

David Henry Hwang: A Mellow Second Act

By Sylvie Drake Photo: Richard Renaldi

WHEN DAVID HENRY HWANG wrote *M. Butterfly* in 1988, it was a revelation—intriguing, mysterious, lyrical, gorgeous to look at and unlike any riff on race and gender in living memory. Hwang, 31 years young and new on the scene, became the toast of Broadway. He was crowned with awards, basked in the glow of his success and was invited to write the screenplay for the movie (to say nothing of every party worth attending).

Heady stuff for someone fresh out of the starting gate. Hwang had written plays before (*FOB*, *The Dance & The Railroad*, *Family Devotions*, *The House of Sleeping Beauties*) and went on to write more. Not all were the same kind of major hit (*Face Value*, featured by name in his newest play, *Yellow Face*, which opens May 10 at the Mark Taper Forum, actually tanked) and none was as unprecedented in style and form as *M. Butterfly*.

Partly through chance and partly through evolution, Hwang found himself branching out into related disciplines, such as writing libretti for operas and books for musicals. Also films and teleplays. But playwriting has always been at the heart of things. “It is still my personal form,” he says. “When I have something I want to do for myself, something I need to explore, I go back to writing a play.

We’ve had *Stuff Happens*. Is *Yellow Face* more of the same?

“The play is not as factual as it sounds,” Hwang cautions. “It’s a variation on the stage documentary form. Some of the stuff in the play is true and some of it isn’t and I hope it’s hard to tell the difference.”

It is and it isn’t. *Yellow Face* feels like docudrama but it takes some sly and less predictable turns.

“To a certain extent the play is about my relationship with my father,” Hwang continues. “The father-son relationship is the emotional height of the play. I tried to write my father as accurately as I could. He was a colorful man. [The character] *feels* like my father. He actually saw an early draft of the play before he passed away and rather liked the way he was portrayed.

“I don’t want to get into too much distinction about what’s true and what’s not because that’s a slippery slope. It’s one of the things the play itself is trying to explore: the difference between fiction and reality, how the two start to blur, and how that also applies in terms of creating fictional narrative and journalistic narrative. I hope that’s all of a piece.”

While Hwang’s comments carefully skim over

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Yellow Face, his latest, bears this out—but with a difference. This Center Theatre Group co-production with East West Players (Hwang’s frequent home whose main theatre was named in 1998 in his honor) deals again with issues of ethnicity, only this time they’re up close and very personal.

