

SAN FRANCISCO EXAMINER

Features

Theater Review

Seeing 'Red'

Yew's intense play explores the troubled Chinese artistic legacy.

By [Sabrina Crawford](#) | Staff Writer
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Red



*Running through Aug. 8 at the Lucie Stern Theater in Palo Alto. Tickets are \$20-\$50.
For information call 650-903-6000 or visit www.theatreworks.org.*

A flag flying before a raging bull, a rosy cheek, a splatter of primary paint -- red. It's the color of blood, the color of power, the color of communism and the eternal hallmark of the People's Republic of China.

With all of the complexity it conjures in an utterance of utmost simplicity, there is perhaps no better title for Chay Yew's intense drama about the personal and political legacy of the Chinese Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). Yew's play is at once forceful and delicate, historical and imaginative, personal and populist, humorous and tragic.

Set in an abandoned Beijing opera house, "Red" follows the journey of a successful Chinese-American romance novelist (Allison Sie) in search of a story with real weight and meaning as she revisits her native country's artistic past in all its beauty and brutality.

Through the tale that unfolds before her of Chinese opera legend Master Hua (Francis Jue) and the young apprentice Ling (Grace Hsu) who turns against him, "Red" peels back the cluster of scabs left by the Cultural Revolution -- which pit ancient arts against "political progress" and the young against the old -- to reveal the scars of an entire people for modern viewers.

In the mid-'60s, Chairman Mao Zedong, fearing challenges to his authority by artists, teachers and intellectuals, declared a "Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution." Spearheaded by the Chairman's wife and deputy, Jiang Qing, the Cultural Revolution brought a reign of terror, torture and censorship to China. Its frontline were youth interrogators, informants and enforcers dubbed "The Red Guards," whose duty was to purge the land of books, plays and people who were "counter revolutionary."

During this time, the production of traditional Chinese operas and plays was forbidden and replaced by revisionist, patriotic, pro-communist "model dramas" written by Qing.

Following Mao's death in 1976, a more moderate communist government came to power and Qing, along with her three associates, known collectively as "The Gang of Four," was arrested. The Cultural Revolution, which left an estimated 11 million people dead, was officially declared a national mistake.

To paraphrase Hua, "The way you know you've made it in China is that the government throws a party for you and they cook a roast pig after you're dead."

With lush costumes, gorgeous make-up, heart-rending opera music, meditative dance and stellar acting -- most notably by Jue (renowned for his role on Broadway and locally in "M. Butterfly") -- TheatreWorks' founding Artistic Director Robert Kelley helps bring the reality of that statement, of that time and of the imprint it left on Asian art and identity truly alive.

Making its Northern California debut at TheatreWorks, "Red" continues the Bay Area company's well-earned reputation for showcasing innovative, intimate works by rising stars.

Born in Singapore, Yew has moved between Asia and the U.S. throughout his life. Author of "Porcelain," "A Language of Their Own," "A Beautiful Country" and "Wonderland" among others, Yew left his native land in 1988 after his play "As If He Hears" was banned by the government because its complex portrayal of a leading gay character did not reflect traditional "Singapore values."

Thus, who better to tell a highly nuanced story like "Red," which moves so gracefully between the Asian American and the Asian experiences -- looking closely at both from a very personal, artistic and self-reflective perspective, as well as through a wider political and cultural lens.

"Theater has to be truthful," Yew has said of his work. "And always questioning, questioning, questioning."

SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE

<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2004/07/19/DDGJ97N38F1.DTL>

A novelist's return to China proves revolutionary

Monday, July 19, 2004

San Francisco Chronicle

▶ CHRONICLE SECTIONS

Robert Hurwitt, Chronicle Theater Critic



Red: Drama. By Chay Yew. Directed by Robert Kelley. (Through Aug. 8. TheatreWorks, Lucie Stern Theatre, 1305 Middlefield Rd., Palo Alto. Two hours, 15 minutes. Tickets \$20-\$50. Call (650) 903-6000 or visit www.theatreworks.org).

The pieces fit together with the intricacy of a Chinese puzzle. The characters have as many layers as Russian nesting dolls. Chay Yew's Cultural Revolution drama "Red" has its underdeveloped aspects and improbable contrivances. But as staged by Robert Kelley, in the TheatreWorks production that opened Saturday, it's a riveting and deeply resonant drama.

Part dream play, part political drama and about equal parts soap and Beijing opera, "Red" opens with the casual informality of a talk show, slips into the twists of a compact mystery and develops inexorably toward a scene of gripping terror. And that's just in the first of its two acts. The plot thickens after the intermission at Palo Alto's Lucie Stern Theatre. Yew is working with only three characters, but none is precisely who we think she or he is.

Yew, a Singapore-born playwright (who had an early play banned when he was working with that city's leading company, ironically also named TheatreWorks), showed great promise with the intense gay men's-room murder mystery "Porcelain," seen at Theatre Rhinoceros in '93. The spare poetry and dense theatricality of "Red"

fulfills a great deal of that promise. Originally staged at Seattle's Intiman Theatre in '98, it's received a number of productions around the country.

