

**HKU SUMMER INSTITUTE IN THE ARTS & HUMANITIES**  
**Inauguration Ceremony on 13 July 2009 (Monday), 1:15pm**  
**Loke Yew Hall**  
**Remarks by David Henry Hwang**

Thank you so much for inviting me to participate in the opening of the Summer Institute. It's a great privilege for me to join you as you set out on an adventure, a time of growth and exploration. Over the coming weeks, you will learn many important things about the arts and the humanities – their histories and techniques as well as the changes that are sweeping through Asia and the world. You will attend workshops, watch demonstrations, listen to lectures and enjoy concerts. You will learn not only about the courses you've chosen to study, but more importantly, about yourselves.

Because the arts and the humanities are not meant to be passively consumed. They are intended to be participatory. In the world I come from – the theatre – we think of the audience as the final collaborator in the creation of new work. When opening a show in New York, on Broadway or Off-, the audience literally affects the text, performances, and staging of a play or musical – through “preview” performances –when the show is open to the public, but yet to the critics.

On preview nights, I sit in the back row of the audience, with pen and pad in hand. The show begins, and, while I'm of course watching what's going on onstage, I am also just as conscious of watching and listening to the audience. Because the audience is teaching me whether or not my show is succeeding.

If I think a passage is funny, but no one's laughing, then I'm obviously in trouble. If people are looking at their watches during a scene I intended to be deeply moving, I had better do some rewriting. During previews, I become very aware of bottoms shifting in seats, legs crossing and uncrossing, programmes rustling at inappropriate moments.

When these things happen, it's not the audience that's at fault, it's me. Or maybe my director or my actors, since the problem may not be in the script, but in the production. Because the audience, as an organism, as a whole, is very rarely wrong.

Based on what I learn at any given preview performance, I go home, rewrite, and the next afternoon, hand my new pages to the actors, who must learn them, the director must restage the changes, and then we perform a new version of the show that evening for another preview audience. The whole process repeats itself, over and over again, as long as previews continue -- eight performances a week, over maybe two weeks for an Off-Broadway play, or months for a big Broadway musical. It's one of the most exhausting and stressful tasks in the process of creating a new show. And also one of my favorite times.

Because it's in previews that the relationship between artist and audience really comes alive, in its most active and visceral form. The arts and the humanities are about live people connecting with other live people. The term humanities itself comes from the

word “human.” And that’s how I see the summer institute beginning today – as a place to explore what it means to be human.

We live in an age of proliferating virtual realities. Every few weeks, it seems, some new video game world is put on sale; every few months, some alternative platform is released to the public. Now, I happen to believe that computer imagery, videogames and the like can rise to the level of art as well. So it’s not like new forms are bad or good per se, each is simply a tool for communication, which can enrich or cheapen the human experience, depending on how it’s used.

But our digital age can create interesting questions and problems for the more performance-based art forms you’ll experience here at the Summer Institute. What do all these virtual realities mean for the continued vitality of more performance-based arts – poetry readings, dance, jazz, theatre, even pop music?

I believe that the new digital mediums are actually good for the old performance-based arts. Again, let me refer to the form I know most about: in the theatre, this is not a new question. Theatre artists have been worried for almost a century that our art form was going to disappear before various new mediums – first, film, then television. Obviously, theatre has not disappeared. It has changed, been forced to adapt, but continues today as a vital and important art form.

In my view, as virtual realities multiply, there remains still only one actual reality: performance-based arts, where live artists share their work with live audience members. And in a way, this person-to-person experience becomes even more valuable and precious, in a digital age, when so many of our interactions are transmitted over emails or filtered through Facebook and Twitter. I believe that as humans, we are constructed to be social beings, and that we crave opportunities to be with one another, to share our experiences, to explore together what it means to have been born into these skins, to exist on this planet, for the few decades we have been given to live. To ask, who am I? And what does it mean to be human?

Your professors here can encourage and support you to explore these questions, but cannot them answer for you. You must find the answers for yourself. That is both the challenge and the blessing of the arts.

I have been very fortunate to have spent my adult life working as a playwright, creating plays, musicals and operas in theatres small and large. But when I the same age as many of you, I had no idea what I was going to do when I grew up. I was born in Los Angeles and my parents were immigrants to America – my father was from Shanghai and my mother was Fujianese from the Philippines. We didn’t go to the theatre. In fact, the first time I ever saw a professionally-staged non-musical drama, I was already 18 years old, in my first year as an undergraduate in college.

