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THE NEWSLETTER OF THE WILMA THEATER

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Therese Zaccagnino**Chay Yew's *Red*: May 21-June 22, 2003****Welcome to the
Beijing Opera**

Red revolves around the Beijing Opera star Hua Wai Mun, a man persecuted for his art during the time of the Cultural Revolution.

Chinese opera, in various forms, has been performed for hundreds of years. It likely first arose from a style called **bai-xi** ("The Hundred Entertainments"), which told its story using music, costume, dance, gesture, acrobatics, and other modes of theatrical communication. When troupes from several provinces visited Beijing in 1790, local artists borrowed aspects from the different conventions of each to develop **jing ju**, the Beijing Opera. Regarded throughout China as the purest incarnation

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Concubine character in the royal court with signature red handkerchief.

Photography by Jessica Tan Gudason

Meet the Author of *Red*

In an interview with Wilma Dramaturg & Literary Manager Nakissa Etemad, playwright Chay Yew discusses the origins and themes of his play *Red* that brings to life a Beijing Opera house in Shanghai during China's Cultural Revolution. This Los Angeles-based writer and director, originally from Singapore, explores the dangerous intersection of art and politics that informs *Red*.

NE: Tell me a little bit about your background, and what drew you to theater. I know you grew up in Singapore. You were born there?

CY: Yeah, I was born there and left when I was 16 to go to college over here in the US. I went back for military service for a couple of years, I joined a local theater company called TheatreWorks, and then there was a play on the season called *Safe Sex*. And all us purists said, "Hey, what's this play, we've never heard of it before?" Well, it hadn't been written yet. So I said, "Really? How interesting, now. How much are you paying for this?" "Well, about 500 bucks." And I said, "I'll do it." It was my first play. And then they put it on the season, they went to produce it, and it was banned by the government there. And then there was a movement of writing our own plays. *Safe Sex* was basically the response to, in the late '80s, the domino effect of the AIDS virus coming down from Bangkok, all the way to



Chay Yew

Southeast Asia. And the play was meant to address something that we thought was important to the region. That's how I started writing, actually.

NE: Did being censored affect your writing about banning art, in *Red*? Do you think the experience makes you write more provocatively?

CY: It's kind of interesting, because I didn't stay [in Singapore]. I mean, I wish I could be brave like [my character] Hua and say I stayed and fought this thing. I just said, you know what, this is not my life. I don't want to work under a regime, at that time in Singapore, in which I have to be censored and edited by the government all the time. So I said, I'm going back to America anyway, it's easier for me to work there and write what I need to write. So I did that. I mean, it's kind of bizarre, some people have been killed for the things that I've been doing. I had the luxury of going away. And I have met a lot of Singaporeans who

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Meet the Author, cont. from page 1



Photography by Jessica Tan Gudanson

A teacher applies make-up to young student for the Chou, or clown role.

had written before my time, who'd been imprisoned for writing stuff that was contrary to government belief and government law. And though these people are heroes, I don't consider myself as one. Doing *Red* again in Singapore [a couple years ago] was very interesting for me. And all the media was descending upon me, and they'd say, "So, you were banned...By coming back here and doing a play about censorship, what's that all about? Are you trying to tell us something here? Are you saying something about the government?" I had the luxury of saying, "Hey, it's a story about China. If you want to read into this what and how you're living, by all means, go ahead. I'm not saying anything political here." All of a sudden, it has become political by them connecting the dots, instead of me shoving it into their faces. I think there's a mirror to it. [Though] it's not a direct mirror.

NE: Tell me about your inspiration for *Red*.

CY: It came from Tsai Chin, [a well-known actress who] was in *The Joy-Luck Club*, and she had been in my plays. And she is a very good friend of mine, and for the longest time she'd been telling me the story about her father, who was this great Beijing

Opera star. In her words, he was the Laurence Olivier of Beijing Opera. And when she was in London performing the lead in *Suzie Wong*, the Chinese Cultural Revolution happened in the '60s, and they incarcerated him and the mother, and during the arrest, they were killed. And Tsai would always reveal stories like that to me about the Cultural Revolution, and she was the first person who talked to me about this. And at the time, I was thinking, "Art and politics is such an interesting situation." We never really experienced the kind of extremes as China did, or any other country. And at the time, the only thing that was bugging me a lot in this country was the question of the potential of the NEA being dissolved by right-wing politics. I think it was in the Clinton administration, and the Republicans had control of the House and the Senate. And they were wanting to de-fund NEA, because they felt like it was a waste of time. In every country in the world there have been subsidies to art, and what art means, and here we are basically de-funding it. And that to me was like, 'wow, I need to respond to this because it's part of our liberty to say what we need to say.' And, taking the extreme example of the Cultural Revolution as a metaphor, a place to explore that relationship between politics and art, I wrote *Red*.

