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AN INTERVIEW WITH DAVID HENRY HWANG

Since winning wide acclaim and a Tony Award for his play *M. Butterfly* in 1988, David Henry Hwang (Fig. 1) has remained one of the brightest luminaries in American theatre. A playwright, screenwriter, and librettist, he regularly tells stories that center on complex characters and reveal their experiences with Western imperialism, American racism, and cross-generational family differences. His works include the plays *FOB, Golden Child, Yellow Face, Chinglish,* and *Kung Fu*; the revised book for the 2002 Broadway revival of the Rodgers and Hammerstein's musical *Flower Drum Song*; and, most recently, episodes of the



Figure 1.
David Henry Hwang. *Photo:* Lia Chang.

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television series *The Affair*. In this interview, Hwang reflects on the longevity of East West Players, comments on today's culture wars, and shares his perspective on the current state of Asian American theatre.

East West Players is [now] celebrating its fifty-first anniversary. What are your thoughts on this moment as well as EWP's legacy?

I have a pretty extensive history with East West going back to its founding. Beulah Quo: her husband, Edwin [Kwoh], was my father's first employer when he came to America. Subsequently, my father became a CPA. Beulah asked him to be the accountant when they [East West Players] first got started. There's that connection. Also, my mother, who is a pianist, was the rehearsal pianist for an early production that they did of Menotti's opera *The Medium*, which they reset in Japan. I was dragged to rehearsals as a ten-year-old. It was a choice between that and being babysat at my aunt's house. I got to see Asian American performers, directors, people in charge, theatrically, at a very young age. Maybe in retrospect, this could account for why I started doing this sort of thing myself when I got a little older. That is emblematic of East West's influence throughout the years. There's a bunch of us who were inspired and able to think that this [a career in the arts] was possible because of East West Players.

East West is now the oldest so-called ethnic theatre in America and the largest midsize theatre in the Los Angeles area. [Its success] is incredibly impressive and a testament to the ability of the people involved in the organization to stay on mission. Mako ran it and did amazing things. It's always tricky when an organization has to transition from a founder. Nobu [McCarthy] did that admirably. Tim [Dang] came in and was able to reorient the organization for a different age, financially and organizationally. All those things are incredibly important in order to have an organization last as long. They did not make a lot of missteps.

Theatre history tends to remember playwrights. Plays remain. Sometimes, history remembers directors and actors if their work was extensively reviewed or if they reflected on their processes. Artistic directors tend to fade away. Tim Dang recently announced that he is stepping down as artistic director of East West Players. What has been his contribution to American theatre over the past two decades?

Tim helped East West's transition from a community-based organization, more of a mom-and-pop organization, into a fully professional institution that is able to deal with the opportunities and disadvantages of the more professionalized, not-for-profit age that we live in. You and I can both come up with examples of theatres that were not able to make that transition: theatres that started out with an artistic and political impulse but couldn't get the organizational infrastructure in place to survive once the funding landscape changed. Tim gets a lot of credit for making that happen and, artistically, for adapting to a more diverse age.

"Asian American," as a demographic, has evolved rapidly throughout Tim's tenure. It's a growing community and also presented challenges. How do you identify it? How do you program? What is the artistic vision? Tim adapted the organization toward a more inclusive definition of Asian American and a larger programming mandate. When I was first starting out, most of the works were

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Japanese American and Chinese American. That was it. They were very specific identity works: about identity, immigration, and the camps. There's a [broader] range of topics that are now under the Asian American banner. East West has played a huge part in making it happen. Tim should get a lot of credit for that.

Many people have spoken about how impactful East West was (and still is) for actors, especially actors in television and film who have been given an opportunity to play a range of theatrical roles that are more dynamic than the ones available to them in Hollywood. Less has been said about the opportunities that East West has given playwrights.