Watching those plays, something inside me said, “I think I can do that.” And so I began writing plays in my spare time. My Father had never even seen a Western play before,

and was expecting me to study business or become a lawyer. But you know Chinese parents – so long as you get good grades, you can do just about anything else you want in your spare time, and they won't really mind. So I kept up my grades, and wrote plays.

I found a professor who was willing to take a look at my plays, and he told me they were really bad – which they were – and that my problem was that, while I wanted to write plays, I didn't actually know anything about the theatre. Fortunately, that same professor set up an independent study program for me, and over the next few years, I ended up seeing and reading as many plays as I could, which basically became my education in the theatre.

The summer before my senior year as an undergraduate, I also went to a type of summer arts institute. I was home in Los Angeles and I saw an ad in the paper that said, "Study playwriting with Sam Shepard." Sam Shepard is a great American playwright, winner of the Pulitzer Prize for Drama; he also happens to be a movie actor and the long-time partner of the actress Jessica Lange.

I was a huge fan of Sam Shepard, so I sent in an application to study at something called the Padua Hills Playwrights Festival, which eventually became a big deal in Southern California. But this was only the first time they had ever held this Festival; only two people, including me, applied to be students, so we were both accepted.

This summer turned out to be a great turning point for me, because it was there that I began to answer the questions: who am I? What does being human mean to me?

Sam and other American playwrights taught me to write more from my unconscious, that is not to censor myself, to ignore that little voice in our head that says things like, "This isn't good enough," "No one's going to like this," "They're gonna laugh at this," "Who do you think you are to be making this?" And once I allowed myself that freedom, something interesting happened. You see, growing up in California, I never thought of myself as Chinese. I mean, I knew that I literally was Chinese, but I couldn't speak Chinese, my father and mother didn't practice any Chinese traditions, I didn't even know when it was Chinese New Year.

But as I began to explore the arts that summer, all these issues started appearing in my writings: I found myself telling stories about immigration, assimilation, about how I felt to be an American and a Chinese. I learned that, somewhere deep inside, I was very interested in these questions, only my conscious mind didn't know that. It took art to show me how I really felt, what I really believed. It took art to help me begin to answer the question: who am I?

So art changes lives. While it is literally true that the artist creates the art, it is equally true that art re-creates the artist. I am standing before you today because, when I was close to your age, I took a summer arts workshop.

Whether or not you literally create art yourself, you can still ask those same questions as you experience it. When you attend performances or sit in on a writers forum, and you decide, “I don’t like David Hwang’s plays, but I do like Shirley Lim’s novels,” you’ve discovered something about yourself, your own life experiences in life, and the way you see the world. Of course, I wish you’d like my work too, but the larger and more important point is, that audience members and scholars ask the same questions experiencing art that the artists do while creating it.

So as you embark upon your summer explorations, I’d like to leave you with two final thoughts:

One, don’t be afraid to fail. Making art is about taking risks. And you’re not taking enough risks unless you fail from time to time, or even often. Because success and failure are two sides of the same coin. Every success, and every failure, carries with it, some little joy, and some drop of poison. Both are necessary for life and exploration to continue.

And two, while most of you will probably not end up pursuing a career in the arts, a few of you may find you want to go in that direction. If you do, you may face some parental opposition. As a Chinese American, I have to say that, while American kids may not listen to their parents enough, Chinese kids sometimes listen to their parents too much.

Parents may say that they a career in the arts is too hard, that you’ll become a bum, that they want you to do something stable. But, the current recession forces us to ask: is there really such a thing as a stable career? Artists are creative thinkers, we learn to be flexible in our career goals, and in a real sense, we are entrepreneurs. My career certainly has had its ups and downs. But because I love what I do, even the bad days are not so bad. Isn’t it worse to spend your life doing something you don’t care about, and then you may even lose that job? Isn’t there a real economic value to happiness and self-fulfillment?

So be brave, be silly, learn as much as you can, have fun. Try to stay open to new questions, new art forms, new experiences – and you may find that the next few weeks will surprise you. They may even change your life. Welcome to the Summer Institute.