NE: Did you know a lot about Beijing Opera beforehand, or...?

CY: Chinese opera has many forms, and the one I was used to was the Cantonese opera, which was performed in streets in Singapore where my grandmother would take me every Friday night — to a Night Market, a very Malay thing called the Pasar Malam. And then all the kids and I would run around the Chinese opera. They erected a stage in the middle of the road, so we went to the side wings and saw the musicians playing, and they would give us food. We ran to the back stage and saw the actors putting on makeup. They would come and talk to us a little bit, and all of a sudden they'd say, "OK, I've got to go now," and then they would run on stage and do a somersault, for example. And that kind of the-

ater has always been very exciting for me, because that was my first [exposure] to theater, and also the aesthetic of the blank stage. Because it's the total theater experience; that's always affected my work in terms of writing and in terms of directing. So I drew a lot from that, and when I went in to do research on this play, it was a little easier, which is kind of surprising, understanding a little bit more about it. But again, the play is not about Beijing theater, but it's a part of the milieu. I think sometimes you write things and you don't know why you're intrigued by them. Often you write about something, and you have to go back into it. You think you can get away with it, you know, just writing a little in the world. I do believe you write a little bit about what you do know, and yet on the other hand, I feel like it's also a part of going home. It's also a homecoming.

NE: Do you think you're using any conventions of storytelling from Beijing Opera in your storytelling in *Red*?

CY: There are some conventions to it, I'd say, but definitely not the structure of it, which is the question of linearity. Beijing Opera in general is always very linear. The thing which is very wonderful about the stories is that they don't need to do light [and set] changes, you know, like, "Days later, what happened..."

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Young Red Guard during a demonstration in a Beijing street, 1966.

Meet the Author, cont. from page 2



Li Ji Ling as the Monkey King character from the novel *Journey to the West*.

pened...." You immediately go into it. You actually see yourself doing it. So, the moment when Hua is telling stories about Mao in the audience is borrowed from Chinese opera, for example. But I never think about it because it's always been part of my vocabulary. For me a part of investigating is, "Oh, wow, it is Chinese opera, I guess." Like having actors stay on stage all the time, and the blank stage. There's no set pieces, really. It tells the story, it sings, it dances, it even forces the audience to participate.

NE: Do you feel a duty to write on Asian themes, living in America, or do you feel that...you have pressure to represent your culture, and yet you want to be an American writer if you're living in America?

CY: I think the most interesting thing is the fact that I straddle two worlds anyway, having the word "Asian-American" attached to me. You just have to think out of the box a little bit. Being an immigrant allows me to have that passport between these two worlds. That's why I think *Red* is kind of interesting; it's about the two worlds, the Asian-American and the Asian. And yet I'm able, with *Red*, to comment about what's happening in Asia as well as

what's happening in America. So I feel like I'm always wary about labels, because I think they only speak to one thing. What most artists want, basically, is a blank canvas, which allows us to create whatever we want to. But I think a lot of Americans really want to come to the theater, they want to be told, "It's a musical!" So they have this expectation of what it is. It's an Asian-American play, so we can sell it as that. I don't mind those labels; I think if it helps people to identify with something, fine. But I think I would resent it if it restricted me to some kind of art form. But what I've done so far is, by saying I straddle the two, to be able to go between one and the other, and it's kind of great. But again, most theater companies don't give me white plays to do. They'll give me the Asian-American play. I think it's about time when someone says, "Hey, you want to do this play?" Instead of saying, this is attributed to you because of your label. It's given to you because, well, you seem to be the right person for it because you understand the play. You know? So I feel like for me, it's what kind of 'in' you have, and for me, I am glad Blanka is [directing] it. A) Because I think she understands the politics of the play, truly, coming from Eastern Europe, and B) being a woman, she understands, and C) she's a theater artist, she understands this play is about the theater. It's a theater story. And it's about passion. And what length you have to go through with it to do what you need to do.

Photography by Jessica Tan Gudnason



A 7-year-old in a Xiaosheng, or scholar role.