The TheatreWorks local premiere is also something of a triumphant return for longtime company favorite Francis Jue, who's spent the last couple years in a featured role in "Thoroughly Modern Millie" on Broadway (taking a little time off to appear in a well-received run of "Red" in Philadelphia). As Beijing opera diva Master Hua, a man specializing in women's roles, Jue wafts with impressively stylized feminine grace -- and strength -- through passages from "The White-Haired Damsel," and rules his theater with hardened, self-absorbed patriarchal authority.

He's also a figment, an artifact or perhaps a memory. "Red" opens in the present, with successful Asian American romance novelist Sonja Wong Pickford (Allison Sie) visiting Shanghai. Stylishly casual in her trench coat, sweater and slacks (Jill Bowers' street costumes define the periods as the story unfolds), Sonja addresses the audience with the practiced informality of one long used to the talk-show circuit.

Once a penniless immigrant, she's achieved fame and fortune churning out potboiler romance novels ("Love in the Jade Pagoda," "Bound Feet, Bound Lives"), but now wants to write something more enduring, "something credible." Hence her return to China. Wandering out-of-the-way alleys, she comes across a deserted old opera house. As Steven Mannshardt's richly subtle lights reveal hidden depths in Ching-Yi Wei's stunning set -- a glowing, at times ornate Beijing opera stage within a derelict theater -- Sonja is transported to another reality.

The time becomes the '60s, in the midst of the destructive turmoil of the Cultural Revolution. Hua appears in full White-Haired Damsel regalia

(sumptuous Chinese opera costumes by Hiroshi Iwasaki and delicate, evocative choreography by Jamie H.J. Guan). No sooner does he begin a classic aria, though, than he's interrupted by a vociferous, single-minded and commanding young Red Guard (Grace Hsu as Ling).

As Sonja gets drawn into the conflict between Jue's unbending Hua -- adamantly defending the classics -- and Hsu's rigorously righteous Ling, time and reality keep shifting. One moment, Hua and a 10-year-old Ling are describing Chairman Mao's visit to the theater and his praise of Hua. The next, an adult Ling is leading her cadre (Lawrence-Michael Arias and Rinabeth Apostol in well-limned nonspeaking parts) in interrogations brutally reminiscent of recent photographs from Iraq.

Hsu, a bit strained in her more childish scenes, is increasingly compelling as Ling turns out to be something of a chameleon -- and her relationship with Hua far more complicated than at first appears. Sie's Sonja segues from intrigued observer to ever more intimately involved participant --

Yew cleverly using his audience stand-in witness to draw us in with her. Kelley varies the pacing beautifully to draw an increasingly tight focus on the intricate and sharply portrayed dynamics between the characters.

Yew could do more to depict the glories of the opera under attack in the Cultural Revolution -- and Jue's projection was lacking in his opera arias on opening night -- though he does a good job of balancing reverence for the form with clear-eyed critiques of its less attractive practices. Some of the connections strain credulity, in the manner of devices we might expect to find in one of Sonja's novels, and the play seems to be meandering in search of an ending before it alights on its resonant and

affecting conclusion.

But even its flaws contribute to the evocative impact of "Red." Art, politics and life are as messy and full of contradictions here as they are in reality. In one vibrant passage, Joe's Hua expresses a resentment of his life's work as deep and abiding as his dedication to the form. The battles between Yew's characters reflect the struggles within them, just as the plot devices mirror the contradictory qualities that give them depth. "Red" strains for effect at times, but achieves it in the end.

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<http://www.talkinbroadway.com/regional/sanfran/>

**Brilliant Acting in the Intense,
Dramatic
Red at TheatreWorks**

TheatreWorks is presenting the Northern California premiere of Chay Yew's *Red* at the Lucie Stern Theatre in Palo Alto. This is a riveting drama about Chairman Mao's Cultural Revolution that swept through China during those turbulent days in the '60s. The intense drama features three brilliant actors who are splendid in their roles: Francis Jue, Allison Sie and Grace Hsu. They work like clockwork together.



Hua (Francis Jue) embraces his apprentice Ling (Grace Hsu)

Red premiered at the Intiman Theatre in Seattle in 1998 and since then it has had several personifications, most recently by the East West Players in Los Angeles where the author. Francis Jue performed Master Hua in a production at the Wilma Theatre in Philadelphia recently and the play has also been presented by the Singapore Repertory Theatre.

Red takes place in the barren Beijing Opera House from the 1960s to present day Shanghai. Sonja Wong Pickford (Allison Sie), who describes herself as "the Asian Danielle Steele," is a popular Chinese American romance novelist who's come to present day China to write a book of substance. She has written such American best sellers as "Love in the Jade Pagoda" and "Bound Feet, Bound Lives" that have been made into "Plays of the Week" on television. She is burned out and has returned to Shanghai for her roots to recharge her sagging spirits.

