

BACK STAGE

WEST

August 1-7, 2002

THE ACTORS
TRADE
NEWSPAPER

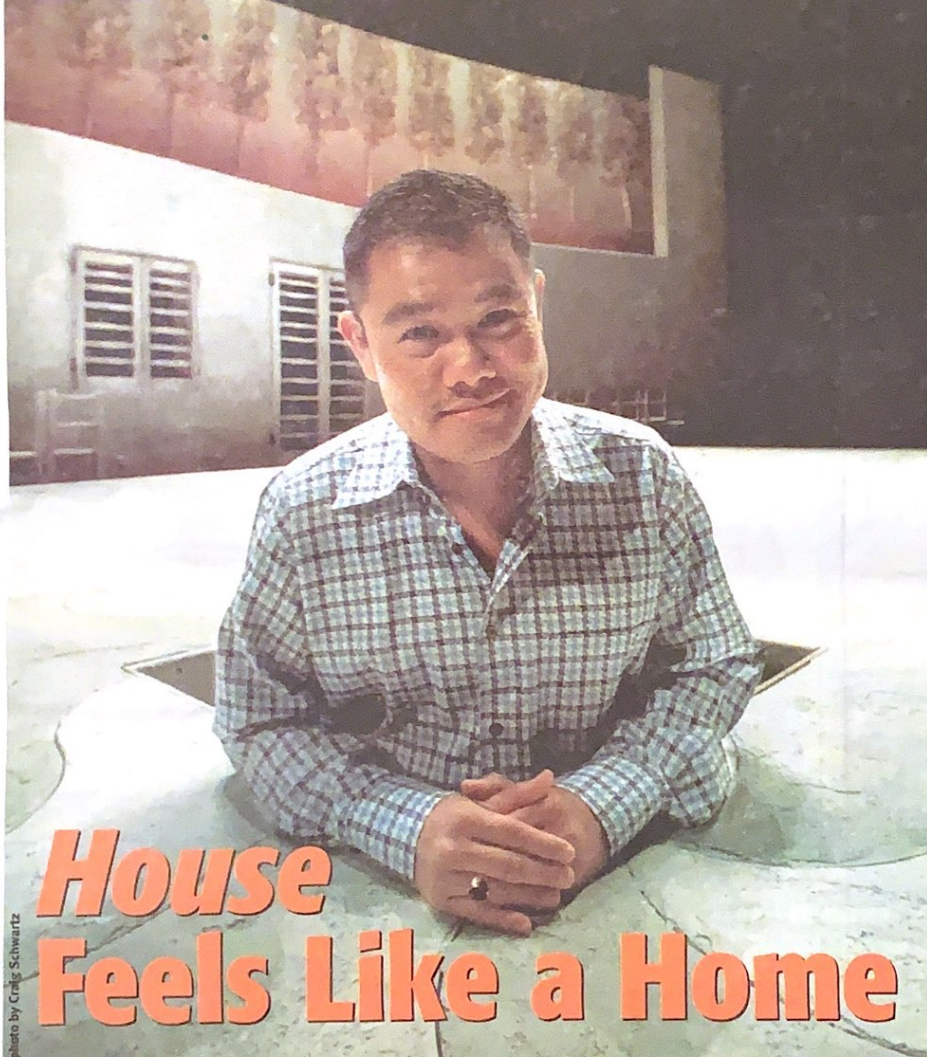


photo by Craig Schwartz

House Feels Like a Home

At last working on the Taper mainstage, playwright Chay Yew recognizes the thwarted women of *Bernarda Alba*.

by Rob Kendt

“I think there is some good to oppression, ultimately, depending on how you use your life,” said playwright Chay Yew in a recent interview. Raised in Singapore, Yew, who came to

Los Angeles in the early 1980s, has headed the Mark Taper Forum's Asian Theatre Workshop since 1995. He's just now making his mainstage debut at the Taper with a multicultural adaptation of Lorca's *The House of Bernarda Alba* (through Sept. 1; see review, p. 10).

