

Wednesday  
March 09, 2011

# THE BERKELEY DAILY PLANET





FRONT PAGE COLUMNISTS ARTS & EVENTS THE WEEK FULL TEXT

## Arts & Events

### Theater Review: "I Dream of Chang and Eng" at Zellerbach

By Ken Bullock

Wednesday March 09, 2011 - 06:15:00 PM

"I've been trying to write this play for 25 years," said famed Asian-American playwright Philip Kan Gotanda. "Finally I let go of everything--fact, fiction, documentation, history--and wrote. this is what came out."    

Gotanda's *I Dream of Chang and Eng* "came to life" when it received a staged reading last year, while the playwright was guest artist with the University of California's Theatre, Dance and Performance Studies Department. Directed in spectacular fashion by incoming department chair Peter Glazer--whose Woody Guthrie's *America* has been a hit around the Bay Area and elsewhere--Chang and Eng follow the conjoined brothers, the original Siamese Twins, mostly Chinese by descent, from Siam across the ocean to America, where they prove good businessmen, taking charge of their own affairs and touring Europe with P. T. Barnum, where they're introduced to the pleasures of the West--cognac, cigarettes, "the green fairy" (absinthe)--and those of the flesh--by a diplomat's wife, who also explains to Chang (as his brother "goes away," sequestering himself hypnotically) what a secret is, something neither brother knows ...

Other meetings--on board ship with sailor Learned Jack, born of a freed African American slave in Liberia, who warns them that, though not black, they're not white, either; with crowds gawking at them (cleverly seen through their unbelieving eyes, not the spectators'); with picnickers who become a lynch mob, thinking the touring brethren are renegade Indians; with two sisters on a farm neighboring the one they buy, who become their wives and mothers to 21 children--set the story in a world preceding--and partly informing our own ...

Much use of anachronism, mixing contemporary slang and style with older, more formal forms of behavior--or at least our sense now of what they were like--both adds humor and perspective, and occasionally confuses, detracts from trying to relate one epoch to another.

The play sprawls, both across the stage, and in time. at three hours' length, *Chang and Eng* fascinates, but loses focus, which is crystallized by the brothers themselves. The last line of the play, a confession of a secret, is beautiful, and perfectly complements the epigraph, found in the program, from Elias Canetti: "All the things one has forgotten scream for help in dreams."

(A special symposium, "Conjoined Histories: Race, Gender, Disability and Popular Performance in the 19th Century," including playwright and director, free, Friday from 1:30-6 at Zellerbach Playhouse)

Friday, Saturday at 8, Sunday at 2, Zellerbach Playhouse (UC campus); Tickets: \$10-\$15. 642-8827; [tpps.berkeley.edu](http://tpps.berkeley.edu)

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