Sonja meets the ghost of the famed Chinese opera star Hau Wai Mun (Francis Jue), who was famous for his portrayal of women on the Chinese stage. She wants to know more about Master Hua, who was tortured and

stage is like a Chinese box, in flaming red with sliding doors opening up for some effective sets. The costume of the Chinese opera singer by Jill Bowers is gorgeous.

Red runs through Sunday, August 8th at the TheatreWorks location at the Lucie Stern Theatre, 1305 Middlefield Road, Palo Alto. Tickets can be obtained at 650-903-6000 or visit www.theatreworks.org.

Their next production is the world premiere of Andrew Lippa and Brian Crawley's pre-Broadway musical, *A Little Princess*

- [Richard Connema](#)

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MOUNTAIN VIEW VOICE

Seeing 'Red'

TheatreWorks opens Chay Yew's epic drama

By Julie O'Shea

Every once in a while a play comes along that is as important as it is moving.

"Red," a 1998 drama by Chay Yew, which TheatreWorks opened last weekend at the Lucie Stern Theatre in Palo Alto, is both these things: a bristling piece of history about China's infamous Cultural Revolution that is so intense at times it will make your toes curl with rage.

Yew's story about the devastating consequences of the Cultural Revolution starts off a little slow, but the playwright quickly pulls in his audience, captivating us with a finely crafted mystery of family secrets and political unrest.

Cutting back and forth through time, "Red" blends fact with fiction seamlessly, although its genius is hard to spot early on, as Yew stumbles through the first few scenes with sometimes excessively verbose dialogue.

When the lights come up, Yew introduces us to Sonja (Allison Sie), a modern-day, Asian-American romance novelist, who is hoping to unearth a "credible" story in the

tattered ruins of a Chinese opera house. It's an admirable goal considering her latest bestsellers include such titles as "Bound Feet, Bound Lives" and "Love in the Jade Pagoda."

The delivery of Sonja's opening lines, however, lose some of their power against scenic designer Ching-Yi Wei's red-and-green hued opera house, which would have fared better on a larger stage. The set looks suffocating, and the large boulders the actors use to climb on and off the stage are eyesores.

But this point becomes obsolete once Francis Jue makes his entrance. Jue, fresh from Broadway's "Thoroughly Modern Millie," plays opera diva Master Hua, whose flamboyant style and grace continue to haunt the deserted performance hall years after he's purged during China's devastating cultural genocide.

Sonja explains to us that this operatic icon is her muse, one of the main reasons she came to Shanghai in the first place. As if on cue, Hua, bejeweled in a lavish headdress and robe, emerges from the opera house shadows and begins chronicling, in perfect detail, the story of his life and ultimate demise.

Jue is simply radiant as the high-maintenance opera star. Each time he opens his mouth or flicks his wrist, it is done with such distinct purpose that it is hard to tell where the character ends and the actor begins.

Grace Hsu's stoic Ling, Hua's young, eager opera student and later a feared revolutionary guard, figures prominently into this plot sequence.

TheatreWorks director Robert Kelley doesn't spare us from the brutality of the Red Guard, allowing the beatings of Hua to take place graphically in front of the audience. While there is, of course, no actual physical contact between the actors during these scenes, their jarring dramatics, combined with harsh scene music and lighting, lets us feel each crippling blow.

The fact that Hua dies is hardly the secret of "Red," rather it's the intricate tapestry Yew weaves around his central characters that keeps us suspended, wondering how the playwright will choose to end his epic.

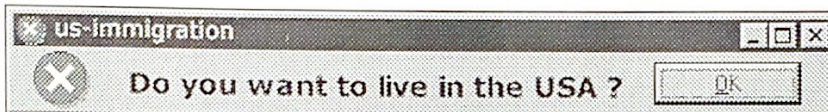
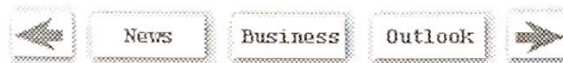
When we realize our narrator, Sonja, is harboring an explosive secret, it becomes clear that Yew has cleverly set us up for an unexpected finish.

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http://www.paloaltoonline.com/weekly/morgue/2004/2004_07_23.red23.shtml

PALO ALTO WEEKLY

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Island expressions

The words 'Singapore' and 'art' are rarely in the same sentence. But the myth of the island city as a soulless metropolis without a creative heart has finally been exploded-welcome to Asia's leading arts showcase

Pichayanund Chindahporn

What do vampires, communists, and Vietnamese villagers have in common? Probably not much except that they presented key subjects in the Singapore Arts Festival's closing weekend performances.

After an entire month of theatre, dance, music, and multimedia shows, the festivities had to come to an end. Since its conception in 1977, the Singapore Arts Festival has proven itself as one of the world's leading showcases of the theatre arts, featuring household names as well as more cutting-edge lesser knowns.



