

## The Dramaturgical Sensibility of Lauren Yee's *The Great Leap* and *Cambodian Rock Band*

by Kristin Leahey with excerpts from  
an interview with Joseph Ngo  
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When Lauren Yee approaches a new play, she considers the historical events she wants to address in her work. Yee contemplates, “What are the moments and people that have been forgotten?” Yee gathers copious research and identifies the primary icons of these periods. She then disregards these surrogates of the times: her plays are not historical renderings of the lives of the famous or infamous, such as Mao Zedong or Pol Pot. Her plays are stories of the people whose narratives have often been omitted from the archive and whose lives have been marginalized. She probes histories of Asians and Asian Americans. As a writer, she acknowledges their communities by conceiving plays based on the lives of fictional individuals from the communities themselves. By reclaiming history, Yee constructs main characters in the form of common people who refuse to accept their plights and choose instead to challenge overwhelming obstacles in order to construct divergent futures for themselves and subsequent generations. Ultimately, through contemporary dialogue, Yee explores paradigms of largely forgotten pasts, such as the Tiananmen Square Massacre in *The Great Leap* and the Cambodian genocide in *Cambodian Rock Band*.

In this article, I, one of Yee's primary dramaturgs, will share the dramaturgical processes for the development, production, and audience and community engagement for two of her most produced works, which both premiered in 2018: *The Great Leap* and *Cambodian Rock Band*. Additionally, Joseph (Joe) Ngo, an actor with whom Yee collaborates, contributes thoughts in the form of an interview I conducted with him over the past several months. Ngo reflects on his dramaturgical contributions as an actor and Cambodian American in the new play development process. By performing an analysis of these plays and sharing specifics of their development trajectories, I provide access to the dramaturgy of one of our most influential twenty-first century writers, unpack why these works about Asians and Asian Americans are so widely produced at PWIs (primarily white institutions, i.e., US regional theatres and off-Broadway institutions), and describe how Yee's work and playmaking processes add to the discourse on Asian American dramaturgies.



Figure 1. Joseph Steven Yang, Linden Tailor, Bob Ari, and Keiko Green in the Denver Center for the Performing Arts and Seattle Rep co-production of *The Great Leap* (2018). Photo by AdamVisCom.

### *The Great Leap*

In Yee's works, fathers are often protagonists, which is true, too, of the *The Great Leap*. Set in 1989, *The Great Leap* follows Manford, a Chinese American high school student from San Francisco, as he plays in an exhibition game in Beijing against the Chinese men's national basketball team. Over the course of the play, the audience discovers that Manford's father Wen Chang—a devoted, ranking member of the Communist Party—is the Chinese team's coach. Manford's mother, Zhang Li, rebelled against the Party after the Cultural Revolution, and she miraculously defected to the United States early in her pregnancy. Wen Chang refused to join her at first and was subsequently unable to because of immigration laws in China and the US. Ultimately, Wen Chang defies the Party and protects his son, who has been unknowingly photographed with the student protestors in Tiananmen Square. He then allows Manford, a member of the University of San Francisco team, to take the last shot in the game, which enables the Americans to win, displeasing the Party. In his final monologue, delivered as a fax to his son, who has hopefully returned safely to California, Wen Chang states: "they are dealing with their most immediate threats. soon they will get to me. they suspect, i suppose, that i will not run."<sup>[1]</sup> Wen Chang is the character in the play who experiences the greatest transformation and moves to action from stasis.

