

In the Director's Chair

A theater director shares her creative process in developing her new play, "Red Light Winter"

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The director of last spring's theatre production of "Ching Chong Chinaman" is back: Desdemona Chiang just directed the inaugural production "Red Light Winter" for Azeotrope, a new theatre company that she co-founded with actor and writer Richard Nguyen Sloniker.

Chiang helps bring to life this new company with a sense of concern about the state of contemporary theatre. "My goal is to reinvigorate the general public's interest in the theatre," she says.

"I guess I'm trying to figure out a way to convince the population-at-large that theatre isn't boring. That theatre isn't church. That it can be something that is interesting, affecting, and relevant."

By going beyond directing theatre into the realm of co-producing, Chiang is confronting a primary challenge of 21st-century theatre: audience development.

"I think we're living in a really fascinating time now—this era of YouTube and web2.0 and FaceBook—where this ability to self-broadcast has turned everyone into both performer and audience," Chiang says. "And I think, increasingly, we're finding that people would rather make their own work than go see someone else's."

The end result, she says: "We are essentially our own audience." And unseen work dies.

To combat this sense of separation, Chiang's focus is on community, as an antidote to the isolation that communications technologies can foster.

"I think the art scene in Seattle is very encouraging this way—there is a vibrant fringe community, and a strong contingent of young artists who are interdisciplinary in theatre and art and dance, so that it fosters an atmosphere of creativity in general." That includes her new partner in Azeotrope, Sloniker.

Although both Chiang and Sloniker hold undergraduate degrees in biology, Chiang

suggests that her theatre career came naturally, the result of an arts requirement in college. "I suppose with a name like Desdemona, it's a bit inevitable."

"As with most people in theatre, I first began working in the field as an actor," Chiang says. "And even though I managed to get cast in university productions and community shows in my early 20's, I could never 'be in the moment' the way other actors could, and it always felt fake to me when I did it."

Instead, she found herself drawn to watching the designers during tech rehearsal and, later, experimenting with directing. "And I chose theatre as a career path because I came to realize that I liked working on plays way more than I liked biochemistry or dissecting human bodies."

This connection between biology and theatre continues to resonate in Chiang's work. "I try to tap into some element of life and death," she says, in every play she directs, "to find that moment of transcendence."

That was particularly true of her recent MFA thesis production at the University of Washington in February, 2009, when she directed "Big Love" by Charles Mee.

"I have loved this play since the day I read it back in 2001, the year that 9/11 happened, a day of tremendous volatility and terror—and perhaps the most horrific historical event of my generation," Chiang recalls. "It was also the same year that I met the man who is now my husband."

"The play came into my life when I was experiencing the possibility of love at a time when the world was dangerous and unsafe," Chiang says, "and the play itself resonated very deeply with my own personal experience at the time."

"So, it was serendipitous," she says, "that, eight years later, I had the opportunity to direct the play in the same year that I was to be married, 2009, and have this production also be the culmination of my three years of graduate school training."

Chiang also feels the pull of the tension between life and death in the plays of Shakespeare and the Greeks. "Aside from the fact that these plays are deeply poetic in language and rooted in history and culture, these plays are also about King and Queens, Gods and Monsters," she says.

"I like to call them vertical plays—plays that deal with ideas that are beyond the earthly realm, ideas that connect heaven to earth to the underworld," Chiang

explains. "And I love them because they are epic—that they have the power to transform me, elevate me, terrify me."

Chiang's process begins with research. "If I have the great fortune of speaking with a playwright, I will always ask him/her what inspired the play," she says. "I also do a lot of dramaturgy. A lot. I look up every word I don't know and every reference I don't understand."

Beyond that, Chiang says, "I treat everyone on my creative team like a dramaturg. Everyone. I treat my assistant director, stage manager, and especially all my designers like dramaturgs," placing them all in the role of that "second pair of eyes" in the rehearsal room that, in addition to providing contextual and conceptual research, is another one of the key functions of a dramaturg.

Chiang explains this strategy: "It makes the team accountable and responsible for the work. I ask them for help when I can't figure out a moment, I ask them to come to run-throughs to give me notes, and yes, oftentimes I ask them to give me notes on the directing, the staging, the acting—the things that are typically considered outside their jurisdiction—because I think they have value as an informed audience member, and if we've had the right conversations early on, they should know the play as well as I do, and provide a good sounding board for whether or not the play is achieving what I'm intending."

Those intentions are based on a studied distillation of each play's core. "When I approach a piece—regardless of style or genre—the first thing I do is look for and identify the central idea of the play—the thing that drives or motivates the actions inside it," Chiang says. "It's the center from which all other aspects radiate, like the spokes on a wheel."

Those spokes then take shape in the rehearsal room. "When I stage a play with actors on their feet, I always keep in my mind elements of composition, rhythm, and tension," Chiang says. "I suppose you'd call it working 'outside-in.'"

"I look for moments of delight and surprise whenever possible, with an aim for variety. I try to create events on stage that are viscerally affecting and visually dynamic," she says.

"And while I think that it's important to know the psychology of a character or a moment, I'm more inclined to see how that is manifested in the physical world of

the play." Chiang asks questions including: "How are the bodies in space arranged and moving in space to convey information about relationship and psychology? What are the people doing, physically? I'm interested in techniques of movement and gesture as a means of telling story."

Even in the rehearsal process, the process of life and death remains in full operation. Influenced by the training of UW Directing faculty Jon Jory, Chiang often consigns ideas to the graveyard as easily as she generates them.

"Jon always told me that 'ideas are cheap,'" she says. "And that's something I've always carried with me over the years."

She explains: "I believe in making decisions quickly. I believe in changing my mind later, and changing it frequently. I believe in the need to see something before I decide on it. Look at it. I believe that you can't be precious about your choices. And that it's not about you."

The sense of something larger than herself inspires Chiang's directorial process. "I think having some level of humility as a director keeps you honest," she says. "I make it my goal to serve the play, serve the work, and in the end, enable the team to make something will be greater than the sum of everyone involved. That's when it's the most gratifying."

But for Chiang, bringing a play to life onstage also entails a little sense of creative death. "Opening night is always bittersweet," she says. "It's like you spent all this time creating this little theatre baby, and now it's finally born, and you don't get to stick around to see it learn to walk and talk."

Unless you remain a member of your own audience and help keep the work alive.