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By David Henry Hwang

For many years now, I've been working on a musical about one of Hong Kong's native sons, Bruce Lee. I've been wanting to make such a show since the mid-1990's to put martial arts on a Broadway stage, and because Bruce himself is a fascinating figure -- a modern hero whose influence has only grown since his death in the 1970's at age 32, a martial arts genius who sought both to become spiritually enlightened, as well as the biggest movie stars in the world. Which is a fascinatingly complex ambition.

He's also interesting as representative of another historical phenomena: over the past fifty years -- the course of my own lifetime -- the image of China -- to the West and to the world -- has completely shifted. When I was a kid in the 1960's, China was still the "sick man of Asia:" a poor, dysfunctional, has-been nation carved up by foreign powers, unable to govern itself or advance into the modern age. In America, where I was born, Chinese Americans were stereotyped as poor and uneducated -- menial laborers -- cooks, waiters, laundrymen.

Just fifty years later, the image of China and Chinese Americans has turned around one hundred and eighty-degrees. Nowadays, China is respected and feared as the world's rising superpower. The current economic crisis has if anything strengthened China's hand, elevated the status of her banks, given her more power to call the shots internationally. In America, Asians are no longer poor and uneducated -- the more recent stereotype is that we have too much education, too much money, and we raise the curve in math class.

This is an extraordinary change over a relatively short period of time. And Bruce Lee sits right on that cusp. He becomes the first popular culture manifestation of the new China -- strong, fierce and, in his case, even heroic.

Throughout my whole career, I have grappled with images of the East in general, and China in particular: what is true, what is partially true, what was once true, and what will probably never be true. Growing up Chinese American is an odd but interesting vantage point from which to look at Asia, partially because I start out knowing that I don't know anything -- except to be acutely aware of how the world sees China -- since that, in large part, has always defined how the world sees me.

With the support of Hong Kong University and Rani Olafsdottir, the wonderful director Dr. Vicki Ooi has put together a splendid cast of actors to perform scenes from my plays. As we ran through the excerpts at rehearsal yesterday, I started to feel I'd stepped into a theatrical version of the old TV show, "This Is Your Life." I've been fortunate to have sustained a pretty long career in the theatre, so my old plays are like psychic snapshots, allowing me to remember "way back when."

Reviewing these excerpts, I think I see that their progression reflects the shifting power balance between West and East over my lifetime, a process which will almost certainly continue for many decades to come. They also express my personal struggle to ask questions about identity: what does it mean to be Chinese? To be American? To be Asian? To be a Westerner? And how do these answers continue to change?

We'll start with an early play of mine, my second to be produced in New York, written when I was 22. "The Dance and the Railroad" was my first historical piece. I got a grant from the U.S. Department of Education to write a play about Asian Americans that would be performed for schoolkids. I decided to focus on the Chinese who built America's Transcontinental Railroad in the 1870's, in particular an incident when they went on strike for more money and a shorter workday. I found this event fascinating because it contradicted the popular image in America at that time of the Chinese as a passive and docile people.

I was also interested in exploring a technique which interests me to this day: to incorporate the theatrical language of the Chinese opera into a Western play. My first play, FOB, had starred the Hong Kong-born actor John Lone, who has since gone on to a big movie career, including the title role in Bertolucci's film "The Last Emperor." At the time, John and I were both just starting out; John had been raised here in Hong Kong in a Cantonese opera school, as were Jackie Chan, Sammo Hung and many other movie actors of that generation. I created a character named Lone, a Chinese railroad worker who had been raised in an opera school, and paired him with another Hong Kong-born Chinese American actor named Tzi Ma, who you may know nowadays as the Chinese Security Chief from the TV series, "24." It's 1867, the workers are on strike, and Ma has approached Lone to teach him opera in their spare time. Here are Mike Brookes as Lone and Eric Ng as Ma – you have to imagine them performing Chinese opera exercises as they speak – in a scene from "The Dance and the Railroad."

EXCERPT

The final school performance of "The Dance and the Railroad" was attended by Frank Rich, then the head drama critic for the NY Times, who gave us a rave review. So we suddenly became an adult show, moved Off-Broadway to the NY Shakespeare Festival, and ran for six months, during which time John landed his first major movie role.

