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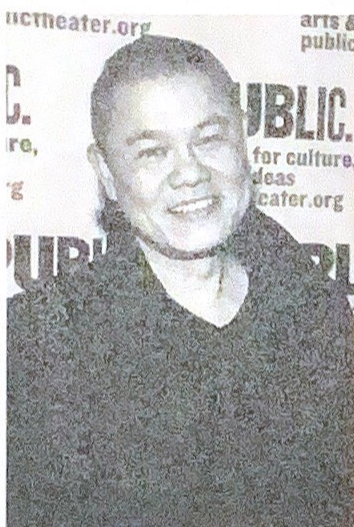
BWW Interview: Chay Yew Directs the Moving WHERE DID WE SIT ON THE BUS?

BROADWAYWORLD TV

August 30 10:40 AM 2016



by Naomi Serviss



WHERE DID WE SIT ON THE BUS? is not about Rosa Parks. It's about identity, self and the immigrant story, from the Latino point of view. But it could be any immigrant's story, said the play's director, Chay Yew, a native of Singapore. He was 16 when he came to America.

The title's question was asked by playwright/performer Brian Quijada, the son of Salvadorean parents, when his third-grade class was studying about Rosa Parks and the Civil Rights movement. The teacher's answer was shocking and upsetting, setting in motion the artistic vision that informs this play.

The fiery production, two years in the making, explores race and what it means to be an American. It incorporates spoken word, rap, hip-hop, and live looping. Quijada weaves

electronics, video projection, and live music in the show, including a harmonica and small electric guitar.

The production began as a compilation of rap songs and poetry recited at the Nuyorican Poets Café in New York and evolved in Chicago.

"It's a very personal autobiography of a young Latino kid in Chicago," said Yew, who was in Chicago at the time of this interview.

"He's trying to find his way in this place we call America. It's hard for everyone from every race," Yew said. "It's also about relationships between immigrant parents and their children. It's very complicated, and also mirrors my own personal experience," said Yew. "When a child wants to be an artist, that is huge."

Many parents eschew a life in the arts for their children, assuming that is the direct route to poverty, Yew said. "Our parents didn't want us to choose an artistic life," he said. "You could be talking about my Asian parents or Jewish parents or Latinos. They want us to forge a life that's better than their own."

The production is spare and Quijada portrays many characters during the show. His goal is to become the artist he is meant to be, regardless of where that path leads. The story takes him

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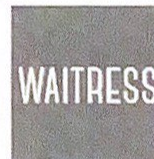
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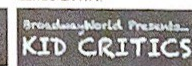
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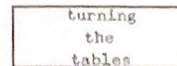
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"I saw myself in Brian's story," Yew said. "Even when your parents don't want you to be who you are, you have to be that person anyway. You have to say 'I don't need your approval.' For me it took eight years for my parents to accept me as an artist," he added.

In the play, Quijada's parents miss an important school production, a huge disappointment. It's reflective of a lot of immigrant artists, said Yew.

"An arts festival invited me to do a play and my parents came. Later I saw press clippings on their wall, and my father pulled out a scrapbook he was going to use for other clippings," Yew said. Has he ever encouraged me, though? No, it's not his way."

In the play, Quijada remembers seeing a photo on television of a group of young Latinos on a beach. They spelled out the word "Dream" with their bodies, a nod to the Dream Act which would have eased the road to citizenship for young immigrants who graduated from college. It stalled in Congress.

The play is produced by EST (Ensemble Studio Theatre) and The Radio Drama Network. It had its world premiere in Chicago and was performed on the Millennium Stage at The Kennedy Center in Washington.

Audiences have responded enthusiastically, Yew said. "Having done it in Chicago initially, we got a diverse audience and it skewed younger. The young ones came for the rap and hip-hop and the older ones connect with the spoken word poetry.

"We come from families who have given a lot for us to be in America, and sometimes you just have to find your own voice and dreams. We have to be very vigilant and move forward as a nation," he said referring to the current political scene, which has a high beam on immigration.

Yew anticipates the New York run of WHERE DID WE SIT ON THE BUS? will find enthusiastic audiences of all races. "We're trying something new. There needs to be more theaters that encourage new, fresh works," Yew said.

"Brian's story is one of the many American narratives. These immigration stories will never go away," he said.

"We had immigrants build this country. We belong to this great legacy," said Yew. "It's the same story over and over again. If we start building walls, we're not going to be the country we're supposed to be."

Where Did We Sit on the Bus? performances begin Sept. 10 at the EST's Curt Dempster Theatre, 549 West 52nd Street.

Photo Credit: Jennifer Broski

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