



"I Dream of Chang and Eng" opens at Zellerbach and "Let's Celebrate" was really great! Town Hall Theatre excells with their production of "The Glass Menagerie"



Eng (Andy Chan) and Chang (Josemari Saenz) scrutinize employer P.T. Barnum (Mark Hinds), warily !!

Photo by: Ryan Montgomery

This past week I visited Zellerbach Playhouse on the University of California Berkeley Campus to take a look at renowned playwright Philip Kan Gotanda's newest play, "I Dream of Chang and Eng". I am pleased to report back on the production that I suggested you join me in examining this week. I found this new play about two of the most famous Siamese Twins in the world and their journey from freak show exhibitors to successful southern plantation owners to be an intriguing journey and a play that I will want to visit again.

In last week's review, I mentioned that I had the opportunity to interview Mr. Gotanda by telephone in preparation for the unveiling of this new play. During that interview, he told me how exciting it is to work in a university setting with the full support of the theatrical department, where he has now entered what he calls phase two of his career, that of teaching, as well as writing. In this environment he has full support to write and to do new work, which would be very difficult now in regional theater with the financial constraints of the current economic environment.

This play is a perfect example of a brand new play that would be very difficult to pursue and develop due to the fact that the story encompasses the life story of these Siamese twins, Cheng and Eng, and the many significant individuals and experiences woven into the tapestry of their lives. The story as it is currently written includes 19 actors, 30 characters and 130 costume changes. A story of this magnitude, in addition to the fact that it is a brand new play, never performed before a live audience, would be a project far too risky financially for a community or regional theater to mount. In the college setting where eager minds want to learn how to develop stories into plays, where there are a lot of students seeking to enhance their acting skills, this is the perfect place to develop a story that requires a fairly large number of actors to tell a story of this magnitude. Mr. Peter Glazer, who is also a playwright, is directing this production, which is a collaboration with UC Berkeley and their theater, dance and performance studies department.

I introduced you to Mr. Gotanda because you have an opportunity to see the first blush of a new play, to experience a new work in the process of development. He has created to date at least 19 plays and 4 films. My wife, Karen, and I have been following his plays since we first saw "Yankee Dawg You Die", in 1986, in a small Berkeley Repertory Addison Street Theater where they mounted new and experimental theatrical work. We saw his award winning movie, "The Wash", and fell in love with his heartfelt writing that primarily focuses on the Japanese-American experience of those living in this country.

This new play is based on his fascination with the true story of two Siamese Twins, Chang and Eng Bunker, chronicling their path from childhood in Thailand, to their introduction to the world as a traveling "freak" exhibit that eventually moved upscale and became part of the world famous P. T. Barnum traveling shows. These self-educated conjoined twins eventually bought out their contract, toured the world themselves, became very wealthy and successful businessmen, American citizens, and just prior to the civil war, settled down on a Southern plantation, becoming early pioneers in modern farming techniques. After marrying two southern sisters, they subsequently fathered 21 children. More than just a story of two individuals traveling the same path, this story reveals the complexities of having to live your life conjoined to another human being, of never having a time in your life completely to yourself, never having private time with your wife, living much like a fish in a bowl.

According to Mr. Gotanda, his play is not an exact tale of what their lives were like, but a dream tale of how he perceived what their lives were like. There is not enough factual documented information as to what their daily lives were like, but enough is known about their various encounters along the path, to turn Gotanda's dream into a reality. This is a very complicated story and while it is very intriguing and interesting, this first production is not without room for improvement. The first act was at times confusing, at least until you grasped the story development path, and it moved with less energy than it required. This story opened at first examining a very difficult period in Chang and Eng's later lives and then, by way of flashback, takes you to their youth, then moves forward through significant milestones in their lives. Along the way it takes a look at their physical, psychological and sexual maturing and mating process as well. The story takes on a very personal look at the very difficult conflicts born of living through this physical abnormality, and finally it examines the epitome of brotherly love and dependency, a poignant story of the love and frustration of two men who learned that they were not freaks, but men who were "very special", and yet, at the same time they were men who were very normal, with normal hopes, dreams and desires!

