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THEATER

Classics in a New Context

Outside voices are finding mainstream exposure when they put their stamp on works from the canon

By JAN BRESLAUER

More than a dozen women, many cloaked in mantillas or fingering rosaries, hover behind several rows of straight-back wooden chairs. Their faces are a rainbow of skin hues, their shapes and sizes as various as their ages.

Suddenly, a young woman in a peasant skirt bursts into the room. As the others turn to watch her, she throws herself on the ground in an erotic lamentation. "You won't be lifting my skirts behind the barn door anymore," she moans, writhing prone on the floor. "Your warm rough fingers will never trail and map my inner thighs.... Of all who served you, family or maid, bet you didn't know, I was the one who loved you most of all."

A stern matriarch draped in black enters, glaring at the servant. "Silence!" she intones.

The conflict about to unfold takes place in Federico Garcia Lorca's "The House of Bernarda Alba," which opens Thursday at the Mark Taper Forum, directed by Lisa Peterson and starring Chita Rivera.

Yet theatergoers who know "Bernarda Alba," the drama of a widow who decrees that her five daughters will mourn their father for eight years, may not recall this scene. That's because it wasn't in the original. It is part of a new adaptation, by playwright Chay Yew. And therein lies a world of difference.

The servant who had neither name nor much stage time has become Blanca, a character who figures more prominently and is about 30 years younger than in the original. The result is a heightening of the play's sexuality and class politics.

Garcia Lorca "had her but didn't use her," Yew says. "By adding the servant class, I'm adding someone who could talk about sex in a visceral way. I went with Blanca because I felt she had a delicious longing, and I understand that. As someone who grew up in authoritarian Singapore and as a gay man, oppression is second nature to me. I understand it sexually and racially."

The aim of adaptation is to make classics speak more directly to contemporary audiences. It can also be a way for artists like Yew to insinuate themselves into a tradition that has long relegated them to the margins, staking a claim to the greatest texts in the history of the Western stage.

"I came from a place where we had to do white plays because that's the thing that you do," says the personable 36-year-old Yew, referring to his upbringing in Singapore. He moved to California in the 1980s.

He is seated in his office at the Mark Taper Forum, where he is an associate artist and director of the Asian Theater Workshop. Two walls of the tiny room are plastered with a dizzying sea of postcards, with a purple feather boa tacked on top of it all, a bright slash of artful impudence.

"Now there's a way to do a classic play by claiming it as your own," continues Yew, who's writing an adaptation of Anton Chekhov's "The Cherry Orchard." "I can have this cross-culture international collaboration with Mr. Lorca and Mr. Chekhov. Just as new works are important, it should also be important to see the old ones in contrast and in a new context."

A look at who's adapting classics these days shows it's not the old boys' club anymore. The majority are people of color, women, gay, disabled or otherwise "other" voices. For theaters that have struggled for more than a decade to include a greater range of artists, this provides a convenient compromise. Producing adaptations by writers like Yew can satisfy the imperatives of diversity without scaring off the more conservative audience members, as happened during the peak of multicultural programming in the early '90s.

Yet the situation raises as many questions as it answers. "Is the reason why all these young playwrights are doing adaptations because they can't get some other work produced in the regional theater?" asks Yew. "I think the problem is not only with works by writers of color, but also new plays."

Playwright Luis Alfaro, a former MacArthur Foundation "genius" grant recipient and co-director of the Taper's Latino Theatre Initiative, states the problem even more bluntly. "If you're a straight white guy, you don't have to write an adaptation to get produced, right?" he asks. "So it is by necessity that you start to look at these things."

With careers that were given a kick-start by the multiculturalism movement of the late 1980s and '90s, artists like Yew and Alfaro are hitting a glass ceiling. Branded in part by an early success predicated on works that focused on the identity politics of being gay and nonwhite, they're having a tough time breaking out of that pigeonhole, even though their writing has since broadened its focus.

"I think it's no big secret that doing an adaptation came to me at a time when, as an artist, I've been thinking a lot about how I get to the next level," says Alfaro, whose "Electricidad," an adaptation of Sophocles' "Electra," will be given a

workshop at South Coast Repertory this summer. (His one act "The Gardens of Aztlan [An Acto Hecho a Mano]" can be seen at the theater's Hispanic Playwright Project starting Saturday.) "I'm 40. How do I get produced in the regional theater, and how are they looking at Latino work?"

"I'm looking at what people are relating to, and adaptation just seemed right politically," continues Alfaro, recently named associate producer of new play development at the Taper. "I wish I wasn't so cynical about it myself, but of course you see it and think this is a way in through that big weird door."