Photography by Jessica Tan Gudnason

Beijing Opera, cont. from page 1

tion of its genre, Beijing Opera employs a meticulously crafted performance tradition to communicate its stories of heroes, of gods, and of wronged women.

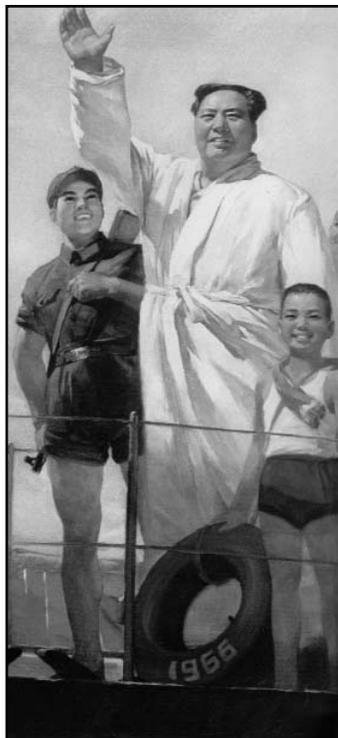
Beijing Opera is not a representational form of theatre, but instead employs a complex language of symbols to indicate emotion, character, and action. These symbols are most strongly encoded in gesture, as performers demonstrate their character's state of mind through specific movements of body or costume. An audience member familiar with this system could recognize anger, shyness, age, or power in the traditional gesture associated with each quality. Costumes and makeup also help to signal a character's identity, as distinctive patterns or colors worn or drawn on the face may help to identify a king, a clown, or a beautiful woman. Red may indicate a courageous character, for example. Characters generally fall into four distinct types: **sheng**, the male roles; **dan**, the female roles; **jing**, who portray gods or adventurers; and **chou**, the clowns of Beijing Opera.

Beijing Opera is performed on a bare stage; the "set" consists of an elaborate silk backdrop, a table, and two chairs. Placing the chairs on either side of the table, for example, may create a bridge. Props are more symbolic than practical, often helping to indicate location or social status, as when an unlit lantern conveys a nighttime setting. Instead, daily objects are denoted through elaborate pantomime, as when an actor mimes the use of a needle and thread.

The music, a central storytelling technique of Beijing Opera, combines the high-pitched and elaborately meandering songs of the singer with a small orchestra of traditional instruments. The base of this orchestra is a rhythmic percussion section that includes cymbals, drums, and bells. Flutes and guitars add to the sound, and the two-stringed fiddle known as the **jing hu** accompanies the melody of the voice. Distinctive musical cues also signal important

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Enter the World of *Red*: China's Cultural Revolution



Painting of Mao Zedong in July 1966, his famous swim in Yangtze River.

Library of Congress

After 17 years as Chairman of the Chinese Communist Party, Mao Zedong still feared challenges to his authority from rival leaders. In a carefully crafted announcement in August of 1966, Mao announced the beginning of a "Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution." He called on the people of China to "criticize bourgeois reactionary thinking in the academic field, the media, publishing and the arts, and seize the power of leaders in the cultural arena." With those words, Mao began the period of terror that would later be called "the lost decade."

To guarantee the spread of his ideals and the downfall of his enemies, Mao decided to enlist the entire student population of China. He closed the schools and provided free transportation for all students to Beijing, where he held rallies to christen them as his "Red Guards." He instructed them to destroy the "Four Olds": old ideas, old culture, old customs, and old habits. This iconoclasm effectively turned the nation's young people against their leaders, their teachers and even their parents. Mao himself replaced these former role models; he built a massive cult of personality to establish himself as China's only leader, and to that end all Red

Guards carried a copy of his "Little Red Book" of official quotations.

Intellectuals and artists were hit particularly hard by this campaign against "old" institutions. Mao's wife Jiang Qing, a former actress, assembled a group of radical intellectuals to help her regulate all aspects of arts and culture. Jiang, also known as Madame Mao, reviewed thousands of operas, banning most of them for containing such traditional subject matter as "ghosts, emperors, officials, scholars, and concubines." Five were selected and re-written by Jiang herself for sanctioned performance as "revolutionary modern model operas." These five operas told stories deemed "heroic" enough in their revolutionary message to remain on the stage. More modern stories, such as "The White Haired Damsel," were transformed into entirely new "model operas," this one even being further transformed into a ballet which promoted Communist ideals. Traditions of the opera, including the convention of men playing female roles and the use of traditional Chinese instruments, were abolished in this period.