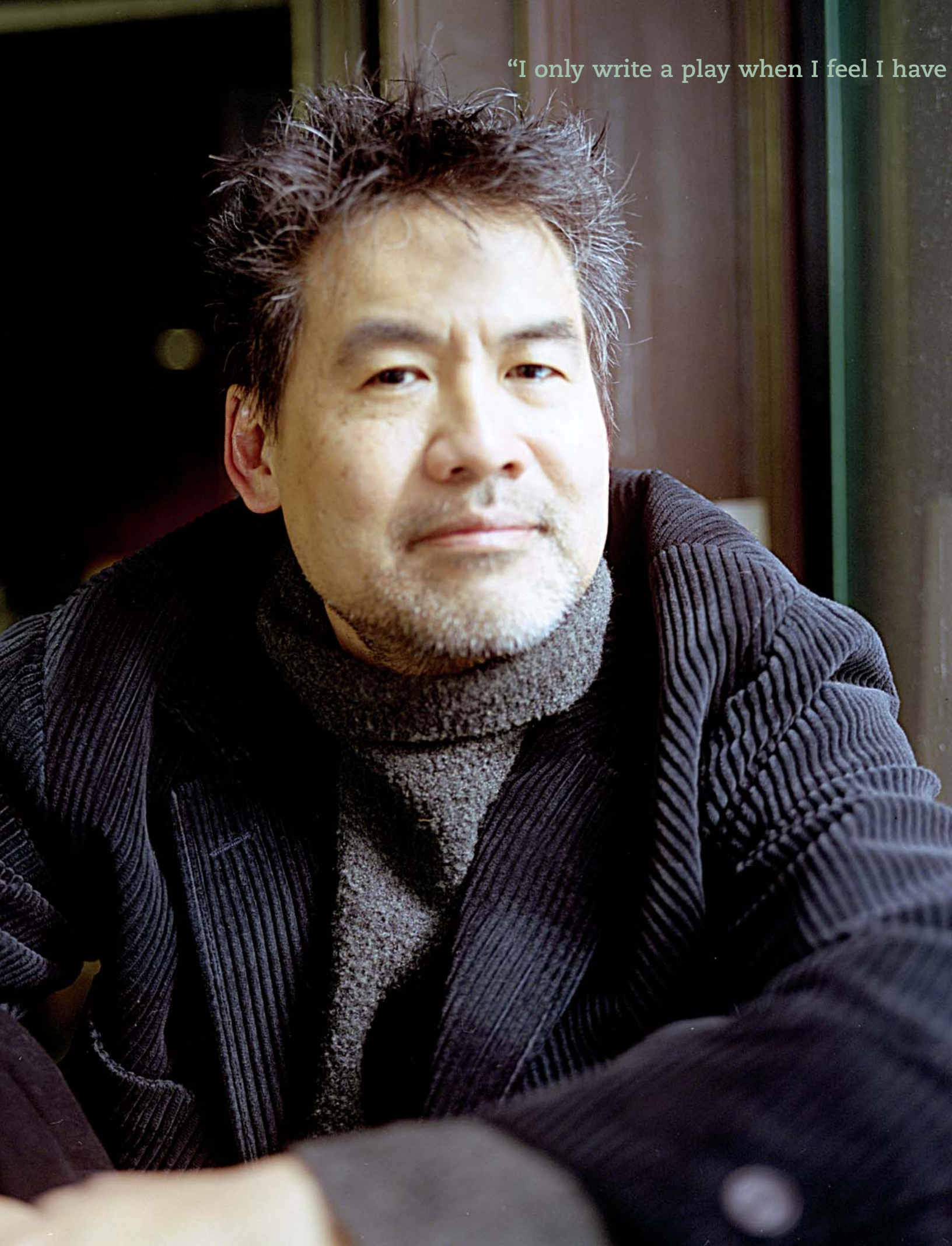
While the protagonist goes only by a set of initials, they are Hwang’s initials—DHH. The events that unfold sound factual, from snapshots of Hwang’s relationship with his father and his tenure as a bank executive (at his father’s bank) to his very public role in the battles over issues of ethnic casting involving the American production of *Miss Saigon*. (Hwang and others in the Asian American acting community saw the hiring of Jonathan Pryce, a Caucasian, to play an Asian role as the moral equivalent of white actors performing in blackface.)

the play’s events, its deeper significance lies in its uncommon examination of morality as well as race. Not only are things not always what they seem but the piece is a candid acknowledgement by the playwright that issues of ethnicity may be less significant and more complex than he once thought.

It’s a bold admission given Hwang’s willingness to cast himself (or virtual self) in an unflattering light at the very center of things. Who are we really and how much does it matter? Those are the questions asked and even answered. But try to pin him down as to the identity—real or fictional—of other characters and Hwang demurs.

“The principal events are true but many have been taken out of their original context and sufficiently fictionalized so that it would be hard to trace them back to the actual incidents,” he says. “Part of the fun is not knowing. There have been cases, relatively recently, where Caucasian

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actors have been cast as Asian by mistake and I found that an interesting jumping off point. If I start delineating these things in interviews it won't be quite as much fun.”

And yet for all of these claims to semi-fiction, Hwang also names names, such as that of activist playwright Frank Chin, a nemesis quoted here putting Hwang down.

“I thought it was fun to use a quote like that in my own play,” Hwang says, sounding for a moment like a kid caught raiding the cookie jar. “It's an actual quote, taken from the public record. Let's put it this way: I really like Frank's work. It was a real inspiration to me. But the fact that he really doesn't like my work has to, therefore, make me feel not so positive about him.”

Another character, known only by the initials DJ, serves, among other things, as a newspaper reporter. Hwang says the character is based on a real reporter but insists DJ stands not for Damned Journalist but for Disc Jockey. “Literally—he introduces the characters in the first part of the play so I think of him more as a DJ.”

Snaking purposefully through the piece is the music of the Dong people of China who, until recently, were isolated enough to have retained, for lack of a better term, a certain cultural purity. Or had they?