Moreover, the situation may be symptomatic of a malaise even more profound than the multicultural glass ceiling. "People are adaptation-mad right now because they hate and fear new ideas, and new writing especially," says Philip Littell, whose translation-adaptation of Georges Feydeau's "He Hunts" was commissioned and staged at the Geffen Playhouse this season, directed by David Schweizer. "It's as if a collective nausea has hit the performing arts about this."

In Garcia Lorca's 1936 "The House of Bernarda Alba," each frustrated daughter finds her own way of enduring the mother's punishing edict, but not without tragic consequences. Although it's more realistic than Garcia Lorca's other dramas, it is fundamentally a work of poetry, written in verse rife with symbolism.

Both the sexuality and the lyricism would seem to make it an interesting fit with Yew, whose works, including "Red," "Wonderland" and "A Language of Their Own," have received praise for their poetic elements. Seen at such prestigious venues as London's Royal Court Theatre, New York's Public Theater and La Jolla Playhouse, Yew has also been staged locally at the Celebration Theatre and East West Players, where he has also directed.

When the National Asian American Theatre Company, a 66-seat venue in Manhattan, approached him, it was not to adapt, but to direct "Bernarda Alba." He ended up both writing the adaptation and directing it in late 2000. Because it was for an Asian company, Yew chose "to take out the Spanish content," he says. "So what I did was fit it in between, in the Philippines."

That location was in Yew's direction, not in the text. "What we're doing is saying it's Spain, but we're inspired by Arab-Andalusian art," explains Taper resident director Peterson. "I cast it multiethnically because I wanted to treat the play as if it were a Greek play or a Shakespeare as opposed to a realistic family drama."

Peterson, who has staged several of Yew's plays, was the driving force behind getting the Taper to produce "Bernarda Alba." "I liked the tension between Chay's rhythms and the force of the rough, large-size emotion that's happening in Lorca's play," she says. "It's the most radical adaptation of this play that I know of. The language is quite spare and rough, and the sexuality is more extreme."

In spirit, Yew feels he is being faithful to Garcia Lorca. "I had read that Lorca wanted 100 women on stage, and of course no theater company can do that," he says. "But that became the aesthetic for my play, to have many women on stage to create the community, always watching."

The result is a melding of two sensibilities. "I began to understand the characters more by diving into my own life, which is strange because who am I to identify with women? And then I realized that Lorca was a man, he was gay and he was an exile to some extent, like I am."

"I decided to go into the play, and of course this gay thing came out and this Asian thing came out," Yew continues. "I understood how these women were fiery. I have that, but I demonstrate it very differently. I think the play still lends itself to big feelings, but I like it a little more pressurized."

There was also pressure from the Garcia Lorca estate. Yew found out, to his chagrin, that he'd have to pay \$3,000 for the rights to do the adaptation again. "I was laughing because this is the first time I paid to work on a play," he says. "So, to all aspiring playwrights, if you want to adapt something, make sure the play is in public domain!"

As happy an occasion as it is for Yew's work to make it to the main stage of the Taper, there's some irony that it happened with "Bernarda Alba." After seven years on staff at the downtown house, he's finally reaching this theatrical high ground, not with a play of his own, but with an adaptation.

This fact hasn't escaped notice among his peers. "I want to feel positive, so I try not to go there," Alfaro says. "But looking at the body of his work, it's the moment when Chay is least vocal about his sexuality that he's most present for most people."

Personal politics may still be present, but the less overt they are, the better the script's chances. "When I tell my story—the gay Latino Luis—my story is not that interesting to theaters that have to fill certain seats," Alfaro says. "We know now, as people of color working in these mainstream theaters, they don't want to hear that story."

Call it the latest plateau in the long climb toward diversity in the arts.

Multiculturalism hit L.A. in the late 1980s and lasted, full throttle, into the mid-'90s, when the sentiments, institutional practices and granting policies of major national arts funders began to shift.

In large regional theaters, it drove changes in staffing, programming and audience cultivation and spawned the kind of development labs that remain a cornerstone of the Taper's bureaucracy. These include the Asian Theatre Workshop that Yew heads and the Latino Theatre Initiative, co-directed by Alfaro and performer-director Diane Rodriguez, which was launched in 1993 with a \$1.47-million grant from the Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund. Other Taper labs include Blackmyths for African American writers, and the Other Voices Project for disabled theater artists.

In the mid-'90s, however, the tide began to roll back. Critical response was increasingly negative and, while new theatergoers were courted, there was a kind of "white flight" among subscribers. Artists began to chafe at some of the politically correct excesses, particularly in the areas of casting and commissioning, which demanded that, for instance, Latino-themed plays be cast exclusively with artists with Latino surnames.

