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Artistic director Chay Yew: 'Audiences come here wanting a dialogue about America'

Posted By *Howard Sherman* On Aug 5, 2019 @ 4:27 pm
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*The award-winning playwright and director has scored a series of Broadway transfers from his Chicago theatre. He tells **Howard Sherman** why community-generated plays come first – and warns against 'ghettoising' directors*

"I probably am a playwright first and a director second," Chay Yew declared in an interview in 2005. Reminded of this 14 years on, he laughs and says: "Times have changed."

While Yew initially made his mark in theatre writing plays including *A Language of Their Own* and *Red*, directing began to take over, with shows at many of America's best-known regional theatres. Since 2011, he has been artistic director of Victory Gardens Theater in Chicago.

"When I was younger there were a lot of things I wanted to write about," Yew says. Over time, he became more interested in the worlds conjured up by other playwrights, worlds to which he felt he had no direct access.

"As a director, I was able to journey into these plays, find myself, and realise the worlds the playwrights have written," he says. "I find my inspiration and my passion in other writers and their versions of this country and this world."

We meet in New York, shortly before the opening of his production of *Mojada*, Luis Alfaro's adaptation of the *Medea* story set in present-day Queens. In *Mojada*, which is playing at the Public Theater (<https://www.thestage.co.uk/tag/public-theater/>)^[1], *Medea* is conceived as an undocumented immigrant to the US from Mexico, who arrives only after a harrowing journey north.



(<https://cdn.thestage.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/05160822/CMYK-MOJADA-Public-Theater-Photo-by-Joan-Marcus-0092rR.png>) ^[2]

Mojada at New York's Public Theater. Photo: Joan Marcus

Because earlier versions of the play have been set in Los Angeles and Chicago, and the script kept evolving, all of Yew's experiences were brought to bear in his collaboration with Alfaro. He said that part of the process for the production was to represent the variety of Latino communities in New York, changing two previously Mexican characters to those with origins in Puerto Rico and Cuba.

But the biggest thing about this production, Yew thinks, was Alfaro wanting to explore the fact that Medea shouldn't kill a child because of vengeance. "How then does the killing justify what Medea wants for herself and for the child? That was a complete dramaturgical shift. Which is very exciting to work on as a playwright and a director and a sort-of dramaturg."

Just as Yew's primary focus in theatre has changed over time, his route into theatre was an evolution. Born in Singapore, he took an undergraduate degree in film and television in the US, before returning to Singapore for mandatory military service. During that time he began working with a small local theatre troupe – it was also there that the government of Singapore banned his play *As If He Hears* because of its sympathetic portrayal of a gay character. But when he returned to the US for graduate school, he once again focused on media studies.



(<https://cdn.thestage.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/05161225/CMYK-HILLARY-AND-CLINTON-Victory-Gardens-Theatre-Cheryl-Lynn-Bruce-Hillary-John-Apicella-Bill-Photo-by-Michael-Courier.png>) ^[3]

Cheryl Lynn Bruce and John Apicella in Hillary and Clinton, 2016. Photo: Michael Courier

Theatre became more important when his friend Glen Goei – artistic director of Mu-Lan Arts in London from 1990 to 1998 – invited him to visit the UK and write a play for him, after hearing about the banning of *As If He Hears*. Yew adapted his short screenplay *Porcelain* for the stage.

After being mounted by Etcetera Theatre at a small pub in London, Stephen Daldry (<https://www.thestage.co.uk/news/2005/royal-courts-dramatic-50th-anniversary-season/>)^[4] picked Porcelain as part of his first season leading the capital's Royal Court Theatre (<https://www.thestage.co.uk/tag/royal-court-theatre/>)^[5].

Following the subsequent success of *A Language of Their Own* at the Public, Yew received a call from Gordon Davidson, founding artistic director of the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles, who told him: "We have a grant for you. Come and be a part of our artistic staff." Yew responded: "What would I be doing? Because I don't want to be a token." To which Davidson replied: "You can do anything you want."