As her dramaturg on the play from 2016 to its New York opening in June 2018 at the Atlantic Theatre Company, I discussed with Yee some of the variations of the title of the play in connection to who the protagonist of the play is: *Manford at the Line*, *Manford at the Line* or *The Great Leap*, and eventually,

simply, *The Great Leap*, after the 2017 Denver Center for the Performing Arts Colorado New Play Summit Workshop. During the workshop, Wen Chang was played by Francis Jue who, like Ngo, serves as a consistent inspiration for Yee. With Jue, there was casual conversation about identifying the main character: Manford or Wen Chang. Manford was onstage throughout most of the play, and he traversed both of the play's settings of the Bay Area and Beijing. But Manford didn't change. Although he is the youngest character (and might be, therefore, most likely to change), his motivations are consistent: to discover his family, to reach his goals, and to honor basketball—the sport he loves. By contrast, Wen Chang renounces communism and looks to the US democracy as a place for his son to find a better life. He writes, “and if i have done my job properly, you are on your flight now, minor injuries, back to a country that will hopefully see you for the man you are. either way, my story ends here. and yours is still to begin.”<sup>[2]</sup> Wen Chang regrets the loss of his individualism, particularly the loss of his life with his family, for his belief and love of the Communist Party. In the end, retaining Manford's name in the title didn't make sense for either the rhythm or the meaning of the play, as he ultimately isn't the protagonist. Additionally, Yee wanted to capitalize on the witticism of the title *The Great Leap*: it simultaneously alludes to the sport of basketball and the 1958–1962 economic and social campaign by the Communist Party to industrialize an agrarian economy, which led to famine, brutalization, and the deaths of 45 million people. Using *The Great Leap* as the title was a linguistically sophisticated, though controversial, play on words.

In addition to the process of deciding the title, we practiced sensitive research in the form of primary source interviews. Yee and I conducted a number of anonymous interviews with Chinese expatriates living in Seattle and Denver. They informed our work, in terms of everyday life, competitive sports, and education in Communist China from the 1970s onward. One source said that a colleague, also Chinese and working in the US, asked them, after I initially contacted them, without their having made any public mention of working on the show, what they were doing working on a piece with this title. A different source stated that the closer you traveled to Beijing, the more you must omit about the protests to the point of pretending they never happened.

One interviewee claimed that they knew the identity and narrative of the man in the “tank man” photo and that this was common knowledge in certain circles, but was unwilling to share more information. This image serves as the culminating moment in Yee's play because is the surrogate for the Tiananmen Square Massacre for the West, while it remains unknown in much of Communist China. In her foundational work *On Photography*, Susan Sontag writes that “Photography has become one of the principal devices for experiencing something, for giving an appearance of participation.”<sup>[3]</sup> Yee further moves audiences to empathy, or a form of “participation” with an iconic photograph by transforming Wen Chang into “tank man.” In *The Great Leap*, audiences hear Wen Chang describe himself as the figure in the photo while he changes his clothes, and then they see him against the backdrop of the famous image. At this moment, every audience I have seen the play with across the country gasps.

This final scene of Wen Chang's journey is connected to grief, as it epitomizes the affect of much of Wen Chang's journey in *The Great Leap*. In *The Melancholy of Race*, Anne Anlin Cheng writes about the transformative act of moving from “grief to grievance, from suffering injury to speaking out against that injury.”<sup>[4]</sup> Cheng describes a “racial grief” elicited from a a history of indifference, social injustice, and psychological or even physical injury. Applying theory from Freud's “Mourning and Melancholia,” Cheng explores a type of grief—melancholy—which I argue Wen Chang exudes throughout the play. Melancholy is a condition of “endless self-impoverishment” or the tendency to remain in an interminable

state of mourning.<sup>[5]</sup> Wen Chang's melancholia is an example of racial abjection experienced by Asian Americans that Yee imprints on the characters of Wen Chang and Manford because they both live in a liminal space between belonging and being ostracized by the US.

