



## What's New?

At Victory Gardens Theater, artistic director Chay Yew keeps an eye peeled for shows you've never seen before

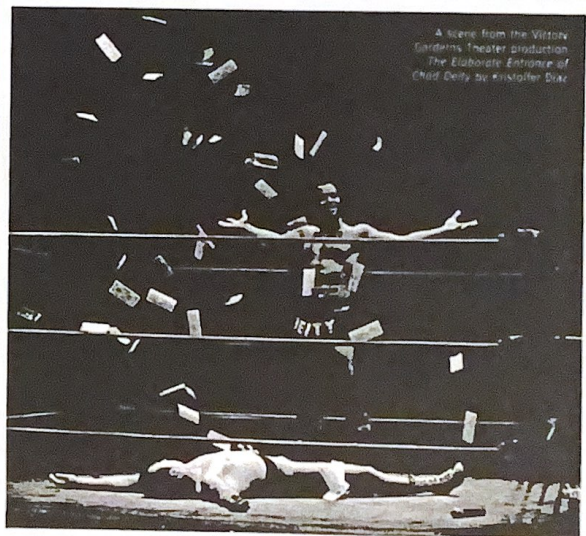
by Robert Loerzel

New plays are the lifeblood of Chicago's stage scene. And few Chicago companies have championed new plays with as much vigor as Victory Gardens Theater. With an ensemble of playwrights at its core, Victory Gardens has produced one world premiere after another since 1974. So it makes sense that the company hired Chay Yew as its new artistic director. Yew's passion is new plays. As he takes over for Dennis Zacek, who retired this year after 24 years at the helm, Yew is eager to bring new plays, new playwrights

and even new kinds of plays into the Victory Gardens family.

While some people use the term "incubator" to describe theaters that promote the production of new work, Yew prefers to use the word "home." As he notes, "Most American theater artists are nomadic, looking for this place called a home, where they can create, experiment and discover who they really are."

Until he found his new home in Chicago this summer, Yew's life as a playwright and director was nomadic, indeed. Born in



A scene from the Victory Gardens Theater production *The Elaborate Entrance of Chad Deity* by Christopher Dike



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Victory Gardens  
Theater's new artistic  
director, Chay Yew

Singapore, he has worked in many cities, including Los Angeles, where he was the founding director of the Asian Theatre Workshop at the Mark Taper Forum. As a director, he's won the Obie Award in New York and the West Coast's Drama-Logue Award. He has worked at New Haven's Long Wharf Theatre and Actors Theatre of Louisville, but until now, had had only a few short experiences in Chicago, at the Goodman and Skokie's Northlight Theatre. "What I really love about Chicago's theater scene is that if you want to do it, you can do it," Yew says. "I like that attitude. I think New York used to have that, until the real-estate brokers said no."

Victory Garden's founders certainly had that can-do attitude back in 1974. And even as the theater grew, receiving a Tony Award for regional theater in 2001 and moving into the Biograph Theatre building in 2006, it kept its focus on doing new plays. Yet Victory Gardens isn't the only Chicago company that emphasizes the new. With writing classes, as well as readings and productions by resident

playwrights, Chicago Dramatists is another incubator. Its biggest hit was Keith Huff's 2007 cop drama, *A Steady Rain*, which went on to Broadway. New titles—some by local playwrights, some imported from elsewhere—often pop up in the city's storefront theaters. And Chicago's most prominent theaters—the Goodman, Steppenwolf and Lookingglass—almost always feature world premieres or Chicago premieres in their seasons. Even the big downtown venues operated by Broadway in Chicago, where tried-and-true musicals dominate, occasionally act as a testing ground for New York-bound shows, such as *The Producers* or *The Addams Family*. More than 100 world premiere productions and adaptations hit local stages every year, according to the League of Chicago Theatres. That's about one in every eight shows.

While every season certainly has its share of familiar titles (and what's so bad about doing another production of *Hamlet* or *American Buffalo*?), there's no shortage of playwrights striving to create new classics. Of course, most new plays don't turn out to be

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classics. Some flop with critics and audiences. Or they end up getting reviews that essentially say, "Nice try." That's the risk of doing new work. Before they get too far into a production, some playwrights need a chance to see whether their scripts actually work on the stage, and how audiences respond. They receive that sort of feedback through staged readings and workshop performances, at places such as the Ignition Festival, which Victory Gardens launched in 2008 to give writers of color under the age of 40 a chance to hear and see their words taking shape on the stage.

The first Ignition Festival included a script by Kristoffer Diaz about pro wrestlers and ethnic identity. The raucous, smart play did so well during workshops that Victory Gardens decided to mount a full-blown production. *The Elaborate Entrance of Chad Deity* won rave reviews in 2009, ending up as a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize. And not only that, the show was a box-office hit. "It means that an audience is hungry for new theatrical work, tough work and smart work," states Yew. "We need to have more *Elaborate Entrances*."

Like many theater artists, Yew is rightfully concerned about the graying of audiences; it's not unusual to look around a theater and to see senior citizens occupying most of the seats. But that's not necessarily cause for panic. Chicago has seen many shows that drew droves of twentysomethings and even teens, ranging from quirky stagings by the Neo-Futurists and Annoyance Theatre, to that huge mainstream sensation, *Wicked*. The trick for a revered and established midsize theater like Victory Gardens is to bring in those kids without alienating the loyal, mature audience members who have been coming for years. One way Yew hopes to do that is by adding young playwrights to the ensemble while commissioning new work from the distinguished writers already a part of the 14-member group, which includes John Logan, James Sherman and Nilo Cruz. The result, Yew says, will be a "dialogue" between the generations. And Yew is looking

for plays that reflect the diversity of America today, topical and thought-provoking stories that will get audiences talking. "If the public is not conversing with the work onstage, then something's wrong," he says.

One example of what's in store is *Ameriville*, which marks Yew's directorial debut at Victory Gardens in January. He developed the show in collaboration with Universes, the Bronx-based ensemble that performs it. Using hip-hop, song, poetry and dance, the piece explores what went wrong with America during the tragedy of Hurricane Katrina. Next summer, Yew will direct Luis Alfaro's *Oedipus el Rey*, a reimagining of the Oedipus myth set in the gangland of South Central Los Angeles. The Victory Gardens season also includes a March production of another play that emerged from the Ignition Festival, Jackie Sibbles Drury's script with an absurdly long title: *We Are Proud to Present a Presentation About the Herero of Namibia, Formerly Known as South-West Africa, From the German Sudwestafrika, Between the Years 1884-1915*.

As Yew takes the helm, steering Victory Gardens in what could well be a more youthful direction, he has been talking with the organization's elder statesman, the recently retired Dennis Zacek. "He's always there when I need him. He's very respectful, which is great," Yew says. "I told him that I wouldn't be here without what he had done." And he has been reading up on the history of his new city. "There's so many ways of looking at Chicago," he observes. "It was basically a swamp. Through the audacity of mankind, it grew. Not even the fire could stop it from dreaming." Yew's own dreams for Victory Gardens spring from an appreciation for what the company has achieved over the years. Where another new artistic director might have come in and leveled what was in order to impose a personal vision, Yew has no intention of tearing down what his predecessors created. "I respect what it was," he asserts. "I want to build." ♦