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Entertainment & Lifestyle

NEW! Breakfast in

While featuring a symphony orchestra, a full-length ballet, and traditional art forms, this performing arts festival proved to be anything but run of the mill. With such diverse works as the Indian Silk World-Fusion Band, the American acrobatic dancer, Streb, and personalities as different as Phillip Glass, American composer and Ea Sola, Vietnamese choreographer, Singapore's annual foray is making its mark as a one of the world's more adventurous arts events, while still promising to be a crowd pleaser.



(Clockwise from top) The critically acclaimed Red by Chay Yew, Dracula by the Royal Winnipeg Ballet, and Ea Sola's soul-stirring Requiem. Since its conception in 1977, the month-long Singapore Arts Festival has proven itself as one of the world's leading showcases of the theatre arts. "We want to introduce audiences to more challenging, progressive works," said the chairperson of the festival's programme committee, Goh Ching Lee.

"We want to introduce audiences to more challenging, progressive works," said the chairperson of the festival's programme committee, Goh Ching Lee.

To encourage innovative creations, the committee embarked on a new direction for its annual Performing Arts Festival. "From last year, we started commissioning works-especially collaborations between groups of artists," she explained. Examples include works by the Singaporean Arts Fission dance company, and Urobos: Project Time, a transnational collaboration between artists from Argentina, Australia, Austria, and Singapore. Even the token story ballet narrated not the plight of a slumbering princess or a mythical swan, but the gothic tale of the world's foremost vampire. The Royal Winnipeg Ballet of Canada's sold-out Dracula, along with Ea Sola's soul-stirring Requiem, and Chay Yew's critically acclaimed Red impressively closed the month-long festival. Ea Sola tapped into her own Vietnamese heritage and memories of war in the creation of Requiem. After relocating to France, Ea returned home after 17 years in an attempt to bring closure to the deep-ridden anxieties resulting from post-war Vietnam.

The piece involved 22 other individuals-all from northern Vietnam-and their respective experiences and emotions. The collaborative effort resulted in one cathartic creation that provoked and inspired, incited and pacified, and ultimately touched the viewers. Ea selected her "dancers" not based on technique or style, but on experience. The expressive power of the 22 bodies on stage stemmed not from years of technique

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class-none had any prior dance training-but from surviving the Vietnam war.

"Each performer works on a memory in connection with a death," read the programme. Since the work's completion last year, she and her dancers have received great acclaim all over the world. Although Ea specifically deals with the experience of warring Vietnam, the pervading themes of disruption, severed relations, and personal anguish could relate to all humanity.

Watching the piece, the audience could sense Ea's intrepidity in embarking on seriously personal territory. The dancers' movements exuded grace as well as wanton expressiveness. The choreography-meticulously crafted-occasionally exploded as if in spontaneous abandon.

They appeared on stage, at first still. Then minute gestures slowly built up to an almost spasmodic crescendo. The music of traditional Vietnamese drums and strings intermingled with the singing of the performers in a mournful, and at times enraged, lullaby. Tradition provided the basis for this strongly contemporary piece, namely Vietnamese Buddhist prayer songs.

Northern Vietnamese pagodas and temples also helped to inspire Requiem. Haunting memories merged with present incongruities, and inner conflict intertwined with communal disjunction. Yet the result of such tensions achieved a startling harmony.

Her Requiem is essentially a mental and physical landscape of her dancers' bodies and consciousness-each inseparable from the other. The bodies, ranging in shape, form, and age, essentially formed a physical and emotional landscape on stage. This landscape results from the merging of mental consciousness and physical existence, which Ea proved to be inseparable.

Striking images formed by the bodies on stage heightened the power of Requiem. A "crucified" dancer collapsing into the arms of others; Ea's body being wrapped with fabric into a human "cocoon", both left strong impressions. During one group segment, each dancer covered his or her face with a black and white likeness-which eerily resembled funeral portraits.

Departing from Vietnam, Chay Yew tapped into the turbulent discords and jarring aftermath of China's Cultural Revolution. His play, Red, follows the trials of three different generations of artists, who cannot escape the Revolution's trials.

Through the intertwined lives of the protagonists, the turmoil and incongruities brought on by the Mao era joltingly unfolded. A series of plot twists and unexpected turns evolved into an

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unforgettable ending that drew audible gasps from the audience. Red not only engaged the audience with a rousing plot and forceful acting (by veteran actors Emily Kuroda, Page Leong, and J. Sakata), but delved into deeper issues.

Art's role in society and communist China's false brand of feminism were crucial topics touched upon by Red. Is there room for true expression between feudalism's elitist requisites and the revolution's propagandist commissions? Add the artists' concern of making a living, and you have the complex struggles of Red's characters. On a gender note, Red questions communist China's brand of feminism which works on the theory that women are equal when they become, essentially, men. While the female subjugation of the aristocratic past was by no means justifiable, does the coercion of women to become red book-carrying "iron ladies" present any real progress?

