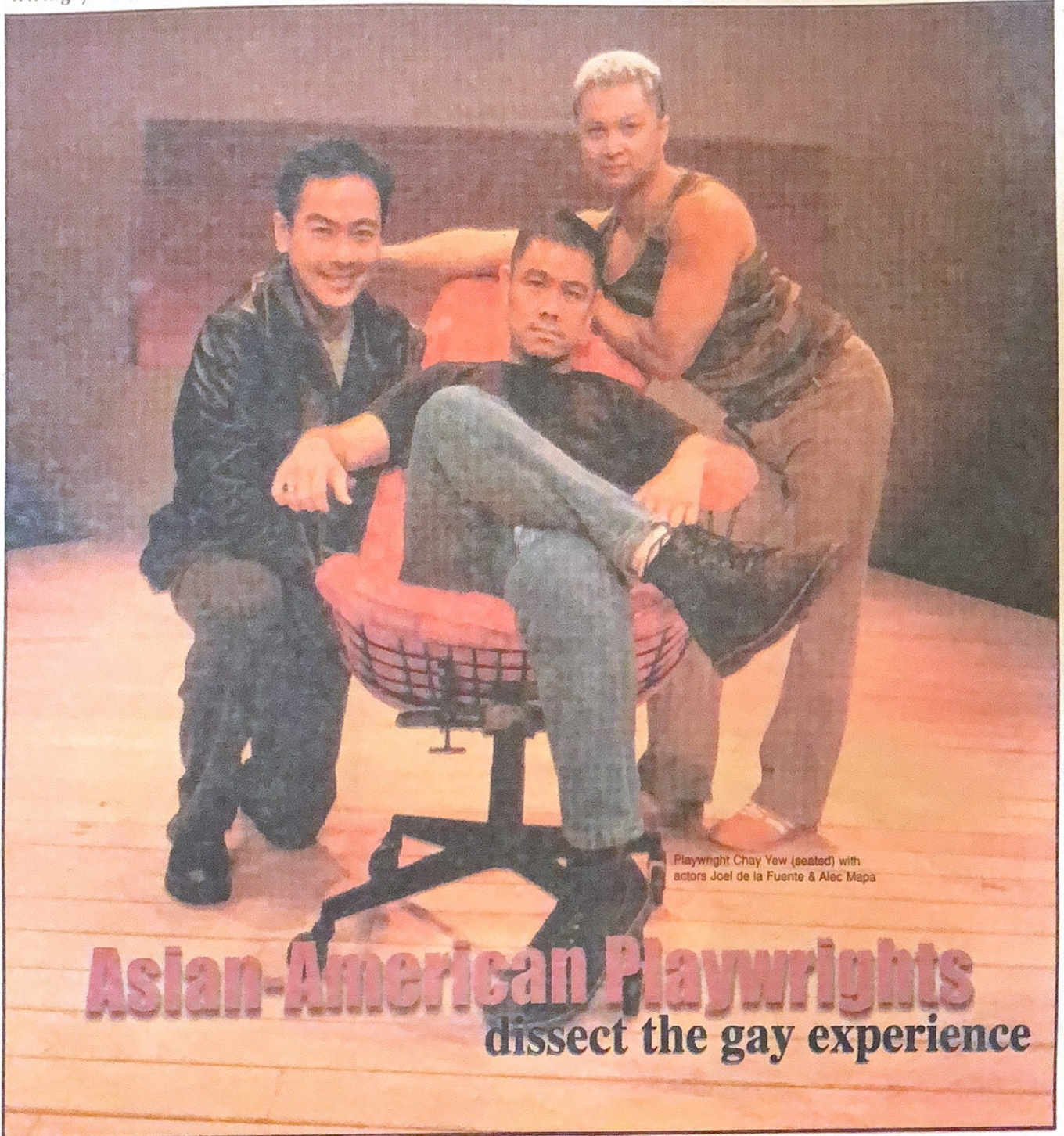


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Playwright Chay Yew (seated) with
actors Joel de la Fuente & Alec Mapa

Asian-American Playwrights
dissect the gay experience

Crazy for Yew

Gay playwright premieres work on Asian life in America

FEATURE

It's said that art imitates life. That being true, if one wants to understand a particular culture, taking to the books, movies and plays about that culture is a sure bet. Within the overall GLBT community are all the smaller communities that give it its diversity. San Diego is truly lucky enough this month to have two plays to enjoy that focus on the Asian experience in America. Both *Wonderland*, at the La Jolla Playhouse, and *The Rice Room: Scenes From a Bar*, at 6@Penn, are written by gay men of Asian descent and both provide an insiders' view of a culture that is unique, yet containing the universal conditions of being human.

The Singapore-born, young, gay, Asian-American playwright Chay Yew usually splits his time between the Mark Taper Forum, where he is director of the Asian Theater Workshop, and East West Players, where he is the resident director.