That harsh play about a houseful of women who effectively enslave and destroy one another was the occasion for Yew's observation about oppression—and the parallels he felt between Lorca's Spanish Catholic sensibility and the often-rigid sexual mores of Asian family life. But one gets the sense that the comment applies more generally to his life and work as a gay Asian-American theatre artist. As the writer of *A Language of Their Own*, *Red*, and *Wonderland*, and a go-to director for playwrights from Alec Mapa to Naomi Iizuka, Yew has developed a national reputation for strong, sometimes stark theatricality, an unsentimental, unblinking empathy for flawed characters, and the kind of serious-minded playfulness that can't be faked.

In short, while he's no longer living under the threat of being banned—as happened in Singapore

to his raw, beautiful early play *Porcelain*—Yew has internalized a knowing, impish, confidently subversive relationship to authority as surely as Bernarda Alba's daughters internalize their mother's cruelty.

Outside Influences

Taper artistic director Gordon Davidson is no tyrant, but Yew's relationship with his boss demonstrates his stubbornness. Take the question of why it took so long for Yew—whose plays have graced the Public Theater in New York, Seattle Rep, La Jolla Playhouse, even East West Players, just down the street from the Taper—to land a gig at his home theatre.

“Gordon and I have fought about that from *Day One*,” said Yew. But according to Yew, the battle has been the reverse of what you might expect. “I'm here representing Asian-American work and new American plays,” said Yew of his literary manager's job at the Taper. “My job is to open doors for other artists, so my work should not be on the front burner, because of the conflict of interest. With

continued on page 3

FEATURE

Chay Yew

continued from page 1

other theatres that had similar situations, it was like, "Oh, well, I'll give you my play—but the literary manager is a playwright, and I wonder if he or she would champion the plays, so why do I bother? Having seen that on the other side, I decided when I came in, these are some of the principles that I want to function within. But Gordon gets upset when, say, a play of mine goes to La Jolla or somewhere."

Indeed, Yew has seldom lacked theatres eager to mount his work—and whatever tensions this may create at the Taper, it clearly also releases other tensions.

"We're not going to wait for the Taper to do our work," said Yew, one of a handful of local artists, including Luis Alfaro, John Belluso, and Diane Rodriguez, who punch the Taper clock but work elsewhere when they can. "So the relationship has been great for the last seven years. I don't feel like I need Dad's approval. Once you need Dad's approval, you're fucked—because if he says no, the relationship changes. The people on staff are fortunate, because we have other avenues."

This freedom is in the self-interest not only of the artists but also of the organization, Yew believes.

"This theatre is basically a town square, where people can come in and create work, and the square's function is to create the environment. If the artists inside keep creating for themselves, by themselves, I think it's a vacuum and it will never succeed."

Bernarda Alba came about through a collaboration with New York's National Asian-American Theatre Company, for which Yew initially directed his own adaptation, set in an unspecified Asian Catholic environment "somewhere between the Philippines and Spain." Director Lisa Peterson later pitched the project at the Taper, where as resident director she has mounted *Tangue of a Bird*, *The Body of Bourne*, and *Mules*.

"We hadn't done many classics for a while, and Gordon spoke longingly about doing more classics," recalled Peterson. "And just at the time he was really feeling that, Chay had done his adaptation in New York, and I thought, Why don't I talk to Gordon about the Lorca?"

Though Peterson feels her Taper job description is to "advocate new plays by living writers," she said she found the Yew/Lorca project irresistible. "The combination of Chay's voice and Lorca's heartbeat seemed both cool and hot, chaotic and clean—great contrasts."

Peterson's own journey with the play led her to study Lorca's Arab/Andalusian influences—an emphasis given a fresh chill of relevance after U.S. forces went to war with the medievalist, misogynist Taliban last fall. One can't watch the primal scene of bloodlust that closes *Bernarda Alba*'s second act—in which the women of the house gather to cheer on the slaughter of a local adulteress—without thinking of recent headlines about vengeance killings and immolation of women in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Some members of Peterson's multiethnic cast, specifically a "small but mighty chorus" of black-clad women, wear solemn head coverings that may strike a chord.