Red doesn't give any easy answers to such quandaries. If the emotionally wrenching Requiem and dramatically ponderous Red left festival audiences a tad sombre, the final act surely lifted spirits. Nothing provides a better escape from dismal reality than a fantastical ballet.

The Royal Winnipeg Ballet of Canada's Dracula dramatically interpreted the count's nighttime escapades to cheers of approval from the audience. Choreographer Mark Godden supplied all the features one might expect of a traditional full-scale ballet—elaborate sets, costumes, and impressive solo showcases, while also adding slight ironic and comedic touches. Decapitated heads supplied subtle black comedy.

A hilariously accelerated pantomime narrates Bram Stoker's famous tale, which served to mock and update the ancient art form at the same time. The "red dance", a bacchanal insertion between first and second acts, brought audiences back from the 18th century to the present in an exuberant celebration of vampire culture. Horror icons, a werewolf, and red-clad revellers lightened the mood of the dark ballet.

The "pure dance" sequence was unabashedly indulgent and the dancers seemed to enjoy every dynamic second. Mark Godden's swirling steps symbolised a whirlwind of dark forces. The circular floor patterns—full of pirouettes and sweeping turns that weave in and out—served to represent the turbulent powers that drive the famed gothic tale. The following night's mixed bill proved that the Royal Winnipeg could pull off more contemporary choreography as deftly as their characteristic Russian Vaganova style.

Concerto Barocco, arguably Balanchine's finest earlier work, is

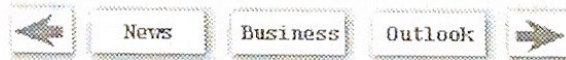
always a joy to watch. The legendary Evelyn Hart shone in Kenneth MacMillan's *Manon Pas de Deux*, proving her dancing can still carry a piece even after more than two decades as principal.

Guest star Johnny Chang from China effortlessly partnered her and flew through the air with remarkable ease.

Along with the main performances in major theatres, the festival also featured the more experimental "Late Night Series" for those who still had the energy to witness yet another theatrical work. Showcasing younger local talents in smaller spaces, the series demonstrated the festival's goal of promoting more cutting-edge creations. Not entirely abandoning tradition, the June event opened with a "festival village" boasting Asian classical art forms.

Yet Thailand was conspicuously absent from this year's festival, except for a small solo by our contemporary dance pioneer Manop Meejamras. Perhaps even more puzzling was the lack of publicity here of this great event right in our own backyard. The Singapore Tourism Board apparently promoted not the festival but rather, the Great Singapore Sales here in Thailand. Yes, Thais love to shop, but catching a world class theatre performance in between sprees at the mall may have been worthwhile as well.

At least then, minds and spirits wouldn't be leaving as empty as the wallet.



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cover story

Spirits of the Past

Two of the highlights in this year's *Singapore Arts Festival* are the theatrical premieres, *Red* and *One Hundred Years In Waiting*. Their coverage of Asian history is set to release and rest some memories

by Otto Fong

In conjunction with Theatrework's *Writers' Lab* retrospective, coined *Charging Up Memory Lane: 30 Plays in 30 Days*, a series of sessions were held in March. Organised by established playwright Desmond Sim, *Playwrights Unscripted* invited theatre notables such as Russell Heng, Lee Chee Keng, Eleanor Wong and interested participants to exchange views on various aspects of playwrighting. Topics ranged from exploring the role of playwrights in Singapore, to the potential for making a living as a full-time playwright.

Indeed, Singaporean playwrights face many challenges. Most, including Sim, hold day jobs to pay the bills, satisfying their passion for story telling on a part-time basis. Some of the difficulties include drawing in Singaporean audiences of many races and sensibilities to the same plays, and a polite society which may not be ready, or willing, to address thorny issues such as racism and homophobia. The handful of local playwrights, such as Goh Poh Seng and Stella Kon, started writing in the 60s. With the exception of Robert Yeo, all stopped before the 70s. Although the *Writer's Lab*, which began in 1990, continues to nurture many new playwrights, the number of full-time local playwrights is still less than the fingers on one hand.

"Are there pro-active solutions from the playwrights?" asked Sim. Interestingly, a few of these questions may be addressed in June. The upcoming *Singapore Arts Festival* will boast at least three plays written by full-time Singaporean playwrights. The critically acclaimed *Red*, produced for regional theatres on both coasts of the USA, is written by American-based Singaporean, Chay Yew, who will double as director at this Asian premiere. The second, *One Hundred Years in Waiting*, is a powerhouse collaboration by three celebrated local playwrights: Kuo Pao Kun, Haresh Sharma and Chong Tze Chien. *One Hundred Years* is set to enjoy its world premiere at the *Festival*.

One Hundred Years in Waiting

In early 2000, the co-director of Practice Performing Arts School and artist director of The Theatre Practice, Kuo Pao Kun, was approached by Foong Choon Hon, senior director Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall Affairs to do a play on Dr Sun Yat Sen. The Sun Yat Sen villa, once used by Dr Sun as a revolutionary base, is set to reopen later this year as the Sun Yat Sen Museum. Foong asked Kuo if a play on Dr Sun could be written to coincide with this momentous event.