On a technical level, this scene is an example of writing from the subconscious: you can be writing along and suddenly get a very strong impulse that the characters should be doing something your conscious mind doesn't understand. As the late Nobel-prize winning British playwright Harold Pinter put it, you make a deal with your characters: sometimes, they do what you want, and sometimes, you do what they want. In this scene, I had a strong impulse that one of the characters should turn into a duck -- although I hadn't the faintest idea why. Now, when I watch the play, I think it's pretty decent, until Lone turns into the duck – and then it really takes off.

A few years after “Dance and the Railroad,” I was at a cocktail party and someone said to me, “Have you heard the story of the French diplomat who had a twenty year affair with a Chinese actress, who turned out to be a) a spy, and b) a man in drag?” And I thought, “Well, that’s really interesting!”

I usually write a play because there’s something I don’t understand, some question in my mind, and through writing, I find out what I really believe in my subconscious. In the case of this story, my reactions were contradictory: on the one hand, I felt as most people do upon hearing it: “How could he not know?” How could the diplomat not have known the true gender of his lover? But another part of me felt the story was fundamentally credible. So I wrote the play to find out why the story made sense to me.

I asked myself, “Well, what did this diplomat think he had found?” And one day, the answer came to me: “He probably thought he had found his version of Madame Butterfly.” The heroine Cio-Cio San from Puccini’s opera “Madama Butterfly,” though Japanese, has for most of the 20th century been the template for the West’s image of Asian women – docile, submissive, ready to sacrifice themselves to a Western man. Which, by extension, represented the Western view of Asia in general: that it existed to submit to the West.

I imagined a structure in which the Frenchman would fantasize that he was Pinkerton, the American Lieutenant from Puccini’s opera. And that, by the end of the play, the Frenchman would realize that it’s actually he who was Butterfly, in that it was he who sacrificed himself for love. And the Chinese spy, who perpetrated that deceit, was the real Pinkerton.

Here are Mike Brookes, as the French diplomat Rene Gallimard, and Simon Wong as the Chinese spy Shi Peipu, reading the scene where they meet for the first time. Shi Peipu has just performed the death scene from “Madame Butterfly” at a diplomatic party in Beijing. So you have to imagine Simon in a kimono.

EXCERPT #1

As the play continues, Gallimard and Shi begin their affair and fall in love, with Shi dressed entirely as a woman throughout the first two acts. Gallimard begins to pass state secrets through Shi to the Chinese government. As Act III begins, they have been arrested in Paris for espionage, and Shi appears, for the first time in the play, as a man – in a Western suit and tie. In this next scene, they are on trial in Paris, and over the course of the scene, you have to imagine Simon taking off all his clothes.

EXCERPT #2

“M. Butterfly” remains to this day the play for which I’m best known. Yes, it has a sexy premise, and there’s nudity – both male and female – but I also think the play managed to hit the Zeitgeist at just the right moment. Twenty years ago, in 1988, the West in general and America in particular was just beginning to question its own long-held assumptions

of superiority. I'd like to think the deeper appeal of "M. Butterfly" was that it captured an anxiety of which the West was just starting to be conscious.

The basic human frailty which makes the plot possible is self-delusion. The diplomat says, "I knew all the time that my happiness was temporary, my love a deception, but my mind kept the knowledge at bay, to make the wait bearable." Shi is successful in fooling Gallimard because Gallimard does not want to know the truth. Self-delusion can work on political and international levels as well. When the U.S. believed it could succeed in Vietnam, it saw the world through Gallimard-like blinders. More recently, when we believed the Iraqi's would welcome American soldiers as liberators, one could argue that we fell into an M. Butterfly War.

But as Song says, "Bad make-up is not unique to the West." Neither are self-delusion or turmoil from shifting power balances. In my play "Golden Child," I tried to examine how change, modernity and the arrival of a foreign religion can wreak havoc in Chinese society. This was based on my own family history. My great-grandfather was a merchant from the Chinese province of Fujian, near the city of Xiamen. He went abroad to run a business in the Philippines, leaving his family – including his three wives, since Chinese men of the day were polygamous – in China. My great-grandfather eventually converted to Christianity, and then had to decide what to do with his multiple wives.

This was one incident in a larger family history which my grandmother told me when I was ten years old. One summer, I went to the Philippines, where she was living, and did what we would now call oral histories, recording her stories on tape. I returned back to the States and wrote from that a ninety-page nonfiction "novel" about the history of my family, which was Xeroxed, distributed to my relatives, and got very good reviews.

