

## THEATER

# He Writes About What He Knows

Art doesn't just imitate life in David Henry Hwang's play "Yellow Face." It clones it.

The show, scheduled to open at the Public Theater on Dec. 10, focuses on a man with the initials D. H. H. who leads a protest against the casting of Jonathan Pryce as a Eurasian in the Broadway musical "Miss Saigon" in the 1990s. (If that sounds familiar it's because Mr. Hwang himself led a protest against the casting of Jonathan Pryce as a Eurasian in the Broadway musical "Miss Saigon" in the 1990s.) When D. H. H. mistakenly casts a white man as an Asian in his own play, thinking he's of mixed race, he tries to cover up the fact to preserve his reputation as an Asian-American role model. "The play is a mix of fact and fiction, in a mock stage documentary style, about a character based on me," said Mr. Hwang, 50.

The author of the plays "F.O.B." and "Golden Child," Mr. Hwang is probably best remembered for his gender-bending 1988 Broadway romance, "M. Butterfly," which won the Tony for best play. Since then he has been a go-to Broadway musical book writer: he wrote the books for "Tarzan" and (with Linda Woolverton and Robert Falls) "Aida," as well as a new book for the 2002 revival of the Rodgers and Hammerstein musical "Flower Drum Song." Mr. Hwang spoke with Erik Piepenburg about the fluidity of race, the legacy of "M. Butterfly" and the meaning of his latest work. An audio slide show narrated by Mr. Hwang is available at [nytimes.com/theater](http://nytimes.com/theater).

## QUESTIONS OF IDENTITY

I think I've been struggling since the "Miss Saigon" incident back in 1990 to



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make sense of, how do you talk about the nuances of race, both the desire to get past race and the awareness that racism still exists? How do you balance those two? I found that by creating a character that I actually gave my name to, in a strange way it liberated me to make him a character. Many times with autobiographical characters in plays, it's very difficult to have them be fully fleshed out, even someone like Tom in "The Glass Menagerie." It's kind of counterintuitive, but by naming him after myself he became more of a character.

## DEFINING RACE

I think this play is a lot about what does race mean. To what extent do we perform race, either onstage or in life?

For instance, the fact that the D. H. H. character in this play mistakes a white man for being part Asian. That's actually a perfectly understandable mistake, because you can't necessarily tell by looking anymore.

You can't tell by the last name. You aren't allowed to ask at auditions, legally, a person's race. So what does race really start to mean when you add all that up?

## 'M. BUTTERFLY'

The thing that's changed in the last 20 years, the sort of transgressive aspects of the story, the way in which it was bold and striking and naughty, as it were, that's no longer true. But it does allow one to focus more on what the play was trying to stay, removing that more sensationalistic aspect. Given the fact that we are sort of at the moment in the midst of what could be considered an "M. Butterfly" war — that is, a war where we thought they were going to love us — it seems still quite relevant. We're also of course dealing with the shifting power balance of East and West. That issue hasn't gone away over the last 20 years.

## 'YELLOW FACE'

The play gets into a series of what I consider to be Chinese-American political scandals that took place in the late 1990s, involving the "donorgate" case and Wen Ho Lee, which The New York Times played a part in. And also my own father was — there was a front-page article about him in The New York Times in the late '90s that reported on certain allegations that he was laundering money for China.

My theory is that the country was gearing up to make China its next big enemy, which was then distracted by 9/11 and the Middle East became our enemy. But I still feel like this is an issue that's going to come back in the 21st century as competition between the U.S. and China continues to intensify, and that will again have an impact on Chinese-Americans.

David Henry Hwang on the set of his play "Yellow Face" at the Public Theater.