Before Dr Sun became the first President of China, he visited Singapore and Penang many times. He lived in Malaya for extended periods, and set up bases in many places including Singapore. By all accounts, he is part of a larger, broader Malayan history.

To bring such a person to life, Kuo felt he needed artists with sensitivities younger and wider than himself. "To do the play merely for the Chinese-speaking community, especially the elderly ones, would be talking to the converted. It is far more meaningful to talk about Dr Sun to the under-30s, those English-speaking Asians who know little about the past," explains Kuo.

Hence, The Necessary Stage (TNS) was approached. Resident playwright, Haresh Sharma, and company playwright, Chong Tze Chien, came aboard in June 2000, to co-write the script with Kuo. From here, veteran Theatre Practice director, Wong May Lan, was asked to co-direct the play with TNS's artistic director, Alvin Tan.

The playwrights set about researching the story for the next three months. While Kuo and Wong had studied about Dr Sun in Chinese history during their schooling days, the younger participants needed to get up to speed with the life of the man

Red photos by Joan Marcus,
One Hundred Years in Waiting photo by Lee Khim Chin

cover story

regarded as the father of modern China. Chong followed Foong on an eight-day visit to Guangzhou, Macau and Hong Kong and Dr Sun's hometown, Zhongshan, where he visited his grave. Sharma stayed in Singapore and pored through notes supplied by the Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce and Industry and surfed the Net for more information.

The playwrights and directors reconvened in August and September and, after much discussion, an enigmatic character in the life of Dr Sun emerged. She was Madam Chen Cui Feng, a Penang woman who was unofficially Dr Sun's second wife. When Dr Sun was in Malaya, Mdm Chen was known to some as his body guard and cook, and even helped him smuggle weapons. When the revolution succeeded in 1911, she left him. Dr Sun passed away in 1925, and Mdm Chen came to Singapore to help prepare for his funeral. With the exception of a chapter here and a paragraph there in Malaysian publications, little is written about this woman. Yet, Kuo and company agreed she should become the pivot of the play.

"We are viewing the life, time and work of Dr Sun from a Southeast Asian vantage point," says Kuo.

From then on, the playwrights set to work on the script. Kuo provided the initial structure of the play by writing short scenes of monologues, and sending them to Haresh and Tze Chien via e-mail. The two younger playwrights would then decide to accept or reject the many suggestions made by Kuo. By filling in the spaces between the monologues, the younger playwrights created the final structure. Chong described the process, "like finding pieces of a jigsaw puzzle."

"It was not the most efficient way to write a play," he says, "but it was certainly the most creative".

"The process was very special because of the different experiences of different people. I loved the openness, the willingness to share and listen," comments Sharma.

Alvin Tan had a similar opinion on working with several playwrights and another director on one play. "We were able to pool our respective strengths to the composition process. It is important for this project which is quite intergenerational in nature."

While the playwrights were still working on a third draft, the directors got to work. From March to May, Alvin Tan began directing the main cast, which includes Gerald Chew as Dr Sun and Jean Ng as Mdm Chen. Wu Yuejuan will play Dr Sun's first wife. In separate rehearsals, Wong directed the ensemble while dancer/choreographer (and Kuo's wife), Goh Lay Kuan, led them through *zhan zhuang*, (a form of standing exercise) and meditation so as to prepare them for the more abstract moments of the play. Earlier in the rehearsals, only the directors would visit each other's sessions. Gradually, main cast and ensemble merged into single rehearsals. The possibilities of using movement and multimedia were then explored.

One of Hong Kong's top designers, Kevin Ho, was then engaged to design for the stage at Victoria Theatre, with Singaporean, Pan Yaotian, commissioned to create new music and sound for the play.

Despite the stellar cast and top designers, the main draw for *Waiting* will be seeing what kind of story has

been created by the combined might of the three playwrights. Any concern that it would be 'another Kuo Pao Kun play', was allayed by Chong.

"You'll do yourself a great disservice if you allow yourself to be intimidated by Kuo Pao Kun," said Chong, referring to his collaboration with Singapore's leading theatre practitioner. "Don't come in expecting a Kuo Pao Kun play!"

Red

Similarly, the main draw for *Red* will be its playwright. For the first time in 11 years, the prodigal son of Singapore will be physically present for the staging of his play. Not only that, he will direct it.

When Chay Yew's *Red* premiered in 1998 at Seattle's Intiman Theatre, critics called it "one of the hottest plays of the year". Presently holding the double posts of director of the Asian Theatre Workshop at the Taper and artistic director of Northwest Asian American Theatre/The Black Box in Seattle, Chay has been hailed as "one of the most significant new playwrights in American theatre".

