

# *Theater; Annals of Asia In America, In Small Bites*

By Michelle Memran

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MATHEMATICALLY speaking, Columbus Park in Lower Manhattan is not a perfect square. Some of its sides stretch longer than others, paths diverge into the street and trees obscure its edges. The park, on the corner of Bayard and Mulberry Streets in Chinatown, is where Cantonese meets Mandarin on a Sunday afternoon. Where -- despite recent police barricades and American flags tacked to dim sum menus -- one still hears the rhythmic click-clack of mah-jongg tiles on cardboard tables, sees clairvoyants peddle palm readings ("Trust me -- 30 years on job!") and feels the resilient thrust of life carrying on.

Inspired by this landmark, the Chinese-American playwright Chay Yew, 35, and the director Lisa Peterson, 40, conceived of a series of 16 roughly 10-minute plays that would form a mosaic of Asian experience in America from the Civil

War to the present. The result, "The Square," was commissioned by the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles, where it had its world premiere last year. In New York, the production is being presented by the Ma-Yi Theater Company at the Joseph Papp Public Theater, where it was to open yesterday.

"These are plays about community, about looking at each other," Ms. Peterson, who is directing, said during a recent technical rehearsal. "These voices are talking about America and the experiment of trying to make a country out of all these different cultural entities."

For Mr. Yew, "Sept. 11 gives the play a strange kind of context."

"All of a sudden, these 16 voices are talking about America," he said. "There's a reason why people come to this country, Asian or not. There's a sense that this is America -- good or bad. We're part of something and we have to go on."

The project began in 1995 as the inaugural venture of the Asian theater workshop at the Taper. Ms. Peterson and Mr. Yew, then resident artists at the theater, were trying to find a way to write about Asian life and include non-Asian perspectives in the narrative. "It's too easy to isolate ourselves -- to make plays by, about and for Asians," Mr. Yew said. "We need to push further."

The two decided to pool resources and call on a selection of their writer-friends -- eight Asian-American (among them, Ping Chong, Philip Kan Gotanda and David Henry Hwang) and eight non-Asian-American (among them, Constance Congdon, Maria Irene Fornes, Jose Rivera and Mac Wellman). "I love the idea of a dim sum platter," Mr. Yew said. "This is precisely what I love about theater."

Once they had recruited the writers, they decided to emphasize the proportions of a square and chose four decades (1880's, 1920's, 1960's and the present day); four themes (chaos, order, destiny, tradition); four ethnic and sexual categories for the roles (Asian and non-Asian; male and female) and set a four-character limit for each play.

Diana Son, who was assigned the 1880's and "tradition," wrote "Handsome," about a Chinese servant who wants to cut off his braided queue to win the affections of his affluent American mistress. "At that time, if you were going to go back to China, to fit in culturally, you kept your queue," Ms. Son said. "But there were some Chinese men who decided they weren't going to go back, and they cut off their queues as an act of defiance. My character was willing to do it for love." Ms. Son said that steeping herself in the 1880's had been instructive: "When you think of the American ethnic palette from that time, you're picturing women in full skirts and Victorian dress. You're not thinking Chinese with queues working on the railroads."

For her play, set in the 1920's, Kia Corthron spun "chaos" into "Anchor Aria." Her protagonist, a half Asian-American, half African-American named Agnes, begins her journey in bed. She not only has to battle racism on two fronts ("Congress pass Chinese Exclusion Act; Congress don't pass antilynching bill"); she also has to contend with a bout of consumption. In a delirious fever punctuated by coughing fits, she shouts out newspaper headlines and expresses a deep desire to stay put. "At this time in our country's history," Ms. Corthron said, "when there is so much suspicion concerning immigrants, this is a good time to celebrate them."

Jessica Hagedorn's "Silent Movie" confronts cultural shifts in America. Also set in the 1920's, it involves a rendezvous between two Irish women -- a gangster-politician's wife and her servant -- in an opium den overlooking a square in Chinatown. While doing her research, Ms. Hagedorn became intrigued by the number of Irish immigrants on the Bowery and along Bayard Street in the early 1900's. "The Irish were in New York's Chinatown before the Chinese," she said. Ms. Hagedorn added that she liked the idea of the two women "in this illicit den, breaking taboos and taking charge" at a time when many women would not have had the freedom to do so.

To Craig Lucas, whose "Examination" explores present-day relationships among a Chinese-American doctor, his parents and a patient, "The Square" is arriving in New York at a pivotal time. "People hunger for connection," Mr. Lucas said. "And theater has always been a life-saver, a place where the most profound hopes can be given voice."

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