So Yew founded the Taper's Asian-American Theater Lab. There he began directing, which led to gigs at such companies as Cornerstone and East West Players.

When Yew took on his role at Victory Gardens, he found a theatre that was struggling financially. It took three or four years to balance the books. His other early challenge was understanding the theatrical ecosystem of the city in which he was working.

"The dramaturgy of audiences and communities is crucial: how they think, how they hear stories, how they relate to the theatre," Yew says. "That was an interesting curve. Not having lived in the Midwest, I found that it's segregated, it's tribal."

He continues: "So how do I give them stories? How do I create a dialogue with them – with what I want, but meeting them in-between instead of just pushing the work I want towards them?"

Assessing his tenure so far, Yew says: "I think after eight years, we are in a sweet spot where the audiences now love and understand what we are all about, aesthetically and in terms of the mission. I think people come to Victory Gardens wanting to have a dialogue about the nation."

Continues...

Q&A Chay Yew

What was your first non-theatre job?

Ad copywriter.

What was your first theatre job?

I acted in Singapore while in the military.

What is your next job?

Directing Packing by Scott Bradley for About Face Theatre in Chicago.

What do you wish someone had told you when you were starting out?

That I could do anything I wanted to do.

Who or what was your biggest influence?

I have many influences, but perhaps the most significant artist is Polish film director Krzysztof Kieslowski. In all his work, he finds poetry, humanity and the political in his characters set against a complex, interconnected world. His intelligent and artful use of sound, light, set, text and actors to create the mise-en-scène continues to inspire me.

What's your best advice for auditions?

Look at the text, look at the punctuation – there's something that's already in the play that is written. Follow it and then add what you believe that character is trying to say.

If you hadn't been a playwright and director, what would you have been?

I would have worked in TV and film in some capacity.

Do you have any theatrical superstitions or rituals?

No.

In recent years, Victory Gardens has been a pipeline for work to go to and from New York. Lucas Hnath's Hillary and Clinton was first seen at Yew's theatre before playing Broadway earlier this year, while Yew's own production of writer Lauren Yee's Cambodian Rock Band is set for the Signature Theatre Company in early 2020. But the path to New York, or producing plays that succeed in New York, aren't priorities for Yew.

"If a New York play speaks to the communities in Chicago, I would automatically want to bring it to Chicago," he says. "But I'm more passionate about stories and plays generated from our theatre. When regional theatres invest in their own communities and put stories from that

community on their stages, the community owns these stories and owns the theatre and owns these plays.” He adds: “For me, a diet of national conversations, civic conversations, centred around the city, are crucial.”

When Yew was hired at Victory Gardens, he was at the forefront of regional theatres that were diversifying their leadership. More artists of colour have joined the leadership ranks in the US in the past few years, and there are more opportunities for artists of colour in other theatrical disciplines. But he recalls his own experiences as a director when the field was much more narrow.



(<https://cdn.thestage.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/05160948/OEDIPUS-EL-REY-Public-Theater-Photo-by-Joan-Marcus-0217rR.png>) [6]

Oedipus El Rey at the Public Theater in 2017. Photo: Joan Marcus

“The first time I got into somebody’s big theatre, it was through Asian plays. It was wonderful to have Asian-American playwrights championing my work – and, I have to say, non-Asian-American playwrights who said: ‘I want a person of colour working on these projects.’ That’s how I started working on communities outside my own.”

I still don’t get called – many directors of colour don’t get called – to direct a white play. That’s where the inequity lies

Yew notes that as a freelance director, he was offered the opportunity to direct a classic play only once – he staged *Our Town* for Oregon Shakespeare Festival (<https://www.thestage.co.uk/opinion/2018/howard-sherman-rethinking-classic-musicals-gives-us-glimpse-america-can-2018/>) ^[7] – explaining that whenever he wanted to do a classic, he had to adapt the work himself. “I still don’t get called, many directors of colour don’t get called, to direct a white play. That’s where the inequity lies. I see white directors directing plays of colour, but I don’t often see, I rarely see, it going the other way.”

