

# Ching Chong Chinaman

**A playwright delves deep into issues of slavery and worker exploitation in a satirical new work.**

**By Roxanne Ray**

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From senior college thesis to Northwest premiere production, "Ching Chong Chinaman" continues to reach new audiences.

Playwright Lauren Yee emphasizes the importance of a long life for a new play. "One of the most crucial things is just to keep on moving," Yee says, and to push each play forward to its next phase.

"I once heard that it takes ten years to gain traction in a playwriting career and I actually agree with that," Yee says. "Even if you get good fast, you still need to develop relationships with theaters, artistic directors, other artists. Being a playwright is not just about writing a good play; it's about finding a good home for your work and finding good collaborators, too."

Yee has tried to do just that. She has worked repeatedly with local director Desdemona Chiang, who has directed "Chinaman" before and will be staging this latest production for SIS Productions.

"I keep working with Desdemona again and again, and I don't think that it's necessarily a coincidence," Yee says. "We're both at early stages in our professional careers, and I really identify with how intelligently and practically she can break a story down to the most essential and clearest components."

Yee had also met SIS Productions artistic director Kathy Hsieh and other SIS members at the National Asian American Theatre conference in 2008. They were able to catch a reading of the play there, Yee says.

Yee's work focuses heavily on issues of work, from paid employment to exploitation, servitude, and slavery, and "Chinaman" is aligned with these interests.

"I'm really interested in power and how it affects our relation to one another," Yee says. "Also, I love the idea that where you come from can define or work in conflict with who you are and what you aspire for in life."

Yee found inspiration for "Chinaman" in a real event. "The idea for the play originated from a New York Times article on Chinese gold farmers," she says.

"The article talked about the trend of American gamers hiring people from developing countries to literally play the online game World of Warcraft for them, completing less interesting, time-consuming tasks within the game for actual money."

But the original script idea that Yee gleaned from the article has undergone a number of substantial changes. "In the first draft of the play, the family was all Caucasian (but still with a Chinese indentured servant)," Yee says.

But her playwriting professors at University of California, San Diego, challenged some of her initial ideas. "My advisor on the project, Donald Margulies, asked me if the family might be Asian American and I immediately said, 'No, absolutely not.'"

"I didn't want to write yet another 'Asian American' play that wouldn't get done, so I tried to be staunch on that point," Yee says. "But after a while, I began to think it over, and the switch to a clueless Asian American family seemed to make so much more sense."

Yee looks forward to continuing her playwriting on issues of labor and heritage.

"I'm currently finishing up 'Samsara,' a new play on a childless American couple and their hired Indian surrogate." As Yee describes it, the play "delves into a fantastical world of expectations, fantasies, and motherhood."

In addition, the Kennedy Center has commissioned Yee to propose treatments for its Heritage Project. She says, "I now need to come up with ideas for potential plays for young audiences," and hopes to find inspiration in literature that she herself loved as a young child.

Plus, with an eye toward finishing her MFA studies at University of California, San Diego, via the UCSD Baldwin New Play Festival, Yee loops her playwriting efforts back to higher education.

"Ching Chong Chinaman" runs March 26 –April 24, at the Richard Hugo House Theatre, 1634 Eleventh Avenue, Seattle.