Red is not the first brush Chay has had with Chinese mainland history. On the 10th anniversary of the 1989 Tiananmen Square riots, he also directed *The Courage to Stand Alone*, a reading of Chinese dissident and Nobel Prize

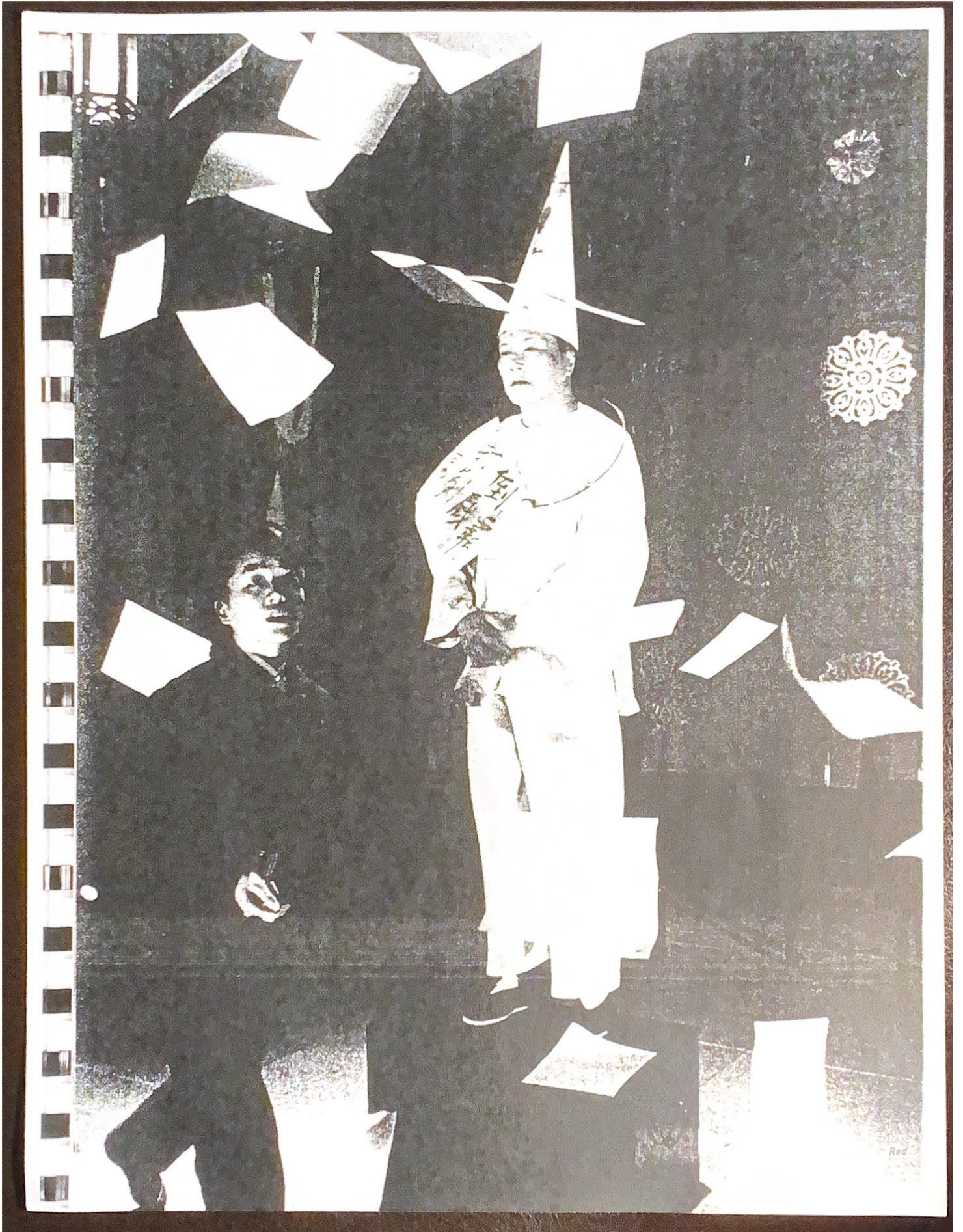


nominee, Wei Jingsheng's letters to the late Deng Xiaoping, with a dramatisation of his life and struggles.

The subject of the Cultural Revolution first caught Chay's attention in 1990 when he was working on his play, *Porcelain*, at Glen Goei's Mu Lan Theatre Company in London, where he became good friends with actress Tsai Chin (of the movie *The Joy Luck Club*). Tsai confided in Chay that her father, a great opera actor, was purged during the Revolution. He died during house arrest and his wife was beaten and killed. At that time, Tsai was performing in the West End production of *The World of Suzie Wong* in London and was unable to enter China. Decades later, Tsai was invited back to China to present a speech about her father, but the homecoming felt strange to her. She suspected that many of the artists and people who went up to congratulate her about her father's achievements might have delivered false testimonies against him, resulting in his death.

"The tenuous relationships between artists and country, and censorship and art, have always fascinated me," says Chay, "especially since my first play *As If He Hears* was initially banned in Singapore."

Tony Petito, the previous artistic director of the Singapore Repertory Theatre (SRT) had asked Chay on several occasions, to direct a project.



