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MY TURN

■ **Dmae Roberts**



Why Chinglish is important

David Henry Hwang isn't a household name even among Asian Americans. Few playwrights become famous, even veteran writers who have won as many awards as Hwang, including a Tony Award, an Obie, and two Pulitzer nominations.

I didn't learn about Hwang until I understudied for *M. Butterfly* at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival/Portland (the previous incarnation of Portland Center Stage) in 1992. At the time I was excited about being part of an Asian play, even as an understudy. I'd already had more than 10 years of theatre experience, but because I could pass for white (not by choice), I never had an opportunity until then to play an Asian character. It was exciting to be involved in a play that had cultural meaning and was incredibly well written.

Let's face it, not many Asians attend theatre. Part of the reason might be there are rarely any plays that feature Asian Americans or Asian content. Not many films or television shows do either. Yet there is a plethora of plays written by Asian Americans across the country — plays that will likely never be staged in Portland. Most of these works document different times in history encompassing a multitude of Asian ethnicities across the country.

Despite the huge influx of actors moving to Portland and the burgeoning of small theatres in the last five years, Asian-American theatre and roles for Asian actors here remain virtually nonexistent.

The last play in Portland with an Asian cast was *Snow Falling On Cedars* in 2010 produced by Portland Center Stage (PCS). David Henry Hwang's *Chinglish* will be the first play by an Asian-American playwright with a mostly Asian cast in a very long time. And it's the first professional production of a Hwang play in Portland since 1992. I have to say kudos to PCS for taking on *Chinglish* — one of the most challenging of Hwang's works.

Chinglish not only requires Asian actors who can speak Mandarin Chinese, but also one Caucasian actor who is fluent in the language. About a third of the play is in Mandarin and supertitles with English translations are provided to help the audience understand what is being said.

Hwang has such a strong cannon of works, it's a

shame many Asians in Portland do not know about them. Most of his plays have been based on Asian-American history and themes.

M. Butterfly remains Hwang's best-known and most-produced work. It's based on a true story of a French diplomat who had a 20-year relationship with a Chinese Opera star he believed to be female. *F.O.B.* captures the conflict between Fresh-Off-the-Boat immigrants and established Asian Americans. *The Dance and the Railroad* is about the only known labor strike by Chinese railroad workers in 1867 and features beautiful Chinese Opera movement. *Golden Child* details the lives of an early 20th-century Chinese family.

Hwang's partly autobiographical 2007 play *Yellow Face* exposes subtle conflicts about the politics of casting racially and also includes events that happened to Hwang's father, who was a banker accused of trumped-up charges in the '90s — an experience similar to those of Taiwanese-American scientist Wen Ho Lee.

With *Chinglish*, Hwang turns his focus to larger international themes, including the difficulties of language and culture. Hwang says navigating the language barrier made it natural for him to write about language conflicts and the difficulty people have in communication even when they speak the same language. The title pokes fun at the English signs Hwang encountered when on a trip to China — a "Deformed Man's Toilet" to describe a restroom for handicapped patrons, a sign in a women's restroom that read "Wash After Relief," and more.

Hwang is quick to point out that he took great pains to present mistakes English speakers make with the Chinese language. In the play he highlights a western academic magazine mistaking a call-girl ad from Shanghai for Chinese poetry and running it as its cover.

"There are still a lot of mistranslated Chinese translations in signs," says Hwang. "But in America we don't even try to be bilingual with signs. We don't even create the possibility that we will make mistakes because we're not even making the effort."

Local theatre often doesn't make enough of an effort either. Not when it comes to producing works

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