With the advent of these government-mandated art forms, many artists of the old forms were exiled, imprisoned, tortured, or killed. By the end of 1968, the vast majority of artists had been sent to the distant countryside to work alongside the peasants. "Elitist" intellectuals were made into laborers in an attempt to erase class distinctions. New works of art were effectively banned, and any artists who attempted to resist were immediately punished by the Red Guard with imprisonment or death. Many exiled artists practiced their craft in secret, however, preserving the ancient traditions during this repressive decade. Musicians might rehearse quietly in a corner of their house, while acrobats might practice their flips in the fields as they tended their herds.

This time of complete cultural regulation plunged China into chaos. Splinter factions of the Red Guard accused each

other of revolutionary shortfalls, and fighting broke out among all sectors of society. The displacement of industrial and political leaders as "reactionary bourgeois authorities" severely disrupted the national economy. Such formerly respected leaders as Deng Xiaoping were discredited and rehabilitated seemingly at random. Others disappeared or died under mysterious circumstances. With Mao's deteriorating health, squabbles over succession broke out between Jiang Qing and Premier Zhou Enlai.

Finally, upon the death of Mao in 1976, the horror of the Cultural Revolution came to a close. Jiang Qing and her supporters (known as "The Gang of Four") were arrested, and Deng Xiaoping emerged as China's new leader. Artists returned home, art schools re-opened, and the nation's cultural officials sought to rehabilitate the traditional forms that had been abolished under Jiang. The surviving Beijing Opera performers began to teach a new generation of young artists. Although subsequent leaders would return to some of the repressive ways, the late '70s and early '80s were a time of considerable creative activity. The legacy of the Cultural Revolution, however, scarred a generation of artists and left China deeply conflicted about its cultural identity. ■



Chinese youths carry Little Red Books as they celebrate National Day, 1966.

The Associated Press

The Wilma Announces its 25th Anniversary Season!

Rebecca Rimmel, president of the Pew Charitable Trusts, singled out the Wilma in her recent *Philadelphia Inquirer* editorial on the arts renaissance in Philadelphia saying, "The Avenue of the Arts probably best represents the new life brought to this city's streets. The Wilma Theater, the first theater built in Philadelphia since the 1920s, offers performing arts relevant and reflective of our times."

RESURRECTION BLUES

From the pen of America's greatest living playwright Arthur Miller comes a brand new tantalizing and mystical tragicomedy called **Resurrection Blues**. In a foreign country ruled by the military, high in the mountains is brewing a rebellion led by a man whose identity nobody knows. When this man is captured, and the threat of imminent, painful death is upon him, the varying reactions of every segment of his society create havoc of extreme proportions — especially when an American television crew that bought rights to broadcast his crucifixion arrives. This production marks the East Coast Premiere of the latest provocative and stirring work by the author of *Death of a Salesman*, *A View from the Bridge* and *The Crucible*.

EMBARRASMENTS

The creators of the delightful Wilma smash hit *Bed and Sofa* take a spirited musical look into the mind of a Victorian genius in **Embarrassments**. The date: January 5, 1895. The place: the St. James Theater in London's West End. Tonight, the brilliant novelist Henry James hopes to change his life with the opening of his new venture: a play, into which he has poured his vulnerable heart. Meanwhile, deep in his imagination, a parallel story unfolds: the revealing tale of a playwright struggling with conflicted loyalties to art, love and life. With comic invention, haunting music and increasing speed,

these two stories, one real and one imaginary, drive toward their very different confrontations with destiny. The Wilma proudly presents an artistic landmark: this will be the first of our commissioned works to premiere on the Wilma stage.

WINTERTIME

The visionary author of this season's *Big Love* strikes out in a bold new direction with **Wintertime**: a surreal romantic tragicomedy written with the wit of a post-modern Noel Coward. When Jonathan and Ariel come to his family's summer home in the snowy wintertime, they think they're in for some amorous solitude. They couldn't be more wrong. Suddenly, a variety of parents and neighbors barge in, with lovers in tow, and a wild dance of seduction and jealousy begins, for several of these people know each other a bit more intimately than they've let on. Love songs and violence, touching poetry and scathing epigrams, farce and heartbreak, tragic death and improbable rebirth all whirl together in this stunningly unpredictable explosion of theater.

