

An Asian 'Wonderland'

Playhouse is poised to unveil emerging talent's new work

By Charlene Baldridge
Special to the Press-Enterprise

Playwright Chay Yew spent the past few weeks in a rehearsal hall at La Jolla Playhouse, laptop computer at the ready, watching as director Lisa Peterson worked with the actors on his play "Wonderland," which makes its world premiere Wednesday.

Yew resides in Los Angeles, where he commutes between the Mark Taper Forum, where he is director of the Asian Theater Workshop, and East West Players, where he is resident director.

"Chay likes to be in the rehearsal room," said Peterson, who has directed five La Jolla Playhouse productions in recent years. "If we're having trouble with a moment, we can look at it. He may change it on the spot or say, 'No, let me just think about it for a while.'"

Peterson and Yew met at the Taper, where both found a theatrical home four years ago as newly arrived Mellon Foundation grant recipients. As the resident director, she works on new play development. In the larger world, she enjoys a hot career as a free-lance director.

"The great thing about working on new plays is developing relationships with writers," she said. "You tune in to how each wants to work. Chay and I have developed a shorthand."

While Peterson rehearsed the premiere of Yew's "Red" at Seattle's Intiman Theater in 1998, he began writing "Wonderland," which Peterson directed in workshop in last year's Taper New Works Festival.

"It explores a contemporary Asian-American family and what it really means to be Asian in America, to pursue the American dream as many others have, and what the dream means to each family member," said Yew.

"I began with archetypes, the immigrant, the Asian-American, and the American within the Asian-American context. Those ideas evolved into a family of three complex characters whom I've come to love and am still very bewildered by."

Tsai Chin, who starred in "The Joy Luck Club," portrays the Woman, whose perception of America was shaped by American television programs. Her husband, a fourth-generation Asian-American with large architectural dreams, is played by Sab Shimono, who starred in the original Broadway

production of Stephen Sondheim's "Pacific Overtures."

The couple's American-born son is played by Alec Mapa, acclaimed for his performance in the La Jolla Playhouse's world-premiere production of Jessica Hagedorn's "Dogeaters" last season.

Actor Joel de la Fuente portrays a young man who relates the family's story.

Asked if the play is autobiographical, Yew admitted there were familiar moments during the writing, but said he is not one to write his life in its entirety into one piece. If someone someday puts all his plays together, they might be able, he said, "to piece a life, probably me."

Born in Singapore in 1966, Yew became fascinated with storytelling through TV shows like "Sesame Street" and "The Mary Tyler Moore Show," though his evolving ambition was to be a star, not a storyteller.

Nonetheless, he received a what he terms a "Barbra Streisand 101" education at school, where in addition to performing, he built and painted sets and directed.

He left Singapore at 16 to do undergraduate studies at Pepperdine University in Malibu. Having returned to Singapore to fulfill an obligatory stint in military service, he acted with Singapore's Theater-Works, which produced his first play, "As if He Hears."

Written for his master's thesis at Boston University, Yew's "Porcelain" explores issues of racism, homophobia and homicidal passion. Premiered when he was writer-in-residence at London's Mu-Lan Theater, it received the 1993 London Fringe Award.

Tsai Chin met the emerging playwright when she performed at Mu-Lan. Though she did not see "Porcelain," she saw Yew's "A Language of Their Own," after moving to Los Angeles six years ago.

"This is a very big talent as a playwright," she said. "Among the Asian writers he is probably the most poetic."

Chin gave Yew the idea for his subsequent play, "Red," based on the story of her uncle, a Chinese Opera singer imprisoned during the Cultural Revolution.

Over the course of "Wonderland," which she said is about unfulfilled passion, Chin's character ages 30 years.

Sab Shimono portrayed the domineering Chinese Opera singer in Peterson's Seattle and Portland

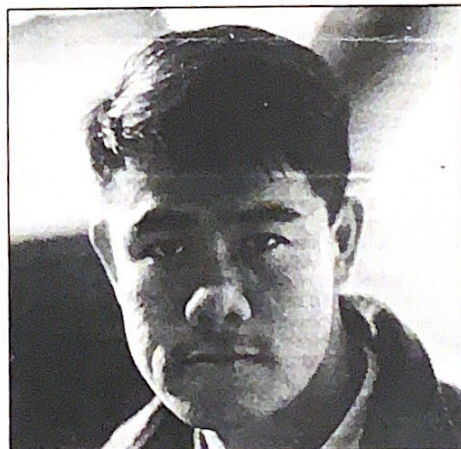


La Jolla Playhouse

The cast of "Wonderland" features, from left, Tsai Chin, Joel de la Fuente, Alec Mapa and Sab Shimono.

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Chay Yew



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production of "Red." Playing the less aggressive father in "Wonderland," which he terms "one of the tougher plays I ever did," has been a challenge.

"It's like music," he said, "like Sondheim. Once you're on the pattern, you can't stop the train."

"Chay uses a minimalist palette," said Peterson, "to write a very large play using very few tools. His plays mix the big and the

little, the personal and the public."

"A play," Yew said, "is like a relationship. Involved in it, you're either happy with it or you're working on it. Once it's over, you can step back and see it for what it is."

Through Oct. 17 at the La Jolla Playhouse, the world and Yew will see "Wonderland" for what it is.

The world should not expect easy answers.

Yew believes that the best theater, the good plays, never give answers, but leave us with questions to take home.

For more information, contact the La Jolla Playhouse, (619) 550-1010.