Very early on, sometime in the early seventies, Mako decided that in order to have an Asian American theatre, you needed to have an Asian American theatrical literature. He began cultivating writers, people like [Wakako] Yamauchi, [Edward] Sakamoto, through to the long and important association with Frank [Chin]. They began to turn East West Players from what started out as an actor's theatre into, at least equally, a writer's theatre. East West was a space where you, as an Asian American writer, could think that you had a chance to get your work produced. Until you can think that you can get your work produced, there's not a whole lot of reason to write it.

Frank Chin has spoken about the challenges of staging his work and noted that some of his pieces were not quite right for East West. As a playwright and a mentor of young authors, what type of work do you encourage playwrights to send to East West? What is the aesthetic of the East West Players?

On this issue, as on many, Frank and I do not exactly see eye to eye. I think that the aesthetic of East West is wide open and inclusive. When I talk about Tim having expanded the vision of the organization, that's what I mean. The parameters of an "Asian American play" are evolving. Much as the community itself is evolving. There needs to be a reevaluation of what constitutes an Asian American work, which Tim and East West have been doing. Therefore, I would not encourage a young Asian American writer to submit a particular type of play to East West. They need to write whatever is the most important work for them to write. Work that allows the author to investigate something that he or she finds important. It may be a specific Asian American story. Nowadays, it may not be. Going back all the way to Diana Son's *Stop Kiss*, you have plays in which characters are identified not necessarily by their ethnicity but still fall into the rubric of Asian American theatre by virtue of having been written by someone who is Asian American and necessarily sees the world through that lens. I don't think that there is a particular aesthetic. It has evolved. That is one of the great things about this community and the theatre that represents them.

In some ways, the public image or face of East West is yours: the mainstage David Henry Hwang Theater and the David Henry Hwang Writers Institute. What are your thoughts on your relationship with the theatre?

As I was saying earlier, East West is the theatre that I literally grew up in as a theatre artist. In that respect, I feel like it is my cradle. More recently, say ten years ago when I was doing a lot of work—movies, musicals, and that—but I had not written a full-length play in ten years, it was Tim Dang who called me up and said, "Come on, why don't you write a new play? And write it for East West."

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I thought, "You know, I ought to do that." I did write a new play for East West. It didn't end up being produced there. It was produced at the Taper. It was *Yellow Face*. East West was a coproducer. It was Tim who gave me a kick in the butt. East West is my theatrical family, in a lot of ways.

In terms of my name being on various things, I feel a little awkward about that. I feel like the DHH Writers Institute just happened because I taught there for a few years when I was living in L.A.—and I haven't really lived in L.A. since '93—and my name is still on that. My name being on the theatre is because my father made a contribution that had naming rights. They agreed to put my name on it. It's great. I appreciate it. I try not to put too much significance on my name being on various things over there.

Conventional wisdom is that the place to make theatre is not Los Angeles. Neither is Chicago. New York is the place. What do you tell people about the possibility of developing a career as a theatre artist on the West Coast?

First of all, let me disagree with you on Chicago. There are a lot of people who think that Chicago is a great place to make theatre.

Yes, as a Chicagoan, I believe that. That being said, it is not uncommon for people to say that if you want to make a career in the arts, then you should go to the West Coast for film or the East Coast for theatre but not the middle of the country.

I'm not sure if I agree with that. Getting back to L.A., L.A. is somewhat more problematic in that it is obviously more associated with film and television. What that means is that you have a fantastic pool of actors and writers, particularly actors who are looking for something to do (and can be really excellent). If you're doing theatre [in L.A.], it means that you are really committed to doing theatre. It is more of an outsider's art form than in New York, where there is commercial theatre. It's definitely not about the commercial impulse. It's not really about what is going to transfer to Broadway. It's about doing something because you have the impulse to do it. There's a purity, which I think helps people to do their most integrous work. Your most integrous is more likely to be more successful work. That's not why you do it. You do it for better reasons in L.A.