Red

(SRT being the same company which world-premiered *Golden Child*, a play written by Asian American playwright, David Hwang of *M. Butterfly* fame.) Given Chay's schedule and commitments, nothing ever worked out. Until last year, when Perito asked once more. Since Chay had wanted the opportunity to work on the play a little more before its publication, and since he had never directed the play, he finally accepted.

When the National Arts Council approached SRT about their intentions of bringing Singaporeans who have established themselves overseas back home, *Red* became a part of this year's *Singapore Arts Festival*.

Chay returns to Singapore this March with a handpicked cast he assembled in the USA. The play will be staged in SRT's brand new home, a restored warehouse on the river, containing a 400-seat theatre.

Parallel Plays

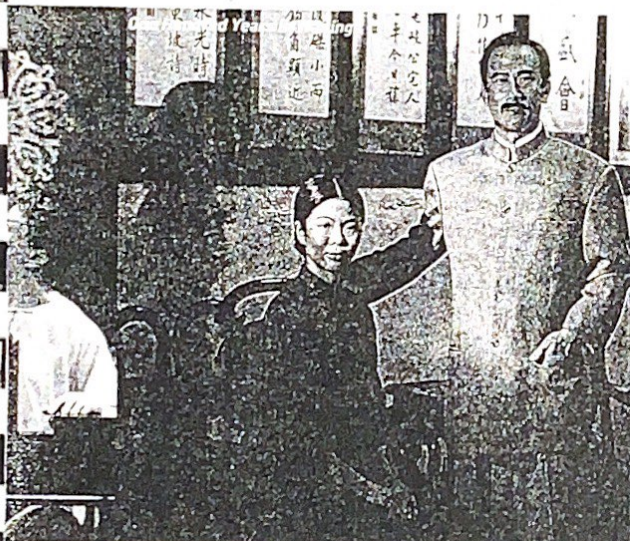
Chay, now based in Los Angeles, is confident Singaporeans will leap to *Red* immediately. The challenge of drawing a great diversity of audience was not new to him. After all, Los Angeles is a town with a large and multi-cultural Asian American community.

"For example, Japanese American audiences are more likely to attend a Philip

the discussion sessions for *Waiting*. Kuo and Wong were vigilant with how the younger playwrights worked in the facts, resulting in second and third drafts which contained more historical references.

Also interesting, is that both plays use similar constructs. Neither are naturalistic plays which merely document history. Instead, both use modern-day protagonists who must confront the spirits of the past. In *Red*, an Asian American novelist visits an old opera house and comes face-to-face with a ghost who lived through the Revolution. In *Waiting*, a television actor has to research his upcoming role as Dr Sun. As they explore the roots of China's past, these central protagonists, both of whom are artists, have a more urgent agenda: using the past as a mirror in an attempt to define an identity of their own. Certainly, then, the two plays are explorations into the role of artists in contemporary society.

"*Red* was about why I work in the theatre and what I would sacrifice to keep to doing it," says Chay.



"The tenuous relationships between artists and country, and censorship and art, have always fascinated me."
Chay Yew

Gotanda play, and may not choose to attend a play written by Chinese American Elizabeth Wong or a Korean-themed play by Sung Rno. This creates a real financial and programmatic challenge for any Asian American theatre. There must be inventive ways to cultivate an Asian American theatre audience."

Ultimately, Chay feels that audiences around the world tend to be similar, citing examples of Euripides' 4,000 year old *Medea* and Shakespeare's *King Lear* which is still being performed in every corner of the world. "Stories and plays are timeless and universal," he says.

Sharma shares this sentiment. Being non-Chinese, Kuo and Chong looked to him to provide a more objective point of view on Dr Sun. For Sharma, race is not the primary focus in this work. Instead, it is merely the jumping-off point.

"I try not to see *Waiting* as just a Chinese issue. It is more a question of how to raise the personal history to one which will resonate with the audience of today."

Despite a de-emphasising of race, the playwrights of both plays maintained a deep respect for historical accuracy. For instance, Chay Yew had taken great pains to portray events faithfully. After *Red* was performed, the playwright found himself besieged by Chinese audiences who were amazed at how accurately and detailed the play had painted the Cultural Revolution. During

Waiting takes a different perspective. "Dr Sun's death was a blow. He had said that all must work harder, because the revolution was not complete," says Chong. "One hundred years after he began the revolution, we are still waiting."

Regardless of their stance, the playwrights for both works seem to agree on one thing: in order to define one's present role in society, one must first excavate the past.

Come June, Singaporean audiences will get a chance to do the same and get glimpses into Asian history. The many part-time local playwrights can also benefit from the solutions these full-timers forged for themselves. Regardless of whether the audiences and theatre practitioners can see eye to eye with the perspectives and paths taken by these four, one thing is certain: new clues to our identity as a nation await to be discovered and uncovered.

otto FONG is a playwright for Drama Box, comic artist and a teacher