now that we have places to create homes, this is what we feel would be best, and the ideal home for these playwrights. Sometimes it takes money. So if we're going to embrace a new generation of playwrights, what support do we give them? If it means an 80- or 99-seat production of a short or long run, and that feels the right thing, and we can't afford it, it's difficult. Especially when we're trying to nurture and help these young writers find their voices. Once they find their voices, sometimes they want to play big, sometimes they want to play small. So what can we do?

I think to some extent—I know I do this, and I definitely can hear it in your voice—we're thinking, "This is what we would like if we were the playwright." Every decision we make is based on that. I realize that all my decisions are based on, "I never had that, I knew it would be great, I know all my friends don't have that, they need that right now—what do they need?" And then when you realize what the theatre can give them, so why are we doing this—what can we do to give them *that*? I feel like, if I'm going to fight to do this, it's going to be a good fight. At least I'm not fighting to do a big ol' play which doesn't need another production—not to meet my theatre's needs, anyway.

MANN: It's interesting, because I think audiences are between two stools now, too. We used to say, "Okay, we'll just do *Richard III* or *Midsummer*, and that will pay for doing these new plays. People really wanna see their Shakespeare." Well, not so much anymore, we're finding. Our audience really has an appetite now for new work. But the new plays that can be in the 1,200-seat house?

YEW: Few.

MANN: Very few. And yet, when we built the second theatre, the Berlind, I said, I want to make sure we don't just say, "The new work always has to be in the smaller hosue, and the classic work always has to be in the big house." So one year we did *Hamlet* in the Berlind, and we did a new play of Athol Fugard's in the big house.

But there's also the other side, which is young directors. Now with playwrights, at least, you can give me your play and I can read it; designers can show a portfolio, actors can audition. But young directors—it's as ephemeral as life itself, what they do. So you direct something quite marvelous and then it's over, and nobody in the business has seen it, so they won't hire you till they've seen the work. It's just a vicious cycle. I want to start a new initiative at McCarter not just about emerging writers but about emerging directors. It is so hard to make that leap from school or assistant to professional director. I've had so many great interns over the years, and I've been helping them and helping them, but I can't in fact myself give them the next step, even if they're completely deserving. There's a real dearth in directors; they're not getting the craft or the jobs they need.

YEW: Sometimes you're lucky to ride a little wave because it's like, "Any Asian-American play, Chay will direct it!" Thank God, at some point it became, "Any plays of color." Never white plays. It's that way with women directors, too. They pigeonhole you. I realized at one point when Bill Rauch asked me to direct something at [Oregon Shakes](#), that was my first classical play I didn't have to adapt to direct, and I was past 40. I think the next generation is going to find it a little bit easier. But where you and I were, these are the little things we still fight for.

MANN: They're not so little, and we still fight. I still get calls saying, "We were really looking for a woman to direct this, so we thought of you." And I think, "Okay, when you want *me* to direct the play, call me back."

YEW: Then you say to yourself: "These are the things that drive our decisions in our own theatres, so that other people in the future don't have to deal with the shit that we are." Any movement is like that.

MANN: I do think it's better—it's getting better.

YEW: It is. Slowly.

So are you two hopeful about the future of the theatre?

MANN: Well, the talent is there. There are astounding writers all over the country.

YEW: I think the audience is there, too. We think the audience is interested in a certain kind of play, and there's a certain homogeneity to the programming, and I think it's wrong.

MANN: And marketing is a whole new animal than it ever was. Subscriptions are definitely generational, we're finding. And we're trying every single way we can to make more packages and flex passes; we're using Facebook and Twitter and all of that stuff. But I still feel that the landscape has shifted so much that we're still trying to find how to build a new audience. Our audience that was so crazy about us when I first arrived 20-plus years ago—they're getting old. I want to get my son's generation in, I want to get in the thirty- and fortysomethings. I want to get the students. It's just constantly reimagining how to build the audience as the audience keeps shifting and changing.

YEW: I've seen this, too. It's never the same every day or every play, or every generation. It keeps changing, because this is a live entity. As audiences change, how do we reach them? As the technology changes, the plays have to change. Which is a great thing about what we do, the theatre. It has to be alive. But most importantly, how do we support the people who make it, and how do we give them a livelihood?