A scene that conveys Wen Chang's immense grief is "letter 3/pick and roll: 1971." Wen Chang writes: "and her absence was noted in my dossier, ensuring that i would never leave this country. every year i applied for a visa, and every year, like the movement of a clock: denied. i was the pick. and she was the roll. and together we could have done so much. but she could not be patient and i was too much so."<sup>[6]</sup> In the co-world premiere productions in Denver and Seattle (at Seattle Repertory Theatre) in 2018, not seeing Zhang Li onstage made the character omnipresent and became a significant production choice. The everlasting emotional and geographic separation between the couple spurred Wen Chang's grief and eventually this melancholy is compounded when he learns that Zhang Li died from cancer just before the beginning of the play. Both Manford and Wen Chang mourn her loss throughout the narrative and seek "grievance," as Cheng defines it, at different points on their journeys. The characters are called to action; they express and enact a search for voice, justice, and change through "grievance," or overcoming their grief. Manford fights to join the University of San Francisco team immediately after the funeral of his mother, creating an impetus to live through grief and demonstrate his grievance by making the team. He expresses his anger for the death of his mother through his system-defying actions. He's angry at the US health care system for not providing proper care for his mother. He's angry that because she was a poor immigrant, she was forced to take taxing, manual labor-intensive jobs to survive that ultimately accelerated her death. Wen Chang expresses his grievance through protest and joins the students in Tiananmen Square. Yee intentionally bookends *The Great Leap* with these men, first Manford and then Wen Chang, essentially wearing the same costume: a white button-down collar shirt and black pants. In their matching attire, Manford restlessly insists on joining the basketball team, and Wen Chang protests for change in Tiananmen Square.

Off-Broadway and regional audiences around the country experienced *The Great Leap* as it became one of the most-produced plays in the US, and Yee became the second most-produced playwright in 2020.<sup>[7]</sup> While working at one of the PWIs that premiered the play—Seattle Rep (as the Director of New Works)—I heard what was attracting many theatres to the work: it has a cast of four or fewer; it is a comedy; it is a father-son story; it is about a historical period and creates an iconic image; it is extremely well-written; it is ostensibly linear with flashbacks that are easy to follow; and it includes a popular sport in it, but doesn't require a set with a full court. Because of these features, the primarily white audiences and subscribers of these theatres, also found this play interesting. However, unsurprisingly, many were shocked by the vulgarity of the language (i.e., "all right, you masturbating horsefuckers: i know you're tired. i know you're still jetlagged from last night. i know you'd rather be jerking off into a nice hot bowl of noodles than sitting in traffic this early in the morning.")<sup>[8]</sup> which theatres such as Seattle Rep and Denver Center for the Performing Arts anticipated by sharing content warnings in advance through pre-show emails, on the show's webpage, and in the program.

In my dramaturgy, I learned that an inspiration for the play was Larry Yee's (Lauren Yee's father) investment in basketball. In the early 1980s, Larry Yee played on a team representing San Francisco in these types of exhibition games throughout China. He noted that the Chinese players from these very competitive teams were extremely tall, often at least 7 feet. In the play, they become coach Wen Chang's "Tall Trees."<sup>[9]</sup> I added images of Larry Yee (who is 6 feet) to the lobby display. I attended all the previews in Denver and Seattle, and I led talkbacks in both cities, where the director and the entire



company were completely different. In every location, diverse audiences of white, Asian American, and other people of color seemed enthralled by the play's climatic game in Beijing. They seemed equally captivated by the narrative of Manford and Wen Chang finding each other on the court and a history that is still forbidden in part of the world. In Denver, watching the first readings, sitting next to Lauren Yee, hearing her laugh along with the audience, then experiencing their immediate standing ovation, the company knew we had created a unique work.



Fig. 2. Brooke Ishibashi, Joe Ngo, Jane Lui, Raymond Lee and Abraham Kim in South Coast Repertory's world premiere production of *Cambodian Rock Band* by Lauren Yee. Photo by Jordan Kubat/SCR.

### ***Cambodian Rock Band***

The band Dengue Fever and actor Joe Ngo brought a formidable dramaturgical voice to the development of *Cambodian Rock Band*, a 2015 commission from South Coast Repertory Theatre in Southern California. Yee partially developed the work at Seattle Repertory Theatre during a closed workshop, curated by me and performed with Ngo, where Yee learned that Ngo's Cambodian parents survived the regime of the Khmer Rouge and the genocidal forced labor camps of the late 1970s. Ngo said in our interview:

I think it came as [a] surprise to Lauren to discover that I was actually Cambodian-Chinese. When in the room, during the feedback session, I mentioned how much it meant to see that Lauren was

aiming to tell a story so close to my family experience. For a play that Lauren had admittedly shelved for some time, it was as if in me she had found a match to light her dynamite, or perhaps vice versa and upon this discovery of my family history, Lauren had found a source. After that we headed to the Thai restaurant across the street for dinner, and [for] at least an hour ... I shared my family stories... As someone who doesn't believe in fate, it is rather difficult to swallow all the fantastical, it seems, coincidences that ended up making *Cambodian Rock Band*: the two looming the largest being Lauren and my meeting and the fact that Lauren realized that'd she wanted to have a band onstage and that I play the electric guitar.<sup>[10]</sup>

Ngo describes his initial work as always aimed at authenticity in building the voices for the characters and advocating for that work beyond the page. Because he is one of Yee's primary partners for *Cambodian Rock Band*, his personal family history added layers of anecdotal dramaturgy. He contributed family stories and song choices. For instance, his parents crossed the Thai border twice under extreme duress, which the character Chum describes. Ngo's mother, who is based in Los Angeles, served as the language coach for the South Coast Repertory production. As the city Battambang is a setting in the play, Ngo suggested "Champa Battambang" in honor of his parents' birthplace. While the cadence and style of Yee's language is ultimately hers, it was his enactment of his father, uncles, and other Khmer community members that led Yee to solidify his portrayal of Chum. Ngo articulates, "In building the life journey of my character Chum, I consider this a transformation of grief to grievance; reflecting on the challenges, pain, loss, and grief my family endured and overcame and my subsequent embodiment of their grievance through my own performance."<sup>[11]</sup>

For the premiere at South Coast Rep in 2018, Yee, Ngo, the rest of the originating acting company, lauded director Chay Yew, and resident dramaturg and current Director of New Works Andy Knight thoroughly examined the historical context of the play's world. In *Cambodian Rock Band*, Yee reminds audiences of the history of the genocide and how the US strategically ignored its existence. In *A Race So Different: Performance and Law in Asian America*, Joshua Takano Chambers-Letson describes this "imperial amnesia,"<sup>[12]</sup> which led the US government to ignore reports of the killing fields and refugee accounts of the death camps. Under the Nixon Administration, in March of 1969, the US attempted to bomb North Vietnamese trade routes in Cambodia, resulting in the deaths of 100,000 Cambodian civilians. This action further fueled pro-communist factions, such as the Khmer Rouge, in Cambodia. Following the devastating loss of the American War in Vietnam and hundreds of thousands of American lives, the US found no imperialistic value in Cambodia or interest in continued involvement in another Southeast Asian conflict. Western media largely neglected to cover the genocide, as the Watergate scandal dominated headlines.

Yee informs audiences of this omitted history through flashbacks with Chum, the character that links the two historical worlds of the play and the band, and with monologues delivered by characters such as Duch, who have a wry sense of humor:

genocide genocide genocide. boo.

(DUCH clicks off the slides)

you think of everything that came after, once the shit hit the fan. the khmer rouge, pol pot, and

two million dead.[\[13\]](#)

Thus far, *Cambodian Rock Band* has been produced by PWIs with predominantly white audiences. Minneapolis' Jungle Theater, in collaboration with Theater Mu, the second largest Asian American theater in the country, will coproduce the play this June and July. Having performed the show more than a hundred times, Ngo described how shocked audiences seem by the genocide:

It's odd to say, but more often than not, it seemed as if audiences weren't prepared to see the brutality of the Khmer Rouge enacted onstage (which, to be honest, is only half as bad as most of the cruelty documented) and so, the general feeling I so often was able to discern from audiences was one of disbelief. It was not surprising to me that whenever our cast participated in talkbacks, we'd receive fewer questions and more of what seemed like condolences for what had happened, expressions of helplessness, statements that affirmed that older audiences "just didn't know this was happening, Cambodia was a blackzone," refutations from other older (typically white) folks asserting that our country just chose to turn a blind eye to the damage that it caused...all of it in a restrained cacophony cloaked in civility. The expression of disbelief indicated to me that they felt some amount of shame or guilt of responsibility (whether acknowledged or not).[\[14\]](#)