However, Yew himself has had the opportunity to work on plays by artists of colour who aren’t Asian, including Alfaro and Marcus Gardley, having staged the latter’s *The House That Will Not Stand* at Victory Gardens.

“I’m not one for ghettoising directors into the communities they identify with,” says Yew. “For new plays, directors are interpreters. If the playwright is writing outside their own skin, it’s imperative the director be from the community the work is representing. I think of the terrible disaster of Robert Lepage’s recent *Slav*, which smacks of colonialism and racism.”

Yew says his collaboration with Alfaro on *Mojada* is rooted in the theme of immigration, since Yew is himself an immigrant to America.



(<https://cdn.thestage.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/05161121/CMYK-THE-HOUSE-THAT-WILL-NOT-STAND-Victory-Gardens-Theatre-Aneisa-Hicks-Diana-Coates-Angela-Alise-Johnson-2.png>) ^[8]

Aneisa Hicks and Diana Coates in The House That Will Not Stand at Victory Gardens in 2016. Photo: Michael Courier

He adds: “If we were to silo directors with playwrights from the same backgrounds, then Latinx directors can’t direct non-Latinx plays and a black director can’t direct non-black plays. And how far do we go with this? A Chinese director can’t direct a Japanese play? And which Danish director will you secure for Hamlet?”

Yew sees his role as artistic director to find the right director for the work and playwright: “It’s also imperative for me to seek and give opportunities to diverse directors. I love the idea of pairing a Latinx director with a black playwright, and a black director with an Asian play.

“For me, this is what diversity and equity looks like: the creative and cultural exchange and dialogue in a theatre work. We can all stand to learn something about our collective citizenship from each other.”

CV Chay Yew

Born: 1965, Singapore

Training: Boston University, graduate degree in film and broadcasting, 1992; Pepperdine University, undergraduate degree in broadcast communications, 1985

Landmark productions:

- Porcelain, Royal Court, London (1992)
- A Language of Their Own, Public Theater, New York (1995)
- A Beautiful Country, Cornerstone Theatre Company (1998)
- The House of Bernarda Alba, National Asian American Theatre Company (2000)
- Durango, Public Theater (2007)
- The House That Will Not Stand, Victory Gardens Theater (2016)
- Oedipus El Rey, Public Theater (2017)

Awards include:

- Drama-Logue award for directing (1992)
- London Fringe Award for best playwright (1993)
- GLAAD Media Award (1995)
- George and Elisabeth Marton Playwriting Award (1995)
- Robert Chesley Award (1999)
- Obie award for directing, (2007)

Agent: Jonathan Lomma, William Morris Endeavor

Mojada runs at the Public Theater, New York, until August 18. Visit publictheater.org (<http://publictheater.org>)^[9] for more details

Howard Sherman: Rethinking classic musicals gives us a glimpse of what America can be in 2018
(<https://www.thestage.co.uk/opinion/2018/howard-sherman-rethinking-classic-musicals-gives-us-glimpse-america-can-2018/>)^[7]

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[4] Stephen Daldry: <https://www.thestage.co.uk/news/2005/royal-courts-dramatic-50th-anniversary-season/>

[5] Royal Court Theatre: <https://www.thestage.co.uk/tag/royal-court-theatre/>

[6] Image: <https://cdn.thestage.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/05160948/OEDIPUS-EL-REY-Public-Theater-Photo-by-Joan-Marcus-0217rR.png>

[7] Oregon Shakespeare Festival: <https://www.thestage.co.uk/opinion/2018/howard-sherman-rethinking-classic-musicals-gives-us-glimpse-america-can-2018/>

[8] Image: <https://cdn.thestage.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/05161121/CMYK-THE-HOUSE-THAT-WILL-NOT-STAND-Victory-Gardens-Theatre-Aneisa-Hicks-Diana-Coates-Angela-Alise-Johnson-2.png>

[9] publictheater.org: <http://publictheater.org>

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