JESUS HOPPED THE 'A' TRAIN

Stephen Adly Guirgis has been electrifying New York and London audiences with **Jesus Hopped the 'A' Train**, a powerful story of hard-won redemption. Angel Cruz makes one mistake, but it's big enough to land him in the heart of darkness: the most desolate wing of Rikers Island prison. There, he navigates a torturous, brutally funny path through manipulators, tormentors and would-be guardian angels... some painfully clear, some cleverly disguised. In the end, he must make a choice that will lead him to glorious freedom... or endless slavery, not only of the body, but of the soul. A dynamic, visceral theater experience that combines the immediacy of a street fight with the spiritual grandeur of classic tragedy.

DANCEBOOM!

The Wilma is also delighted to be producing the third annual **DanceBoom!**. Hailed by *Philadelphia Magazine* as "Best of Philly", this festival grows in reputation each year. Curated once again by The Philadelphia Fringe Festival's Nick Stuccio, *DanceBoom! 2004* promises to be the best yet. For 3 weeks, the Wilma plays host to some of the best of Philadelphia's dance community, introducing our audiences to the incredible depth of talent that Philly boasts.

We hope that you will join us in celebrating a new season of intriguing, challenging and entertaining productions. Subscribers allow us to continue our 25-year-old mission of creating intimate, thought-provoking theater. If you haven't already committed to Wilma 2003-2004, subscribe today at www.wilmatheater.org or call 215-546-7824.

The Season Line-Up:

Resurrection Blues

By Arthur Miller
East Coast Premiere
September 17 - October 26, 2003

Embarrassments

Book by Laurence Klavan
Music by Polly Pen
Lyrics by Laurence Klavan and Polly Pen
World Premiere
November 26, 2003 - January 4, 2004

Wintertime

By Charles L. Mee
Philadelphia Premiere
March 10 - April 18, 2004

Jesus Hopped the 'A' Train

By Stephen Adly Guirgis
Philadelphia Premiere
May 19 - June 27, 2004

DO YOU KNOW THE PASSWORD?

The most exclusive new address on the Internet is here! Now all Wilma Bijoux and Premiere Circle Members can get an insider's look at the inner workings of the Wilma on our brand new **Members Only Website**. Here is where you can see photos, get news, and find out other tidbits that the general public doesn't get. For your first glimpse at this new section, simply visit www.wilmatheater.org and click on "Members Only." If you have not received the username and password yet, contact Therese Zaccagnino, Annual Fund Manager, at (215) 893-9456 x108 or tjz@wilmatheater.org. Happy surfing!



Get Your Kids to Camp!

CAMP WILMA, now in its fourth year, will run from August 4 to August 15, 2003. In honor of The Wilma Theater's upcoming 25th anniversary season and the Czech heritage of our Artistic Directors, Blanka Zizka and Jiri Zizka, we invite students ages 7 to 16 to join our counselors and fellow campers on a very

special journey through the land of imagination as we explore the world of Eastern European Folktales. Campers create, design and act in their own original theatrical production and perform it on the Wilma's stage for family, friends, neighbors, and The Wilma Theater staff on Friday, August 15. For registration information, contact Heather Wallis at 215-893-9456, ext. 100, or visit our website at www.wilmatheater.org.

Opera photographs reprinted courtesy of Abbeville Press and Jessica Tan Gudnason.

Beijing Opera, cont. from page 3

events, as when a burst of cymbals announces the entrance of a great person.

Because Beijing Opera is such a technically challenging art, children begin to train for performing careers at a very young age. At the height of the opera movement, children were enrolled in (or even sold to) prestigious training schools to learn the complex set of skills necessary for a Beijing Opera performer. These schools drove the students rigorously in pursuit of artistic perfection, a high standard which continues today.

The feudal nature of Chinese culture until the twentieth century banned women from performing on stage. As a result, a tradition of "man-for-woman" acting arose, in which men were trained to become specialists in feminine behavior and song. The Cultural Revolution, declaring the practice antiquated and perverse, banned this style and introduced women to the Beijing Opera stage. Nowadays, it is extremely rare to see men playing women's parts, and female performers have become an integral part of the genre. ●

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— *Los Angeles Times*

"...a stunning interplay between loyalty and tradition, political upheaval and censorship."

Running May 21-June 22, 2003

Red
By Chay Yew
Directed by Blanka Zizka
A Philadelphia Premiere



On the Avenue of the Arts
265 South Broad Street
Philadelphia, PA 19107



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