

The Theatre of David Henry Hwang

The Theatre of David Henry Hwang. By Esther Kim Lee. New York: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2015; pp. x + 207.

The work of David Henry Hwang represents an intersection of many of the most prominent concerns of late 20th century and early 21st century drama. His plays tackle numerous facets of identity politics, such as race, gender, sexuality, and ancestry. Esther Kim Lee's extensive survey of Hwang's theatrical output traces all of these themes through his successes, failures, and participation in cultural discourse. Combining her own work with that of three other scholars in the final chapter, Lee's work functions as history, analysis, and criticism, providing a portrait of one of American theatre's most notable dramatists.

Hwang is best known for his Tony Award-winning play *M. Butterfly*, and though it does occupy its own chapter, much more room in this text is devoted to his other works, some of which are rather obscure. This attempt at a comprehensive survey is somewhat undercut by the relative absence of discussion of his work on musicals, most of which, with the exception of *Flower Drum Song*, are summed up in a couple of pages. Hwang's position on these projects as a script doctor, rather than as primary author, may contribute to the scant attention Lee pays to them. Still, despite some gaps, Lee deftly covers most all of Hwang's plays in an accessible and thorough manner.

Lee's approach with each text is to summarize the major plot points, but then delve into the subtext of each work and how it connects with the overall concerns of Hwang as a dramatist. She starts with a trio of plays from the beginning of Hwang's career that reflect his early grappling with some of the themes listed above as well as the culture of his home state of California. *FOB* (an acronym for Fresh Off the Boat) shows Hwang exploring different types of immigrant and minority experiences in America through two contrasting Chinese American characters. Lee explores the influence of Sam Shepard on this work, as well as Hwang's wrestling with the "dilemma of assimilation" (12). The other two plays in that first (informal) trilogy, *The Dance and the Railroad* and *Family Devotions* see Hwang dramatizing the immigrant experience through its dual challenges: fitting into a new culture while maintaining one's own.

Lee follows Hwang as he expands his thematic vision to include other cultures and ideas, incorporating Japanese stories and settings in *The House of Sleeping Beauties* and *The Sound of a Voice*. The reason for this is not just a sense of interculturalism, but also to explore gender. As Lee writes, "The Japanese tradition provides the cultural underpinnings for more rigid gender divisions, which Hwang uses to examine how gender is embodied and performed in the game of power and love" (38). She also discusses *Rich Relations*, one of Hwang's notable failures that saw him turn from ethnicity as a theme before returning to it in his most famous play, *M. Butterfly*.

Lee spends the entirety of her third chapter on that text, reviewing the scholarly, critical, and commercial responses to the play. The play would launch Hwang to a new level of prominence that would drive his career in unexpected ways. The book chronicles how Hwang's notoriety led to him being drawn into protests over whitewashing in the casting of the Broadway musical *Miss Saigon*. His experiences with that controversy would make its way into his play *Yellow Face*, which Lee covers in the fifth chapter. Before that, the fourth chapter is devoted to Hwang's 1990s output, consisting of *Bondage*, *Face Value*, another notable failure which closed during Broadway previews, *Trying to Find Chinatown*, and his

successful return to Broadway in *Golden Child*.

In his recent works, Hwang has continued to explore the intersecting concerns of race, gender, and globalization, as Lee notes, in texts that draw on the personal experiences of himself and his family. Hwang's metatheatricality evolves to provide multiple perspectives on a given plot or character, with the combination of fiction and nonfiction exemplifying his style in several of his plays. *Golden Child* and *Yellow Face*, in particular, manifest this tendency. Lee writes that in *Yellow Face*, "...the characters wear multiple masks, and it is impossible to tell which mask is the 'real' one, or whether 'realness' exists at all" (114).

The last two productions Lee covers, *Chinglish* and *Kung Fu*, a play about Bruce Lee, both deal with travel and communication between the United States and China, though the former brings together most all of the themes present in Hwang's work more potently than the latter. After Lee reaches the end of Hwang's oeuvre, she brings in three other scholars to give further critical analysis on previously discussed texts. The final chapter contains three short essays in which Josephine Lee compares Hwang's 2001-updated script of Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Flower Drum Song* to its 1958 original, Dan Bacalzo examines multiple versions of *Golden Child*, and Daphne Lei explores the globalized context of *Chinglish*.

Esther Kim Lee's prose deftly mixes biographical information with textual analysis, crafting a highly readable study that should be useful to both new and seasoned scholars. The breadth of the textual analysis is impressive, with the authors analyzing multiple versions of certain texts to trace Hwang's evolution as an artist. Those interested in Hwang's work will find plenty to enrich their understanding, while those studying Asian American theatre will find his work placed within that discourse. Details about specific productions are also found throughout, though the focus remains on the written texts. Those hoping for a larger analysis of production aesthetics and the ways in which Hwang's texts have inspired particular design choices may find it lacking, but the book will certainly lead devotees of the author to further study of his contributions to the American stage.

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