Several decades later, in the mid-90's, I returned to this novel as source material for my play. So in a sense, I was able to collaborate with my ten year-old self. This scene from Golden Child takes place as Husband has just returned home to Fujian after three years away in the Philippines. At a banquet on his return, he presents his wives with gifts: a cuckoo clock for First Wife, who runs the household in his absence; a waffle iron for Second Wife, the most ambitious of the three; and a record player and a recording of "La Traviata" for Third Wife, whom he truly loves. He also tells them he's invited his friend, a Western missionary, to come visit him at their home. As the husband goes to the Third Wife's pavilion to spend his first night home, First Wife, played here by Lynn Yau, enters the pavilion of Second Wife, portrayed here by Holly Aston.

EXCERPT

Over the past decade, I've become involved with Broadway musicals, most notably two big shows for Disney: a pop "Aida" with music by Elton John and Tim Rice, and the Broadway version of "Tarzan" with songs by Phil Collins. We're not really going to go there tonight. But I do want to share a bit of my remake of the Rodgers & Hammerstein musical "Flower Drum Song." We've already heard one of the big hits from that show,

“I Enjoy Being A Girl,” originally performed in the 1961 movie by yet another Hong Kong-born actress, Nancy Kwan.

The need to reinvent Flower Drum Song stems directly from this shifting perception between East and West. Back in 1958, Rodgers & Hammerstein were the undisputed kings of the Broadway musical. With works like “Oklahoma!” “Carousel,” “The King and I,” and “South Pacific,” the arguably invented the American musical as we know it today.

That year, they opened a new show based on a novel by a Hunan-born author named C.Y. Lee, about inter-generational conflicts in a Chinese American family, set in San Francisco’s Chinatown, and cast with almost all Asian actors. “Flower Drum Song” was the first Broadway musical ever written about Asian Americans – as opposed to Asians from Asia – and remains so to this day.

Like many Asian Americans of my generation, I had a complicated history with “Flower Drum Song.” As a kid, it was one of the few things on television or in the movies with Asian characters that I could watch without cringing. After all, it had a strong Asian male lead, characters – particularly the younger generation – that were clearly Americans and spoke without accents, and an actual romance between an Asian man and an Asian woman, which you still don’t see much of today in American movies.

Moreover, even today, I am incredibly impressed by Rodgers & Hammerstein’s intentions. In 1958, America was still caught up in the Red Scare which followed the Communist victory in China. The FBI began investigating Chinese Americans as a possible “fifth column” through which Communism could infiltrate into the U.S. So for Rodgers & Hammerstein to write a musical at that moment which declared that Chinese Americans were just as American as anyone else, was an incredibly radical and forward-thinking thing to do.

Yet “Flower Drum Song” also fell prey to embarrassing stereotypes – the female lead was a mail-order bride, characters sung about the joys of Chop Suey. In its time, “Flower Drum Song” was a hit, but gradually fell into disrepute; by the time I began thinking about remaking it, the show had basically fallen off the face of the earth, and was rarely if ever performed. Largely because American perceptions of Chinese had shifted – people simply knew more about Asia and Asian Americans, and no one even eats Chop Suey any more. So I approached the Rodgers & Hammerstein estate to ask if I could rewrite the show; they agreed, and became wonderful partners over the years it took us to get the show to Broadway.

In my remake of “Flower Drum Song,” I tried to capture more of the spirit of C.Y. Lee’s novel, which was bittersweet about the costs as well as the joys of assimilation, whereas the original musical was simply sweet. My version is set in a traditional Chinese theatre in San Francisco’s Chinatown, and concerns the conflict between a Chinese opera actor performing to ever-shrinking audiences, and his Americanized son, who wants to turn the place into a Western-style nightclub. Mei-li, the female lead, is no longer a mail-order

bride, but rather a refugee who flees China after her own opera actor-father is arrested by the Communist government.

In this scene, Ta, the son's, nightclub has begun to succeed, but his scandalized Father decides to shut it down. Mei-li, who secretly loves with Ta, tries to get him to see his father's opera through new eyes. Here are Juni Ng as Mei-li and _____ as Ta.

EXCERPT

In 2007, we opened my most recent play, "Yellow Face." "Yellow Face" was in many ways born from an earlier work of mine called "Face Value," which had been a notorious flop on Broadway in the early-90's. This was right after "M. Butterfly," and I remember one of the many scathing reviews, whose headline read simply, "M. Turkey." Which is funny now!