"What they're wearing is highly influenced by photographs from last fall," said Peterson. "They're not burqas; they could be women in Greece, Spain, the Balkans. I wanted the sense of a world culture up there, like Bernarda's house is a metaphor for the world stage—for any society in which people participate in their own repression."

Yew was likewise interested in this resonance, though he was wary of making too close a correlation.

"I was intrigued, but I was thinking, Do I have to make it, like, Islamic? That means you're being literal, and that's dull. If there is a notion that this play was written some time ago, and there's little hints of the Muslim influence, maybe the audi-

ence will get it, and maybe they will make the journey themselves a little bit more, by saying, What kind of 'Taliban' do you impose on your lives or on the people around you? So I think this play can be a little bit more open than this small little world Bernarda Alba creates."

Tough Love

Still, it's the small little world that we each create—the cell we build for ourselves—that is Yew's creative sandbox.

"When I went into the play, it was the most nostalgic journey for me," recalled Yew with a kind of clear-eyed fondness. "The idea of longing—you can never have it, it's over the wall, so you create fantasy worlds, dreams, ambitions. I got into these characters, and I understood what it was like for me to have lived in Singapore as a teenager, always wanting something else but you could never have it. But you find ways. And for me that's interesting, to see how they can find a way to exist. It's like *Miss Julie*—I always loved the play, I understand it implicitly. And *Three Sisters*. I remember going to *Three Sisters* in New York and hearing an old Jewish couple coming out, saying, 'Moscow, Moscow—Jesus, just go to Moscow!' It's a different mindset."

In plumbing the character of Bernarda Alba, who puts a virtual house arrest on her daughters after their father dies, Yew again came up against his own original problems with authority.

"I always said to myself when I read it, Why is she such a fucking bitch? And then I said to myself, Why was my father the way he was, a disciplinarian? Today we still don't talk—not in that Brady way. I realized he always wanted the best for me, but he cannot show weakness. It's his way. So for me the access to Bernarda was: What if the only thing she wanted for her daughters was a life that was decent? And the way to keep them pure, good, happy, is to love them in a way that is strict."

He used another culturally specific analogy: "Working in Asian-American theatre, I come across a lot of Korean-American experiences, and a lot of my friends who are Korean women come from a culture of deep misogyny, so when they come here, it's like, Oh my God, I have legs, I can run. But their mothers who also come here are still very harsh to the daughters. So then the question is: I'm sorry, you were a daughter once, you remember how your family favored the son and basically treated you like shit—why are you doing this to your daughter? Because they were taught. Some things you don't question, you just do."

If Yew does anything unquestioningly, it's not evident at first meeting. He's nothing if not self-aware, in a constant, curious conversation with others and himself; it may be no coincidence that one parallel Yew found between Singapore and the world of *Bernarda Alba* was the cheap relief of gossip. Yew may not be the only hyphenate theatre artist with a love/hate relationship with the gifts of American freedom, but few are more bluntly self-searching about it.

"Vaclav Havel wrote wonderful plays under Communism," said Yew. "And gay theatre was great during the period when there was AIDS, because there was a cause; when people wrote they were passionate, fiery, and then it was like, OK, we've done that, so what do we do now? *Naked Boys Singing*—oh, joy."

"I remember being banned when I was a kid in Singapore. Writing a play was important. I miss it in a way because it made me more creative. Doing a play, you could be jailed. It was not about money, it was not about making a living. When you come over to this country, it's like, Great, I've made it—this is the land of milk and honey. And then you realize, I've been hungry for so many years, I see a banquet in front of me, and I can't eat everything."

It's this hunger that feeds Yew's art, whether he's adapting to the larger culture or adapting a play from another culture.

"I love it," he said, relishing the contradictions that inspire him. "It's a conflict within me."