

14 'Yellow Face' looks in the mirror

Playwright Hwang mixes autobiography, fiction in new play

By Evan Henerson
Theater Writer

Confession may be good for the soul. But David Henry Hwang hopes that confession mixed with a little bit of dodge makes for more effective drama than straight autobiography.

The "M. Butterfly" playwright has written himself into his latest play, "Yellow Face," revisiting his greatest public embarrassment and even some family scandal in the process.

Except some of the "autobiographical" elements of "Yellow Face" aren't true, and a cagey Hwang — who was born in San Gabriel and now lives in New York — is leery about separating fact from fiction.

"I feel like part of the fun of the play is this whole question of what's true in terms of race, authenticity, reportage and journalism," says Hwang, whose play opened Sunday at the Mark Taper Forum prior to a run at New York's Public Theatre.

"People post their anecdotes and videos online and all this stuff," he continues. "You don't really know how much of that stuff is true. I hope part of the fun of the play is the sort of fusion of fact and fiction."

Left in the dark

Inquiring journalists aren't the only people left wondering.

"As we've been working together, things are revealed and we have some ferociously interested and curious actors," says the production's director, Leigh Silverman. "I didn't want to know it all. I sort of feel it's best for me in the storytelling of the play to actually, in a certain way, believe everything in the play is true."

History was, in some measure, Hwang's point of departure.

In 1990, British producer Cameron Mackintosh announced his decision to have British star Jonathan Pryce reprise his role of a Eurasian pimp called The Engineer in the hit musical "Miss Saigon" when it went to Broadway.

The decision caused a mini uproar among activists who felt that an actor of Asian descent should play the role. Hwang — who had won a Tony award for "M. Butterfly" — joined the debate, writing a letter to the union of stage actors, Actors Equity, protesting the casting.



John McCoy/Staff Photographer

"I hope part of the fun of the play is the sort of fusion of fact and fiction," David Henry Hwang says of his new play, "Yellow Face," which has just opened at the Mark Taper Forum.

The union ended up barring a white actor from playing the role. But when Mackintosh threatened to cancel the production, Equity reversed itself, and "Saigon" came to Broadway with Pryce.

DHH, the Hwang persona in "Yellow Face," labels that decision a milestone rather than a setback, saying, "Who would have guessed that a debate over the casting of a Broadway musical could've triggered such intensity and fervor and anger?"

Philosophical attitude

Some 17 years after the events in question, Hwang himself is equally philosophical. Producers should be able to cast who they like, he says, just as people who don't approve should be able to protest as loudly or as often as they like.

YELLOW FACE

Where: Mark Taper Forum, 135 N. Grand Ave., L.A.

When: 8 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday, 2:30 p.m. Saturday and Sunday, through July 1.

Tickets: \$20 to \$55. (213) 628-2772 or visit www.centertheatregroup.org.

Could a "Saigon"-like casting flap occur today? Probably not without an equal ruckus, says Hwang, noting that there are far more bankable Asian stars in the casting pool. That said, Hwang also points to the upcoming "Marco Polo" TV miniseries with Brian Dennehy as Kublai Khan.

"Part of this whole casting controversy is aesthetic, and part of it is an employment issue," says Hwang. "The employment issue at the time of 'Miss Saigon' was quite clear. It wasn't like African-Americans were being cast as George Washington. If you had roles for minorities and you

didn't cast minorities, what were they going to play?"

Of course, where this topic is concerned, the playwright enjoys the benefit of some rather unique and ironic hindsight.

In 1993, Hwang unwittingly cast a white actor to play an Asian character in his play "Face Value." The production closed before reaching Broadway at a loss of close to \$2 million. By then, the white actor had been replaced by B.D. Wong. Hwang won't name the actor, who is called Marcus G. Dahlman in "Yellow Face."

"Yellow Face," then, is a

sort of reexamination of the "Saigon" and "Face Value" events. Marcus becomes a Hwang doppelganger, the Asian-American role model that Hwang had always aspired to be. Meanwhile, Hwang's character, DHH, spends the bulk of "Yellow Face" trying to get egg off his face for his countless missteps.

Hwang's family also becomes part of the events. Among the characters in "Yellow Face" are Hwang's late father, Henry, the founder of Far East National Bank, who was implicated in a federal money-laundering investigation. Henry Hwang died in 2005 but saw early drafts of the play.

"He sort of liked the way he was portrayed," says Hwang, with a laugh, "which says a lot about his character."

Hwang says he informed people associated with "Face Value" that "Yellow Face" was in the works and received their blessings, although — as both he and Silverman point out — the character who receives the greatest humiliation is DHH himself.

"David has written a character of himself who knows very little and has everything to learn about himself and about racial politics," says Silverman. "So, in many ways, by making himself the fool, he's done this incredibly smart and sophisticated thing."

Prolific playwright

In the years since "Face Value," Hwang's output has diversified. He wrote the books for a pair of Disney Broadway musicals ("Aida" and "Tarzan"); the script for the film "Possession"; and the reworked version of Rodgers and Hammerstein's "Flower Drum Song," which played the Taper and Broadway in 2001. He is also working on an adaptation of "The Fly" for Los Angeles Opera.

His only other straight play since 1998 was "Golden Child." But "Yellow Face" has reinvigorated his interest in the form.

"Having come back to working on a play and really enjoying the process and remembering there are certain muscles I haven't used for a while, I think I'd like to increase my output over the next 10 years of plays," Hwang says, "and I have a couple of ideas for things I'm pretty excited about."

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