Recently, he split for La Jolla, to sit in a rehearsal hall, tapping out changes on a laptop computer. Yew's most recent play, *Wonderland*, playing now at the La Jolla Playhouse, is directed by Lisa Peterson. Peterson, who is resident director at the Mark Taper Forum, directed the world premiere of Yew's *Red* at Seattle's Intiman Theatre last year and also its subsequent production at Portland Stage.

BY CHARLENE BALDRIDGE

"He's a poet," she said, "a very rhythmical writer, and he has the ability, using a kind of minimalist palette, to write a very large play using very few tools. His plays are a wonderful mix of the big and the little, the personal and the public, and on the page they are very rhythmically placed, like Lawrence Ferlinghetti, so there's a kind of music."

Renowned film and stage actor Sab Shimono plays a fourth-generation Asian-American known simply as the Man in *Wonderland*. He likens performing Yew's work to singing Sondheim (which he did in the original Broadway production of *Pacific Overtures*). "Once you're on the patter, the train doesn't stop," he says.

Having played a domineering star of the Chinese Opera in *Red*, the actor feels both stretched and challenged by the Man, a talented architect whose dreams remain unfulfilled. "I never realized how difficult it is to play passively," he said. "You have to hold so much in."

Yew explores several issues in *Wonderland*, which concerns a contemporary Asian-American family in Los Angeles.

"What does it really mean to be an Asian in America?" Yew asks, "To pursue the American dream as many others have, and what does the pursuit of the dream mean to a this particular family?"

Yew began with "an archetype," consisting of an immigrant woman (Tsai Chin) who at 26 comes to America to marry; her fourth-generation Asian-American husband (Gotanda); and the American created within the Asian-American context (their Son, portrayed by Alec Mapa). By the way, the son is gay.

"My ideas evolved into this family of three complex characters whom I've come to love



Chay Yew adds to his list of produced plays with 'Wonderland.'

and am still very bewildered by," said Yew, whose play spans 30 years.

Tsai Chin, who starred in the film *The Joy Luck Club*, portrays a headstrong Chinese immigrant named Woman. To her, America is Hollywood. Her idol is Elizabeth Taylor.

"She expects everything to be the movies," says Yew. "That's quickly dashed and so she finds a way to negotiate her existence and her life in America."

"The story is about dreams that go wrong. The play is about passions unfulfilled for each character," says Chin, who calls Yew "a very big talent" and probably the most poetic of the current crop of Asian playwrights.

Chin, who made her home in London at the time, first became aware of Yew when she was acting at London's Mu-Lan Theater, where Yew was a playwright in residence during the early 1990s. She did not see his work until she moved to Los Angeles six years ago.

It was she who suggested the historical context for *Red*. Chin's uncle, a star of the Chinese Opera, was imprisoned and died during China's Cultural Revolution.

Yew describes *The Son in Wonderland* as "a typical American street kid except that he hates the skin that he is in." Mapa, who plays the role, is remembered for his brilliant performance as a drag queen nightclub owner in the world premiere of Jessica Hagedorn's *Dogeaters* last season at the Playhouse. He starred in the Broadway and touring productions of David Henry Hwang's *M. Butterfly*, and Yew received a Drama-Logue Award for his direction of the actor's one-man performance piece, *I Remember Mapa* in Los Angeles.

"The Son doesn't understand why he's Asian-American. He's American," said Yew. "He fights that only to realize you can never escape what you look like in the mirror. He's his mother's son and he sees himself as Montgomery Clift. He has no choice but to come face to face with who he is."

Joel De La Fuente plays *Wonderland's* Young Man, who narrates the family's story. He is part Greek Chorus, according to Chin, but he is also the Son's double, a part of him and yet separate, somewhat like the relationship of a playwright to his play.

Asked if *Wonderland* is autobiographical, Yew replies, "There were moments when I said, 'Oh, I remember that,' and 'Oh, I wish that had happened to me,' but I'm a very private person, not one to write my life in its entirety into one piece. I think if one day you were to put all my plays together, you could probably piece a life, and that's probably me."

"When you read two or three pieces of work by an individual artist there is a resounding theme about one's ideology, one's place in the world and one's feelings. For instance, I keep exploring the concept of home. What is it? Is it a physical place? An emotional place? Or is it a place you call your own by creating it?"

Like most kids born in 1966, Yew's place was in front of a television set, watching shows like *Sesame Street* and *Mary Tyler Moore*. Yew's television set just happened to be in Singapore.

Yew realized that telling a story is a fascinating, vivid thing to do; however, his ambition in those days was to be the star of the story, center stage in the bright lights of

Hollywood or Broadway.

Though his conservative, business-minded father believed that the theatrical profession was not quite respectable as a career, his son participated in drama at school, where he did everything, acting, directing, and building and painting sets, all of which amounted to an experience Chay terms "Barbra Streisand 101."