“Friends of mine had done the first anthropological musical field work on the Dong and produced a CD,” Hwang explains. “I listened to the music and was fascinated by the way it did not sound typically Chinese; if anything, as the play describes, it sounds a little Bulgarian. You know the *Bulgarian Voices*? You can kind of [track], geographically, how the music progressed from Eastern Europe into China. I started to build a play around this idea and about a year ago I decided to [visit] the Dong village.”

“I like it as a metaphor of how culture and race are quite fluid and always have been. Things are always changing and all culture is mongrelized,” he says, in a statement that would never have crossed his lips at 31. And then in a burst of candor: “The DHH character learns to have a less fundamentalist view of ethnicity.”

Music, if not exactly central to Hwang's life, has always been an important part of it. He played the violin as a child. His sister is a cellist. His mother is a pianist and his father sang, “mostly choral music,” he says, “but I didn't grow up with opera. I became interested in opera through *M. Butterfly*. I incorporated the Puccini as a kind of thematic device and ended up hearing so much of it during rehearsals that I fell in love with it.”

Philip Glass was the first to ask Hwang to write a libretto for *1,000 Airplanes on the Roof* (1988). It was a novel experience and Hwang enjoyed it. As, apparently, did Glass. They wrote two more operas together: *The Voyage* in 1992 and

The Sound of a Voice in 2003. Writing libretti evolved into a kind of sub-career. *Alice in Wonderland*, an opera written with Unsub Chin, is to open in Munich and *The Fly*, with music by Howard Shore, will open in Los Angeles and Paris.

As an offshoot of this offshoot, Hwang was invited to write books for musicals—the revamped update of *Flower Drum Song* that played the Taper and New York (2002), and the books for the Tim Rice/Elton John *Aida* and—ready for this?—Disney's *Tarzan*. He is currently adapting *Across the Nightingale Floor* for Universal Studios and producer Kathleen Kennedy.

“I've had this oddly eclectic career,” he says with a chuckle. “It just sort of happened. But I find I enjoy working in a lot of different genres. With opera, the audience suspends its disbelief incredibly quickly, probably because the form is so non-naturalistic. But I also feel when I do an opera that I'm a crafts person. I serve the composer. Part of my job is to create a libretto that will allow the composer to do his or her best work.”

“I love opera now. And Broadway musicals. In the 1980s I was a snobby playwright; I turned up my nose at musicals but we grow older and mellower...”

“Only when I do my own plays do I feel I am the master puppeteer and the other artists should be serving my vision. When I do a movie, the director is the principal artist. For whatever reason, I enjoy working on some things where I'm not the principal artist and other things where I am.”

“I only write a play when I feel I have something to say and I don't always have something to say. In the times in between, it's great to be able to work on other people's projects and, say in the case of movies and musicals, it helps pay the bills.”

Hwang turns 50 this year. A benchmark. He's married (to actor Kathryn Layng who has a role in *Yellow Face*) and they have two children. He seems startled that he's managed to have a career for this long. “I think I'm a good writer,” he says, “but you know, there are a lot of good writers out there who cannot sustain [a career].”

So despite F. Scott Fitzgerald's musings to the contrary, Hwang is enjoying his second act. “I appreciate the fact I've been doing this long enough to feel I know something about this profession and this art. So it has been comforting to me as I enter the second half of my whatever-you-call-it that I have things I can share with younger writers and young theatre companies.”

“It's wonderful to do a play where you're completely in charge. It's also scarier and more demanding. It's an interesting fact that, at this point in my career, when I go back to doing my own work, I still go back to shows that have Asian or Asian-American characters. That, too, seems to be who I am.” ■

YELLOW FACE

World premiere co-production of Center Theatre Group and The Public Theater in association with East West Players
Directed by Leigh Silverman
Opens May 20;
plays Tues.-Sat., 8 pm;
Sun., 7:30 pm; Sat. & Sun., 2 pm; through July 1
Tickets: \$42-\$55
Previews May 10-19 (\$30-\$40)
Mark Taper Forum
135 N. Grand Ave.,
Los Angeles
213.628.2772 or
www.CenterTheatreGroup.org