Director Peter Glazer has gathered together an excellent cast of current and former student actors. The lead roles of Eng Bunker and Chang Bunker are played by Andy Chan and Josemari Saenz. PT Barnum is played very well by Mark Hinds, David Moore is excellent as Learned Jack, and Gwen Kingston is superb as Lady Elizabeth Monroe. The wives of Chang and Eng, Addie Yates (Dasha Burns) and Sallie Yates (Chelsea Unzner) were very believable and charming. There are far too many actors to give each the kudos they deserve, but the acting performances are very strong and exciting. The choreography, under the direction of Erika Chong Such, was very clever and added significantly to the

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production. I enjoyed the play much more in the second act and overall I found this to be a play with great promise. Remember, this is a play in development and this was the first public performance.

Under the auspices of the Theater Dance and Performance Studies (TDPS) umbrella at the University of California at Berkeley, and some very generous private funding for this project, "I Dream of Chang and Eng", has now opened in the Zellerbach Playhouse and continues through March 13th, with performances at 8 p.m. on Fridays, Saturdays and Saturdays. Tickets are a very reasonable \$15 for general admission and \$10 for seniors and students. Call (510)642-8827 for ticket information or visit their website at tdpsboxoffice@berkeley.edu. Cal Performances are performed at 101 Zellerbach Hall #4800, University of California, Berkeley. If you go to the following link on the internet, <http://maps.google.com/maps?q=zellerbach+playhouse&oe=utf-8&rls=org.mozilla:en-US:official&client=firefox-a&um=1&ie=UTF-8&sa=N&hl=en&tab=wl> you can find a link to a map that shows you exactly where the Zellerbach Playhouse is located on campus. The entrance to the Zellerbach Playhouse is on the north side of the building. I have found the entrance quite easily by entering the campus right at the intersection of Bancroft and Dana street, taking the paver path north between Haas Pavillion and the Zellerbach Playhouse until you come around to the front of the Zellerbach building at Speiker Plaza. The Playhouse entrance would then be on your left. Karen and I found \$5 parking, in a church parking lot, two blocks away and across the street from the Berkeley City Club at 2315 Durant Street and next door to the Berkeley Architectural Assn. office at 2318 Durant, which was not bad for a Friday night!

Disney on Ice's production, "Let's Celebrate", just made a quick but delightful stopover in San Jose and Oakland !

Finally, I hope you took my advice and took the grandchildren to one of the Disney on Ice productions of "Let's Celebrate!" performing in the HP Pavilion in San Jose or the Oracle Arena when it made its Bay Area debut this past two weeks. I took two of my grandchildren, Rodrick and Mari to the show on Wednesday night in the Oracle Arena and I have to tell you that this was one of the best Disney on Ice shows I have seen to date.

The children were still talking about it yesterday morning when I stopped by their house. They both thanked me again and again for taking them. They got to see all their favorite Disney characters including Mickey and Minnie Mouse, Donald and Daisy Duck, Goofy, Lelo and Stitch, Toy Story's Woody, Jesse, and Buzz Lightyear. In addition to many more Disney characters, all of the Disney prince and princesses were there, ranging from Aurora, Ariel, Belle, Cinderella, Jasmine, Mulan, Snow White, and even Tiana from the Princess and the Frog. The skating was quite excellent and the show was a lot of fun, albeit with a very shallow plot. The whole show was based upon Mickey Mouse being able to use Mickey's "destinator machine" like a time machine laptop able to take him and Minnie to different places all around the world to join in the fun. Altogether, it was just a grand excuse to party, party, party!

This show is for everyone, adult and child alike. There was a delightful lady sitting next to us who had recently moved back to the Bay Area from England and she was having an absolute ball, snapping digital photos of the performers again and again. If you didn't go this time, keep your eyes open for the next show to come through our area and go have fun. Disney does a great job and if you go on opening nights, the general admission tickets are only \$15 for all seats except the ringside seats. Parking is a bit expensive at \$25 a car, but that was the only disappointment!

