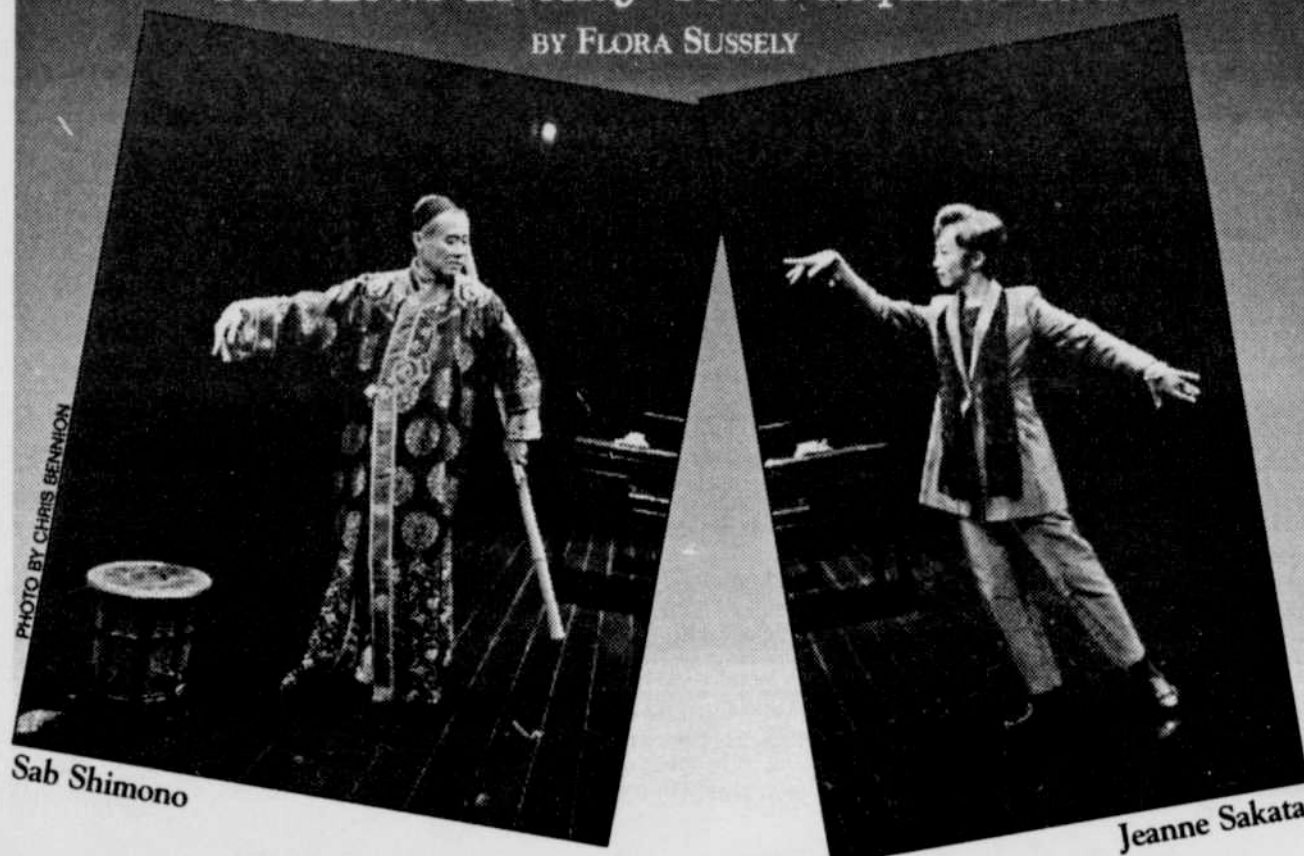


THEATER

Seeing Red

Politics and culture are complicated, necessary bedfellows in Chay Yew's exquisite *Red*

BY FLORA SUSSELY



Sab Shimono

Jeanne Sakata

In every political revolution, the intellectuals and artists always pay the highest price. And so it is that culture and history are raped. That is what *Red*, now playing at Portland Center Stage, is about.