Recently, I read the 51% Preparedness Plan, [part of] 2042: See Change, written by Tim Dang on behalf of East West Players. The plan calls for theatres, by 2020, to commit to one of the following goals: "51% of your organization's artists and production personnel (combined) will be PEOPLE OF COLOR; or 51% of your organization's artists and production personnel (combined) will be WOMEN; or 51% of your organization's artists and production personnel (combined) will be UNDER 35 years of age." A number of theatre companies have signed or expressed support for the plan. Many of them are theatres of color, or ethnic theatres. In your estimation, what would it take to get more theatre companies, particularly theatres that do not share the same mission as East West Players, to take on this pledge?

As one might expect, I totally support the goals of the 51% plan. It is not entirely clear to me that the specifics are legal. That is a problem. What needs to happen is that theatres, mainstream theatres or whatever you want to call them, start to realize—and they are starting to realize—that this is not a social

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justice issue as much as it is an economic survival imperative. People like to see themselves onstage. You have an audience that's changing. You either adapt to it or you're not going to survive. Interestingly, you can see this—when it comes to Asian Americans and other minorities—in television more than theatre. All of a sudden there are five or six television shows with Asian American leads: *Fresh Off the Boat, Dr. Ken, Master of None, Quantico*. Theatre needs to do this too. It is not just hiring actors of color or doing plays by playwrights of color (although both are important) but also changing the administrative spectrum. That's starting to happen but, to some extent, it's hard. You need to replace a generation. It's hard to fire people. You can't fire people for race. That's illegal. [Change] is happening but it is going to be a slow road.

Recently, I read an Art for Change interview with you. In that interview, you noted that today's culture wars are about "recentering the mainstream." What does it mean to recenter the mainstream?

When I first started in the early eighties, there was an acknowledgment that African American and Asian American works had a certain sociological value. But there was a sense that they were second class citizens literary-wise. The eighties culture wars were about legitimizing diverse works. The current culture wars are about what is the mainstream. It is not simply a matter of "male works are the default mainstream and then you have these other works that add diversity." It is increasingly about work that was once Other now being the central work of the American canon, which includes white male works but they are no longer the center of the cultural lens.

Over the years, East West Players has facilitated national conversations on the state of Asian American theatre as well as the state of American theatre, since the two are interrelated. This October, Oregon Shakespeare will host a national conference on Asian American theatre. Which topics would you like to see on the agenda? What should we be talking about today?

I would be interested in having a conversation about how to diversify staff at major institutions. By the way, Oregon Shakespeare is an amazing place to have that conversation. Although Bill Rauch has not signed onto the 51% idea—I think because of the legal ramifications—Bill has done an amazing job running the largest theatrical organization in the United States and diversifying it at all levels, including staff. That's super hard to do, to turn around a big ship. When I go to OSF, I always see people of color. I assume that they're the artists, and then I realize how much I've been conditioned to expect the staff to be white. There's a big conversation about how you do that, especially (as I said before) since you don't want to just fire people.

Another issue: What is the role of multiracial work and international work? Multiracial work is already starting to happen in Asian American theatre by virtue of there being more multiracial Asians and multiracial Asian writers. I think that it's worth talking about. When I started, it was important for us as Asian Americans to be Asian Americans since we were fighting the idea of being perpetual foreigners. That stereotype still exists, and that battle is not yet over. Right now, there is much more willingness of younger Asian Americans to be transcultural, to acknowledge all of the different influences that have gone into who we are,

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including our root cultures. There is value in looking at contemporary Asian American work from root cultures, and from other parts of the world, from other parts of the diaspora. Anglo-Asian writers. There's a rich body of work there that hasn't really been tapped by Asian American theatre. That's a discussion that needs to be had that falls under the rubric of Asian American theatre.

Over the years, you have spoken passionately about the need for more diverse and inclusive American theatre. What fuels your optimism for the changing voice and face of American theatre?

What fuels my optimism is that I have been around long enough to have seen progress. Things are not the same as they were in 1980. Yes, it's fits and starts, and three steps forward and a few steps back. There are things that are really frustrating that happen. We don't exactly fight the same battles. We fight battles about the same subject, but the needle has moved from the time that we fought that battle ten years ago. I find that very hopeful. I don't think that societies change overnight. The fact that they change and are changing is exciting.

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