Meanwhile, Alfaro and Yew had gained a beachhead within the institutions. But their charge was to nurture the work of upcoming writers, and they often had to turn to smaller theaters to see their own work produced.

Now, they're looking for new ways to work within the system. Alfaro had a commission from South Coast Rep for a long time before he decided to submit his adaptation. "I've written three plays since I got it, but they were all things that I just never thought they would do," he says. But with "Electricidad," "there was definitely the sense that I was writing toward a

larger audience."

Written in Spanglish, "Electricidad" was created during a residency with Borderlands theater in Tucson. "There was an incident that happened as soon as I got there, involving girl gangs, with a mother and daughter involved in killing people," Alfaro says. "So I started thinking about Clytemnestra and Electra."

Just as Alfaro chose to infuse the Greek text with a Chicano sensibility, others have chosen to use their personal vantage points to recast classics.

Kelly Stuart, 41, adapted Aeschylus' Oresteia trilogy at the behest of San Diego's Sledgehammer Theatre, where it was produced in 2000. "I was struck by how blatantly hostile the Oresteia was to women," Stuart says. "I decided I wanted to highlight exactly what was being said, because I felt that the message gets obscured under a lot of puffery and macho heroism in modern adaptations. In a sense you could say that I attacked Aeschylus as much as adapted him."

John Belluso, 32, is the co-director, along with Victoria Ann Lewis, of the Taper's Other Voices Project. "Eyolf," his adaptation of Henrik Ibsen's "Little Eyolf," about a partially paralyzed boy and his resentful mother, was recently given a reading at the Manhattan Theatre Club.

"The reason that I was drawn to this particular play is it contains within it a fascinating narrative about disability, and I saw it therefore as part of my overall project of examining disability on stage," says Belluso, whose "The Body of Bourne" was seen at the Taper in 2001 and whose "Gretty Goodtime" will be staged at the Falcon Theatre in Burbank this spring.

"It's my direct experience as a disabled man that allows me to add a new dimension to these characters," says the writer, who's now working on an adaptation of Sophocles' "Philoctetes." But "I definitely don't think it's my place as a writer to 'correct the mistakes' that Ibsen made in representing a disabled character."

Philip Littell, best known for his librettos for the operas "The Dangerous Liaisons" and "A Streetcar Named Desire," is a veteran performer and translator-adaptor. Now 52, he moved back to New York in 1999, after spending most of 23 years in L.A., where he also created a number of provocative original works, including his and Eliot Douglass' "The Wandering Whore," a chamber musical about "the birth of the gay world" in London's criminal milieu, circa 1700.

It's as though Littell has financed his original works with his adaptations, having had major commissions from a wide range of other sources, including Disney, which had him create text for Michael Torke's millennium symphony "Four Seasons," for the New York Philharmonic, and an equestrian Zorro show for Euro Disneyland. "I guess I'm an adapting fool, but I still consider it a very minor percentage of my activity," he says.

Ultimately, it's still artistic attraction that determines which projects he tackles. "Feydeau is perfect, the greatest farce writer ever, and his work is also disturbing and destructive ... of values, which I really admire," says Littell, whose rendition of the late 19th century French playwright's work has a pointedly contemporary edge.

Following Littell's lead, Alfaro is also ready to do more adapting, possibly of a Thornton Wilder or Tennessee Williams play. "I can't wait to get my hands on something else," he says. "Now I want to do 'Nuestro Town.' Or a Chicano adaptation of 'Summer and Smoke.'"

As for Yew, his version of "The Cherry Orchard"--moved to China, with Mao Tse-tung's long march passing through--was given a workshop in the Singapore Arts Festival in June. "Chekhov and Lorca were great indirect mentors, and I learned much more about myself as a playwright," he says. "Ultimately, the lesson about adapting is, what about my plays? Can I see them 4,000 years from now, and if not, why not?"

Such questions are not merely personal, but a matter of the future of the art form. "The real question to ask of an adaptation is probably the same one that has always been asked: Do we need it and can it change our lives and affect the development of our future work?" says Littell. "It's a question that needs an unequivocal yes."

"The House of Bernarda Alba," Mark Taper Forum, 135 N. Grand Ave., L.A. Opens Thursday. Regular schedule: Tuesdays-Saturdays, 8 p.m.; Sundays, 7:30 p.m.; Saturdays-Sundays, 2:30 p.m. Ends Sept. 1. \$30-\$44. (213) 628-2772.

Jan Breslauer is a regular contributor to Calendar.