This past week in Lafayette, the Town Hall Theatre opened a highly professional production of Tennessee Williams' poignant and heartbreaking tale, in "The Glass Menagerie". In addition, I interviewed one of America's leading Asian-American authors, Phillip Kan Gotanda, this past week about a new play of his that is still in the developmental stage at the University of California, in Berkeley. This play, entitled "I Dream of Chang and Eng", is literally a play that has been floating around in Gotanda's dreams, both daytime and nighttime, in bits and pieces, for the past 20+ years. We've got a lot on our plate this week so I'd better get to it - - -

Town Hall's current production of "The Glass Menagerie" is an emotion packed production, due in large part to the outstanding acting talent, and the directing skill that Director Susannah Martin brings to the production. The words of Tennessee Williams are a powerful mixture of poetic imagery and prose, forged by years of personal hardship and sacrifice long before his first plays brought the spotlight of fame to his name.

The Glass Menagerie is considered a memory play, a quasi-autobiographical look back at Tennessee "Thomas" Williams' own difficult past. Amanda Winfield (Heidi Abbott) is a middle aged mother of two children, reminiscent of Williams' own mother. Tom (Alph Ayin) her son, shadows Tennessee Williams' own loneliness and desire for adventure, and Laura (El Beh), speaks to us from Williams' own sister, Rose, whose insecurity led eventually to insanity. Our characters in this play live in a low rent apartment facing an alley in St. Louis, in 1937.

Amanda, divorced for 16 years after her husband suddenly abandoned the family and disappeared, struggles to make ends meet by selling and renewing subscriptions to serialized periodicals to her friends and church members, while her son, Tom, works as a stock clerk in an unfulfilling warehouse job. Tom, frustrated by his pressure filled family life, escapes as frequently as he can to the safety and solitude and vicarious adventures experienced in the local movie theater. Tom's younger sister, Laura, is handicapped with a foot deformity and severe shyness and insecurity. Their mother, Amanda, is overprotective and loving and a highly critical parent. Amanda grew up in the lap of Southern luxury, on a plantation where she had friends in all the best of southern social circles. She had myriads of gentlemen callers pursuing her affections and unfortunately married a traveling telephone salesman, who, according to Amanda, "fell in love with long distance". Amanda is possessed with finding a potential husband for her introverted and handicapped daughter, pushing her son Tom to bring home one of his fellow workers who might be a potential suitor for his sister. Tom is repulsed by the whole process of what he sees as the entrapment of a fellow worker. Even his sister, Laura, is frustrated by their mother's constant admonitions and frequently reiterated concerns about Laura becoming an old maid.

While the story is a captivating and frustrating story in itself, the images of a world on the edge of war hangs darkly in the wings of this story, poking out unobtrusively from the eloquently expressed, articulate verbal background. Tennessee Williams is first and foremost a brilliant writer and his imagery and passion keep us in the historical moment. At the end of Part III, scene 5, Tom stands on the fire escape smoking a cigarette and in the role of a narrator, explains to the audience about the music drifting up to their apartment from the Paradise Dance Hall across the alley and explains that couples could be seen kissing in the alley below. He says:

"This was the compensation for lives that passed like mine, without any change of adventure. Adventure and change were imminent in this year. They were waiting around the corner for all these kids. Suspended in the mist over Berchtesgarden, caught in the folds of Chamberlain's umbrella. In Spain there was Guernica! But here there was only hot swing music and liquor, dance halls, bars, and movies, and sex that hung in the gloom like a chandelier and flooded the world with brief, deceptive rainbows. . . . All the world was waiting for bombardments!"

Finally, relenting to his mother's unending pressure, Tom invites an old school chum, Jim, to be Laura's first "gentleman caller". Of course, Tom does not reveal that his invitation has anything to do with his sister, or even that he has a sister. He has simply invited Jim to his house to introduce him to his family and to have dinner. The mother flies into a fit of hysterical excitement, trying to turn their humble little walk-up apartment, a "Sow's ear" if you will, into a "silk purse", before the gentleman caller's anticipated arrival. After all, she fantasizes that this one and only "gentleman caller" could be the answer to her concerns and prayers for her daughter!

