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Philip Kan Gotanda's 'I Dream of Chang and Eng'

'I Dream of Chang and Eng': Playwright, Cal theater department head team up on reimagining of twins' lives

Chad Jones Published 4:00 am, Thursday, March 3, 2011



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Andy Chan (left) and Jose Saenz and Eng and Chang Bunker.

Chances are good that when you think of Siamese twins - we call them conjoined twins now - you think of an old black-and-white photo of Chang and Eng Bunker, arguably the most famous such twins.

Bay Area playwright **Philip Kan Gotanda** has been trying to write about Chang and Eng for almost 30 years, but the twins' incredible life story was just too big.

"I wanted to include everything," Gotanda says by phone from his Berkeley home. "I did all kinds of research and was deeply invested in the whole political and cultural backdrop from their birth to Chinese parents in Siam in 1811 to their arrival in Boston nearly 20 years later. But then I just let go and decided to write whatever I write and not worry about history."

That's why Gotanda's latest play, "I Dream of Chang and Eng," has such a personal title.

"This is a reimagining of their lives," the playwright says.

And what lives they were. Their time in the States started with a touring freak show, but at age 21, the twins bought out their contract and started touring themselves around the world. The savvy businessmen retired in the 1830s to become gentlemen farmers in North Carolina, where they married sisters Adelaide and Sarah Yates.

Chang and Eng, who spent three days at each plantation in a bed big enough for three, fathered 21 children, several of whom fought for the Confederacy in the Civil War.

"By the end of their lives, they hated each other so much they'd get into fights and try to kill each other. There's a very strange tale," says Gotanda, whose "Love in American Times" makes its world premiere in May at San Jose Rep.

And in Gotanda's vision, the strangeness includes dancing and singing to tunes such as "Singing in the Rain" and "Let's Do It" translated into Thai.

With 19 actors playing 30 characters and making 130 costume changes, "Chang and Eng" is such a big production that most theater companies wouldn't even consider it. But Gotanda developed the play with **Peter Glazer**, chairman of UC Berkeley's department of theater, dance and performance studies. Now Glazer is directing his students in the world premiere of "I Dream of Chang and Eng."

Gotanda and Glazer have been working with the students since fall, and Gotanda, who says he never envisioned himself as a teacher, is loving the experience.

"At this stage in my life, Act 2 of a two-act play, I like being in an environment where I can continue to do work that interests me and be in the world of intellectual thought and professional work," says Gotanda, 60. "The students are game to try anything, and have a fun, fresh take on everything. I really enjoy that."

Glazer says Gotanda is bringing his students an extraordinary opportunity to be part of a new work by "a major American playwright." "I think the students realize that when the curtain goes up on opening night, they will be involved in a piece of theatrical history with this premiere," Glazer says. "And they will have been more intimately involved with its birthing than I think they ever imagined."

8 p.m. Fri.-Sat., 2 p.m. Sun. Through March 13. \$10-\$15. Zellerbach Playhouse, UC Berkeley campus. (510) 642-8827. sfg.ly/gomp9a.

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