During undergraduate studies (begun at the tender age of 16) at Pepperdine University in Malibu, Yew realized that possibilities were limited for an Asian-American actor, that is, unless he wanted to perform in *Flower Drum Song* the rest of his life.

Having returned to Singapore to fulfill a two-year military service obligation, Yew acted with a local company named TheaterWorks. He wrote his first play, *As if He Hears*, in response to their need for a play about AIDS, which the theater management rightly believed was about to explode in Asia.

The play, which concerns a gay social worker's efforts to support a heterosexual man who contracts AIDS, was immediately banned from performance by Singapore censors. Ultimately, Yew rewrote the work, omitting any overt homosexual situations and dialogue.



(From left) The cast of 'Wonderland': Tsai Chin, Joel de la Fuente, Alec Mapa and Sab Shimono.

Seeing the character sashay across the stage was enough. The audience got it, and the young playwright learned a lesson about non-verbal theater. The play enjoyed a successful run in Singapore, and to Yew's satisfaction seeing it prompted many people to become involved in the local AIDS task force.

While doing graduate work at Boston University, Yew got the idea for a second work from a college newspaper article about anonymous sex in public lavatories. Originally intended as a TV film and written for his master's thesis, *Porcelain* (premiered by Mu-Lan and recipient of the London Fringe Award) explores issues of racism, homophobia and homicidal passion.

Yew's subsequent plays include *A Language of Their Own*, *Red*, *A Beautiful Country* and *The Courage to Stand Alone*, an adaptation of the letters of Chinese political dissident, Wei Jingsheng, which Yew directed at the Mark Taper Forum.

Yew is recipient of the George and Elisabeth Marton Playwriting Award, GLAAD Media Award, Robert Chesley Award, McKnight Fellowship and a TCG/Pew National Artist Residency Grant.

His plays have been produced at the New York Shakespeare Festival's Public Theatre, London's Royal Court Theater, the Long Wharf Theater, Manhattan Theater Club, Intiman Theater, Portland Center Stage, Dallas Theater Center and The Group Theater, among others.

Collectively published by Grove Press, Yew's plays were nominated for the 1998 Lambda Literary Award for Drama. They have also been published in *Performing Arts Journal*, *ZYZZYVA* and *Central Park*, and included in HarperCollins' *Staging Gay Lives* and the Asian American play anthology, *But Still, Like Air, I Rise*, published by Temple University Press.

Yew most recently directed Prince Gomovikas' *Big Hunk O' Burnin' Love* at East West Players.

Peterson's Playhouse productions include *The Good Person of Song*, *Triumph of Love*

and *Arms and the Man*. She directed *Collected Stories* at South Coast Repertory and Manhattan Theater Club.

At the time of his *Gay & Lesbian Times* interview, Yew climbed upon his soapbox to address theater, society and gay culture.

"Good theater makes us see our world in a different way," he said. "The best plays never give answers, they leave us with questions."

"We bring these questions home to our lives: What have we done? What are we doing? What about the aged? Why do Americans leave their parents when they become young adults? What about the problem of violence?"

"When you ask Europeans what they think of America, their vision comes from *Baywatch*, so they say: 'It's beautiful there. It's the ocean, beautiful bodies.' It's the same thing with our gay culture."

"Ultimately, it's about images and the manipulation of images. Look at some of our magazines. The men are usually young, blond and white. We want to be those people. We want to date them. One day we look into the mirror and we realize we're not one of these things.

"Where are the role models then? Where are our gay old people? Why don't we see them on our magazine covers? Because

they're not sexy? We can be all these things, astronauts, scientists, schoolteachers. We don't have to be porn stars. That's not the end-all.

"They say, 'But if we put an old man on the cover of the magazine, no one's going to pick it up or buy it.' And yet, they also tell us there is a 'community.' Where is it? Why are we turning against each other in such horrible ways, using words that wound? Haven't we been discriminated enough?

"What is our community? Don't tell me. gay bars? That's not a community. Where is our Chinatown? Our Little Italy? Why is gay culture so based on looks?

"Are we buff enough? If it's because of health, good for you, but if it's because you think at the end of the day someone's going to have a relationship with you because you

look good, forget it. Looking good is only interesting for about three days."

Asked if he is currently in a relationship, Yew replied, "I'm not 'in' anything. I'm in love with the theater, which is really sad. I've become my father, the workaholic. There's a moment for everything, and for right now, since I haven't found the right person who can deal with my bullshit, and I do have bullshit, I love my work. I need my space. I hate to be bored. And I want the other person to be as passionate as I am in terms of work, in terms of the world, and in terms of himself.

"The romantic in me would say, if it happens, it happens. If it doesn't, there are friends to see, travel, and things to do to improve myself. And I'm not going to the gym just for the sake of going to the gym."

'Wonderland' at La Jolla Playhouse

Chay Yew's *Wonderland* is now playing at La Jolla Playhouse through Sunday, Oct. 17. Tickets can be obtained at (619) 550-1010. Access www.lajollaplayhouse.com for more information.