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## Does History Repeat? The Question That Propels "A Distant Shore"



Top (L to R): Nelson Mashita, Eric D. Steinberg and Daniel Blinkoff; bottom (L to R): Emily Kuroda, Maria Cina, Esther K. Chae, and Tamlyn Tomita in rehearsal for A Distant Shore. Courtesy of Craig Schwartz.

Now playing at the Kirk Douglas Theatre is "A Distant Shore," Chay Yew's "multi-generational saga" that

takes place in the jungles of Southeast Asia. APA talks to writer Chay Yew and cast members Emily Kuroda, Tamlyn Tomita, and Eric D. Steinberg -- who do a way better job explaining it.

## **Interview with Chay Yew, Emily Kuroda, Tamlyn Tomita, and Eric D. Steinberg**

**April 17, 2005**

**Interviewed by Ada Tseng and Chi Tung**

**Video Edit by Ada Tseng**

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**Chay Yew (writer):** The play breaks into two narratives, and the people from Act 1 come back in Act 2. But it's 80 years apart, and they basically become different people. But yet, you recognize who they are. So, it's commenting on the concept that history does repeat itself, and sometimes we are in a strange way fated to live similar lives over and over again.

It was actually a commission from a theater up in San Francisco, and what had happened was that I had done an adaptation of Lorca's *The House of Bernarda Alba*, and they really liked it and thought I could attempt another Lorca play, *Blood Wedding*. And I thought, well, I need money. So I decided to go do an adaption of *Blood Wedding*. And what had happened was I kept it away, because I didn't want to do it. Because, like most college students, I procrastinate. I did it before, I'm doing it now. So, I went back to Singapore.

And, then 9/11 happened. And I, all of a sudden, saw the world a little differently, from the other side of the Pacific Ocean. And I remember seeing -- here's a colony that used to be owned by the British, and it's really interesting to see how the British had owned a piece of Asia years and years ago, and then to come back after 2001 to see the effects of imperialism and colonization in 2001. And, now it's more global. More American and Dutch, depending on which companies are running the world: McDonalds and Starbucks... So, I decided to write this play, *Blood Wedding*, setting it in the 1920's in Southeast Asia.

And then halfway through, I got bored, so I jumped 80 years in Act 2 to 2004. So this play is about colonialization and globalism, using the framework of Lorca's *Blood Wedding*.

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**Eric D. Steinberg (Zul):** I would say that the piece in broad strokes is about colonialism of different sorts. So, economic colonialism literally, but also sexual colonialism as well. In terms of Asian-American issues, these archetypes go back from day one, to the Madame Butterfly archetype, if your'e going to be general about it. You examine that in this with a white man and an Asian woman, and all the stereotypes that go with it, which is sometimes a little difficult to play because you're not sure if, in the playing of it, whether you're deconstructing it adequately. So, it is a concern. I've worked with a bunch of playwrights who have dealt with that subject, who have not been able to effectively dismantle it. They present it, and you examine it, but when you come away from the piece, you still have a sense of the same archetypes being in tact. So, it's a real tricky business.

I think it's interesting the way Chay addresses it, because he doesn't go head-long into it. It's in the framework of political colonization as well. And, the other layer is that it's straddling two time periods. I think that's probably what makes the piece so expansive. It's oddly relevant today in strange ways -- Bush talks about exporting democracy to other countries, and it brings up the whole question of colonization, what is occurring, what your foreign policies are going to be, and how much has it changed. That is another good question -- not a hell of a lot. Also, it asks what roles does globalization play in the colonization factor, with the haves and have-nots. To me, what's interesting about the piece is dealing with the have-nots, which is where I inhabit

the piece loosely.

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**Tamlyn Tomita (Salmah):** We take into account inter-relationships between peoples -- men and women of both cultures -- they clash, contrast, compare, and eventually evolve together with all those conflicts, and it creates a lot of interesting stories, because we're not only dealing with gender issues, economic, political -- religion is touched upon, but it's an underlying belief. But it's a struggle between beliefs and desires and wants and betrayals for the betterment of oneself, one's country, one's life or status, in that character's present life terms. And it's very, very engaging. You see a lot of mirror images, you hear dialogue -- it's all very integral, intricate, very complex ways in which...you'll hear things, where you'll be like, "Oh my gosh!" and ultimately you'll be able to see how our universe is not as easy or as complicated as it seems.

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**Emily Kuroda (Wardina) :** I play Wardina in this play. I have a son in both acts. My character's a very practical woman. In the first act, she's uneducated, she's old-fashioned, and she sees the old-fashioned, traditional ways changing, and she's having a really hard time adapting to it because of the colonization of the British in her country. And, she's lost her husband in the first act, because he was a radical trying to free our country from this colonization. In the second act, I was a radical when I was younger. Now I'm 53, but I still haven't lost the dream of going back to our country and our roots. So, that's the struggle there in the second half.

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**Eric D. Steinberg (Zul):** I play a guy named Zul in both acts. In the first act, he's a plantation farmer. But he's managed to eke out a 5-acre little lot, that he gets from the white people who give him a plot of land. So, he's that guy. He's struggling and dealing with his limitations, because he not allowed to go further than that. He's never going to be a big land owner.

In the second act, Zul is a sex worker. He's a hustler, but a smart one, a good one. And, he's limited again by his situation, and by the colonial aspect in this country and his class. Obviously, in Asia, it is such a huge thing. And so he survives in that way, through playing on that sexual colonization archetype. He's a gay man, so he's working with gay white men who come in. So that is interesting too cause you don't see that addressed a lot. You always see the white man with an Asian woman. This is a different dynamic, but it's the same... cause they have rice fever too.

Chay, I've worked with before many times, and I have great respect for him, so I can always trust that this will be intelligently done. The sex worker part wasn't in it when I took the role, so what attracted me was the farmer -- the idea of playing against my expressiveness, playing a man who was not a man of words but a man of action, rooted into the earth.. That's what attracted me the most to it. That' s the challenge. Anything that makes me nervous, that's what i'm looking for.

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**Tamlyn Tomita (Salmah):** I'm the hot young thing! [laughs] No, just kidding. I play a woman who's caught between worlds, I think a lot of the characters are caught in between worlds. They're not archetypal characters, none of the seven characters are, but we all represent a class, a style, a certain mode of thinking, a certain set of values, a certain world of beliefs, and we are ever-evolving.

And the circumstances you'll see, we hope we'll be able to provide an element of surprise. Because expectations of an audience if they go into a play, if they're like, "Oh my god, I know what's gonna happen,"

you don't want that as an actor, you don't want that as a playwright, as a director and certainly not as an audience member. So we're gonna try to convey the idea of drives and intentions and wants, I think that's the best way to do it.

*A Distant Shore*

**Written by Chay Yew**

**Directed by Robert Egan**

**Starring Daniel Blinkoff, Ester K. Chae, Maria Cina, Emily Koroda, Nelson Mashita, Eric D. Steinberg and Tamlyn Tomita.**

**May 1 - May 22, 2005, Tues-Sun**

**Kirk Douglas Theatre**

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