Ngo shares his family's story through not only Yee's play but also extensive audience outreach. For *Cambodian Rock Band*, Yee and her team of artists launched Herculean efforts to promote and encourage Cambodians and other Asian and Asian Americans to attend the show because of the work's subject matter. Yee and the cast created and sold tee-shirts. Also, Yee attended as many of the shows as possible, facilitated community engagement events, hosted Asian American nights, worked with student groups from local colleges and universities, emceed music nights with members of the cast playing songs from the show's Dengue Fever catalog, and participated in massive press campaigns.

Ngo contends that the attraction for audiences with *Cambodian Rock Band* is the rock music, the interpretation of story connected to the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia, and the intrigue of how the seemingly unrelated items are tied. What audiences—Asian and Asian American but truly all diverse audiences—receive is a deeper understanding of a culture, people, and history through this theatrical platform, which ends with a celebration of their humanity. Ngo says, "I believe we achieved something special when we had younger audiences at Oregon Shakespeare Festival, and they, too, danced in the aisles, celebrated, and seemed to deeply absorb all the rawness of the characters, having survived their youth. And, with arms flailing and sweaty, they would then hug each other and cry, seeming to feel the immediate understanding of just having survived themselves."[\[15\]](#)

Dramaturgy is not a delicate art for a Lauren Yee play. When Yee writes, she mouths her characters' words. She bangs on her computer keys with a ruthlessness. She becomes consumed by her subjects, reading an excess of texts, then putting them aside to structure the building blocks of her plays. With superpower speed, she writes 200 to 400 pages in a week and just as easily slashes pages upon pages of dialogue. She requires the same ferocity and fight in her collaborators, which Ngo and I can confirm. Audiences will often find a narrator in conflict with the past and a geopolitical power struggling to draw a map of their own future. She examines epic, world-building and (hopefully) change-for-the-better historical moments, but always from the perspective of an ordinary person.

**Kristin Leahey** served as the Director of New Works at Seattle Repertory Theatre, and prior to that post, as the Literary Manager at Washington D.C.'s Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company, among other places. She has freelanced as an artist nationally and internationally. Her publications include articles in *Theatre Topics*, *Theatre History*, and *Theatre Studies*. Leahey is an Assistant Professor at Boston University.

**Joe Ngo** is an Obie Award-winning actor, who has worked at South Coast Repertory, La Jolla Playhouse, Oregon Shakespeare Festival, and off-Broadway at the Signature Theatre in New York City. As a writer, his work has been primarily geared toward solo performance and audio narratives with pieces such as *Words, Words*. Joe is a graduate of the University of Washington, Seattle's MFA/PATP, and is based in Los Angeles.

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[1] Lauren Yee, *The Great Leap* (unpublished final manuscript, 2018), 112.

[2] *Ibid.*, 112.

[3] Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (London: Penguin Classics, 2008), 7.

[4] Anne Anlin Cheng, *The Melancholy of Race: Psychoanalysis, Assimilation, and Hidden Grief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 3.

[5] *Ibid.*, 8.

[6] *Ibid.*, 84.

[7] Diep Tran, "The Top 10\* Most-Produced Plays of the 2019-20 Season," *American Theatre Magazine*, 18 September 2019, <https://www.americantheatre.org/2019/09/18/the-top-10-most-produced-plays-of-the-2019-20-season/>.

[8] Yee, *Great Leap*, 68.

[9] *Ibid.*, 88.

[10] Joseph Ngo, interview with Kristin Leahey, 3 January 2022.

[11] *Ibid.*

[12] Joshua Takano Chambers-Letson, *A Race So Different: Performance and Law in Asian America* (New York: New York University Press, 2013), 176.

[13] Lauren Yee, *Cambodian Rock Band* (unpublished final manuscript, 2018), 7.

[14] Ngo, interview with Kristen Leahey, 3 January 2022.



[\[15\]](#) Ibid.

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