"The Glass Menagerie" continues at 8 p.m. on Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays, with Sunday performances at 2 p.m., now through March 19th. Tickets range in price between \$29.50 for general admissions and Seniors pay only \$22.50

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for Sunday matinee performances. There is a separate service charge of \$2.50 for single ticket purchases. The Town Hall Theatre is located at 3535 School Street, at the corner of Moraga Road and School Street in Lafayette. Contact the box office at 283-1557 or purchase your tickets online at www.TownHallTheatre.com.

Gotanda's new play, "I Dream of Chang and Eng", premieres at Zellerbach Playhouse on the University of California campus in Berkeley!

This past week I had the opportunity to speak with a playwright whose work I have admired for many years, Mr. Phillip Kan Gotanda. I introduce you to him because you have an opportunity to see the first blush of a new play, to experience a new work in the process of development and perhaps you will be intrigued enough to examine further some of the remarkable body of work he has created to date; at least 19 plays and 4 films.

Karen and I were at first intrigued by the title of a play, "Yankee Dawg You Die", being produced in 1986, in the small Berkeley Repertory Addison Street Theater where they mounted new and experimental theatrical work. This story about two different generations of Japanese American actors and their experiences in the American film industry, one an older gentleman, Vincent Chang, who was only offered parts that reinforced old Japanese stereotypes and a younger actor, Bradley Yamashita, who will only take dignified and unстереotypical roles. More importantly, while they begin with a tenuous relationship, over a one year period of time as encompassed in the play, they grow to understand their similarities, respect their differences and above all, share their commonality as humans instilled with powerful ambitions and overshadowing insecurities. The story, while focused on Japanese Americans, is really, quite importantly more about the relationships that can be built between different generations and viewpoints. Intrigued by the passion, the poetic beauty of this amazing Asian-American author's writing skills, we rented a movie, written in 1985 by Mr. Gotanda entitled simply, "The Wash".

This movie told the story of a newly-separated Nisei (second generation Japanese in America) couple, Nobu and Masi, and their struggles to deal with the roles assigned by their culture and collective past. Masi eventually begins to date a widower by the name of Sadao, while Nobu finds great difficulty in moving on with his life, still imprisoned by memories of his time in the internment camps and the loss of his wife. Masi understands Nobu and attempts to ease his pain by continuing to return to his home to do his weekly wash. It is a beautiful, powerful story of love lost, but the caring that can continue, and often does.

I could go on to discuss the several plays written by Mr. Gotanda that we have seen over the past 20 plus years but instead I will tell you that we eagerly seek out anything of his authorship that we can, because we find his voice to be unique, eloquent and memorable.

I asked Mr. Gotanda about his life growing up in the Stockton area and how he found his way into becoming a playwright and screen writer. I learned that his path to writing came through his love of music, an opportunity to write a musical based on a Japanese fairy tale. It was produced, received reasonable response, he was asked to write another which he did, then began to write plays without music and found a demand for his talent. He says that he often gathered a story from one source and combined with another story from another source melding and merging until he found common messages that resonated with his audiences.

This new play is based on his fascination with the true story of two Siamese Twins, Chang and Eng Bunker, their early lives featured in a Barnum and Bailey "freak" exhibit that toured the world. These conjoined twins eventually bought out their contract, toured the world themselves, became very successful businessmen, settled down on a Southern plantation, and married sisters and fathered 21 children. According to Mr. Gotanda, his play is not an exact tale of what their lives were like, but a tale of how he perceived their lives were like. There is not enough factual documented information as to what their daily lives were like, but enough is known to turn his dream into a reality.

Under auspices of the Theater Dance and Performance Studies (TDPS) umbrella at the University of California at Berkeley, and some very generous private funding for this project, this "I Dream of Chang and Eng", is now being brought to fruition in the Zellerbach Playhouse beginning on March 4th, and continuing through the 13th, at 8 p.m. on Fridays, Saturdays and Saturdays. Tickets are a very reasonable \$15 for general admission and \$10 for seniors and students. Call (510)642-8827 for ticket information or visit their website at tdpsboxoffice@berkeley.edu. Cal Performances are performed at 101 Zellerbach Hall #4800, University of California, Berkeley.

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