In that earlier play, "Face Value," I tried to write a comedy of mistaken racial identity. There are many comedies of mistaken sexual identity – where a character dresses up as the opposite gender and hilarity ensues. It seemed to me that if a character could be mistaken as someone of a different race, we could ask, what's the meaning of race? Is racial identity simply one more role that we play?

"Face Value" failed spectacularly, but I continued to feel that my basic idea was a good one. Then, starting around 2000, a few Asian American filmmakers started putting me in their movies, playing myself. And I started to think, "I can do that too. I can put myself in my own play."

I began to look at the stage documentary form, where actual quotes by real people are assembled into a theatre piece. One example of this is "The Laramie Project" by Moises Kauffman, which explored the murder of Matthew Shepard, the young gay man in Wyoming. But I was also influenced by mockumentaries, like "This Is Spinal Tap," about a fake heavy metal band, or Woody Allen's movie "Zelig."

I decided to create a stage mockumentary which would also poke some fun at the excesses of multiculturalism and identity politics, movements with which I've been so identified over the length of my career.

So "Yellow Face" is about an Asian American playwright named DHH who wrote a play called "M. Butterfly." I wanted to begin and end the play with two fairly public incidents from my real life: first, the "yellow face" protest against "Miss Saigon." When the Broadway musical "Miss Saigon" came to NY in 1990, it was announced that the Welsh actor Jonathan Pryce would play the lead role of a Eurasian pimp. Many Asian Americans felt that the role should go to an Asian actor, that the choice of Pryce constituted "yellow face" casting. I was part of that protest, which became a big culture wars incident in America for about two weeks, and was generally roundly denounced by mainstream America at large.

In this scene from “Yellow Face,” it’s about a year after the “Miss Saigon” protests – Jonathan Pryce has gone on to play the role on Broadway, and the show has become a big hit. DHH speaks with his father, HYH, a banker who originally immigrated to the States from Shanghai. Here are Mike Brookes as my father, and Eric Ng as, well, me.

Excerpt #1

The second real-life event in Yellow Face are the charges that were brought in the late-1990’s against my Father, who was accused by the New York Times and others in a front-page article of laundering money for China. At the time, the U.S. was going through a wave of anxiety about growing Chinese power – leading to accusations that the Chinese had illegally acquired U.S. missile technology, as well as the arrest of Wen Ho Lee, a Chinese American nuclear scientist accused of spying for China. Wen Ho Lee spent nine months in solitary confinement before the charges against him were eventually dropped.

Over the course of the play, we’ve seen how DHH accepts his father’s invitation to sit on the board of his Father’s bank – Far East National – basically to make some extra money after many flop plays. Now, in the wake of the NY Times article raising suspicions about the bank, DHH – played here by Eric Ng – gets a phone call from the same journalist who wrote that article, played by Holly Aston.

Excerpt #2

“Yellow Face” was a way for me to sum up the last twenty years of the multicultural movement in America, as well as America’s shifting relations with China and Asian Americans. The play also acknowledges the complexity of minority relationships within China itself, as one of the characters ends up traveling to Guizhou to hear the music of the Dong Zu, which also inspired me as I’ve learned that multiculturalism too is not unique to the West.

As China continues to grow in wealth and influence, power will continue to shift, tensions to intensify. That’s why, besides the Bruce Lee project, I’m currently writing a play about American businessmen trying to make a deal with a provincial government in contemporary China.

Nowadays, I believe internationalism is the new multiculturalism. That it’s no longer sufficient to examine only the relationships between different groups within American borders, but we must look further, at how different groups relate in the world at large. In this respect, I certainly believe the election of our new President was a step in the right direction.

As for questions of identity – what does it mean to be Chinese? – I now realize that there’s no one answer, any more than there’s only one answer to the question, what does it mean to be American? There are Hong Kong Chinese, and Singaporean Chinese, and

Amsterdam Chinese and Alabama Chinese. There are Shanghai Chinese and Guizhou Chinese and Dong Zu and Mongols and Manchus. There are multiracial Chinese and adopted Chinese and many Chinese who don't think of themselves as Chinese. I myself was once one of those.

As the world grows smaller, it also grows more complex. Which is just fine with me as a writer. Because I now feel that the riddle of identity is not one meant to ever be definitively answered. If I get to the point where I can say, "I know absolutely now who I am," I might as well shuffle off this mortal coil, because then I will know everything. Rather, it is by asking the question "Who am I?" again and again at various points in our lives, that we affirm our common humanity, and give meaning to our lives.