I love what you've been restating: Yes, for them to have exposure and relationship and dialogue and history with community, or communities, within a place is crucial. Then how do we keep having that dialogue with that community? Some theatres are basically producing stuff because they want it to go to New York, or producing shows that come from New York. I don't see the point. It's kind of interesting; Chicago rarely does plays from New York. This is a new thing for me.

MANN: They are proud.

YEW: I have a question for you: How did the McCarter reach out to you and what was the process like?

MANN: I was going through a personal change in my life, and my son was going to be in first grade; I could no longer feel good about being on the road all the time. I needed to be in one place for him, make a home. I thought, well, an artistic home—that was one of the TCG mantras.

YEW: The Todd London book [*The Artistic Home*, TCG, 1993].

MANN: I remember talking to Mark Lamos, who was artistic director at [Hartford Stage](#) and an old pal from my [Guthrie](#) days, and he said, “You should build a body of work in one place, with an audience that will be consistently challenging and exciting to you. In so doing, you start to build a sensibility and a vision.” Which has been absolutely true; it’s one of the best things anyone’s ever said to me.

And I remember I had dinner with Peter Hall, who was then running the [National Theatre](#) in London, and he said, “The only advice I would give you on how you build your season is: never just pick plays, never just pick artists. Every single thing you put on that stage should be an event. And if you can’t describe it as an event, you shouldn’t be doing it. What is it that makes you need to do that work at this moment in time?” Between the two of them, I decided to take the offer.

I also knew—and I wonder if this rings any bells for you—that I write very political pieces. And I didn’t want to be begging all over the country anymore to be produced. I wanted a place where I could grow as a writer and as a director, as well as give opportunities to the people I most admired in the field. And it made sense that if I were in a community like Princeton—smart people who were not afraid of strong, smart women and what they had to say, and were interested in the kinds of work I wanted to do—that this could be a place where we really could make a difference with new plays and productions. So it just made sense.

YEW: There are some interesting similarities in our stories. The Taper was the closest to an artistic home I'd ever had. When I left, I thought, maybe there will be more opportunities as an independent artist. But as much as I liked traveling all around, the dialogue was always complicated. Having all these far-flung conversations in different places—it's great, but it's not consistent. It's like I was always setting up shop. And maybe that's the nature of the business: We're jobbed in, we do our little song and dance, and then the next thing you know, we're gone. But I don't quite understand how we grow in that situation.

People had heard me say things like this, so they said, "You should go interview at some of those theatres." I went to one, which I was excited about; the young managing director had ideas about changing the theatre, and it was in a city I thought I could live in; there was enough MSG in the area that I could be really happy with my people. I went to a bunch of meetings in the last round, and then the board president basically said, "You know, we're in an area that's 98 percent white, and you do a lot of new plays of color. So how do you fit in?" Which was awkward. I realized at that moment: This is who I'm going to be fighting with every day for all the choices I'm going to make.

And then someone said, "Have you heard of Victory Gardens? They're looking for someone." I went online and read their [mission statement](#), and it was basically about new work and diversity. I realized that [founder] Dennis Zacek had always been committed to doing plays of color. He and his mission—and his generation of people who believed in those things—are to some extent the reason why I'm sitting at this table today. I thought it was a great continuity.

Secondly, this wonderful play *The Elaborate Entrance of Chad Deity* had been a big success there. It was so bold and experimental and political. So that told me that the audience is ready.

Chay, do you have any advice you'd like to ask of Emily, and Emily, any to share?

YEW: I don't have specific questions right now, but I hope that when I call, you'll pick up.

MANN: Are you kidding? Of course.

YEW: I realize I've joined this strange club of people. There's a genuine camaraderie about how we do this thing better.

MANN: We're comrades-in-arms. It's really hard.

YEW: We're doing this because we actually still love the art form and the artists. The only question now is: How do we do it better?

MANN: The one thing I would say is to encourage you to give yourself your own creative time. I'm preaching to myself here, because I've not always got it in balance, but the more you're artistically fulfilled, the better your running of the theatre will be. You may be writing fewer plays, but just make sure that side of you is still engaged—not just by helping other playwrights and other directors, but by doing some of your own work. It doesn't have to be as much. You'll find a different balance. But we can't lose you as a writer.

YEW: Thanks. And there will be more playwrights running theatres by decade's end.

MANN: I actually do think that's true.

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