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THEATER

Interview

One Mao time

When it comes to censorship, Singapore playwright Chay Yew sees *Red*
By Randy Gener

What kind of country—America, no less—could do something like this?” asks playwright Chay Yew, a Singapore native and Los Angeles resident who runs the Mark Taper Forum’s Asian Theater Workshop. *Red*, his new play, is set mostly in China during Mao Tse-tung’s Cultural Revolution, but it was originally shaped by Yew’s personal response to the U.S. congressional battle over federal funding for the arts. “When we go to the museums,” he says, “do we not realize that art is what endures? Empires rise and fall, but art ultimately represents the legacy civilizations leave behind. And here we have a superpower that refuses to support its artists. It seems criminal to me.”

Yew’s choice of words may seem harsh, but he is not being flip. Though he tends to talk fast and likes to ramble, the 33-year-old dramatist speaks from a bicultural point of view—as one familiar with both East and West. No stranger to artistic controversy himself, he knows what it’s like to confront the harshness of oppression. In the early 1980s, Yew’s drama *As If He Hears* was initially banned (but finally produced in 1989) by Singapore government officials because it dared to address homosexuality and AIDS. After moving to the United States in 1981, Yew faced another form of artistic censorship. His plays *Half Lives* and *A Language of Their Own* (the lyrical 1995 study of gay

love for which he is best known) caught flak when a board member of Los Angeles’s East West Players, who were staging the plays, resigned in objection to the works’ sexual content and candor. Even some Asian-American actors have deemed the overtly gay themes of Yew’s plays unacceptable.

Such experiences have made Yew acutely sensitive to the subtle, insidious ways in which conflicts between art and politics directly affect the real lives of artists. “Censorship is a big, old issue for me,” he says. “In Singapore, before you put up a play, it has to be vetted by the Ministry of Communications, which literally reads plays line by line. The lesson of being censored taught me a lot of things. I’ll never forget the horrible, choking feeling of being told ‘You can’t do this play!’ So in some strange sense, when I smell censorship in any way, shape or form, I get frightened, and I fight it immediately.”

Indeed, Yew becomes impassioned when he points out a particularly timely irony: His new drama, *Red*, will be staged at the Manhattan Theatre Club, the same venue that has recently been the site of religious protests over Terrence McNally’s supposedly blasphemous *Corpus Christi*. He notes that in a perverse way, “the repression of artists still happens today” in the guise of moral indignation by the fundamentalist right and as a result of what he calls “economic censorship.” “In America, it’s all about making money, and so what gets lionized are plays which are basically considered safe,” Yew says. “And economic forces reinforce that by producing plays that reinforce safe, familiar values. I think there’s a fine line between capitalism and communism—except we dress better in a capitalist world.”

In *Red*, Sonja, a Chinese-American Danielle Steele, returns to her homeland to write a book about the lives of an imperious Beijing opera

singer, who perished during the Revolution, and his young protégé who joins China’s militant Red Guard. Thematically and structurally ambitious, *Red*’s narrative explores themes of art, family, betrayal, politics, identity and mass marketing by employing an off-kilter mélange of flashbacks, interviews, memories and time-travel confrontations. Yew’s Sonja, for instance, is a scathing portrait of an author who strip-mines her cultural heritage for best-sellerdom. “I invented Sonja to question how Asian-Americans use their own culture to sell their art,” says Yew. “I had been very disturbed at first when people came up to me and said, ‘We want to see a play about your people.’ What do you mean ‘my people’? And they said, ‘You know, a play about China and samurais.’ I just thought, Oh, my God! I realized that artists in film, television and the literary world pilfer Asian culture for Western audiences. For an artist, it’s an interesting moral dilemma. Does one bend fact in favor of fiction to further promote a stereotype, a form of orientalism? Or is it commercialism, because this is what mass audiences want to see?”

“The funny thing about this play is that [militant government censorship] seems so far away that you don’t think it could happen to you,” Yew continues. “But if you probe deeper, it does happen to us.” Yew agrees with filmmaker Krzysztof Kieslowski’s belief that the destinies of the world’s peoples are intricately connected. “So I named the play after my favorite color and as an allusion to Kieslowski’s [“Three Colors” trilogy],” he says. “I believe there is a connection between [Chinese people and Americans]. But because of the media, music and MTV, we’ve built this simplistic wall. We exoticize each other. These are the myths and images I grew up with. As a playwright, I am hypercritical, so I question all this.” *Red* is playing at Manhattan Theatre Club (see Off Broadway).