Chay Yew's play is about the Chinese Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution that waged its ugly war on art and artists between 1967 and 1977. Like Milan Kundera, who writes about the Czech revolution, and Isabel Allende, whose books deal with the Chilean version, *Red* paints the picture of art twisted and destroyed, artists and intellectuals persecuted, tortured and held up as examples to discourage deviance from the New Order.

In *Red*, the story is woven through a series of flashbacks that take us by surprise at the end. It is funny at first. We follow the "Asian Barbara Cartland" on a journey to China, where she will research a Chinese opera star for a biographical novel. It is witty and sets the stage for the juxtaposition of the courage it takes to be a real artist and the fear that breeds conformity in those who have witnessed atrocities.

The cast of *Red* is marvelous. Michi Barall as Lin plays a girl from the age of 10 into adulthood. Her journey takes her from innocence to feminist anger to creative restlessness, fear and remorse, rage and elation, guilt, terror and, always, great love. Likewise, Sonya (played by Jeanne Sakata), moves from self-satisfaction to shame, grief, egoism, confusion, pain and resolve. Sakata's performance begins and ends the play; she is our host, our conscience, our cultural tour guide. She makes us laugh at how silly our concerns are and makes us aware of how great are the sacrifices of our fathers.

Hua, the Chinese opera star, is elegantly played by Sab Shimono. His is the character that symbolizes tradition, art, courage, dignity and conviction. Shimono manages to play the role of martyr without playing victim. As in the famous Chinese operas in which he sings, strength of character saves the person from disgrace, even when disgraceful circumstances surround him. The parallel is always there, stating that—like the White Hair Maiden who is raped in the opera—strength and dignity win over evil. If not physically, certainly spiritually.

Red is a profoundly spiritual and political work. As in the film *The Official Story*, in which we see an entire family come to terms with their own participation in the raping of a culture (in that case, Chile's), *Red* brings home the ugly truth that, sometimes, in order to live

to tell the story, we are forced into complicity.

In what is a rarely discussed context—the Chinese revolution—we see the same elements of Hitler's Germany and Pinochet's Chile. We also get to see that there is nothing original in evil. Indeed, evil's only tool is to crush the spirit. And that never lasts for very long.

In the end, when our three artists merge into one voice that must be spoken; when the one that is left cannot find the words, we hear: "Find it in the silence, in the cracks.... Go make history." And, with the Chekhov quote "we will live," we reach the understanding that history is truly made by the writers—not the book burners.

Red was beautifully underdirected by Lisa Peterson. There is a simplicity to the entire work. We are not looking at the spectacle of the Chinese opera. Instead we are listening to characters deal with creativity and freedom of expression. Things that, perhaps, we take for granted.

In many ways, we see and hear how women are denigrated and must fight for power. We understand the need to expand the circle of those who hold culture to their elitist standards. In *Red*, we can actually identify with the stirrings of revolution, the need for it, the fairness of it, the inevitability of making art accessible to the masses. This is the strength of this kind of play. We see how extremists can start out sounding logical. We find ourselves agreeing that classist supremacy kills artistic freedom. But we also hear the point of view of the traditionalists who want to preserve a culture that has indeed been shaped by a narrow group. That is how a work like this helps us understand how basically good people can be turned into warring factions. In an election year full of talk about morality, it is as timely as it is moving.

Red requires some thinking and a lot of listening. As an audience, our loyalties may shift philosophically, but the wonderful thing about this play is that, in the end, we understand how life can manipulate us into actions we will not control.

But we also come to terms with the opportunities life gives us to set the record straight, and "we will live."

■ *RED* is onstage at the Newmark Theatre, Portland Center for the Performing Arts, 1111 S.W. Broadway, through Nov. 21. Tickets are available at the PCPA box office and TicketMaster outlets.

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