



BY SEAN O'LEARY

May Adrales: STRANGER IN A FAMILIAR LAND

You could argue that it all started with Homer transporting the always-beset Odysseus from one strange and scary place to another. And Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* emphatically established it as a literary genre. Then, Robert Heinlein's 1961 novel, *Stranger in a Strange Land*, gave the genre a name. So that by the time Charlton Heston donned a loincloth in "Planet of The Apes" and made "the stranger in a strange land" a pop-culture phenomenon, we were accustomed to bonding with unfortunate outsiders who struggle to adapt to alien cultures where convention as they or as we know it is turned on its head.

And why do authors and playwrights employ the now-familiar "stranger in a strange land" trope? Sometimes to promote visions of a better life and a better society, sometimes to warn us against unforeseen dangers to ourselves or the environment, often to expose society's absurdities and hypocrisies, and sometimes just to entertain ("Toto, I have a feeling we're not in Kansas anymore.") But, regardless of their literary goals, authors do it because they understand that our tendency to identify with helpless strangers is spontaneous and profound and that it causes us, along with our endangered heroes, to sharpen our senses, become more alert, and experience more intensely the worlds into which they plunge us.

It's that last quality—intense sensation—upon which playwright Chisa Hutchinson seizes in her new play, "The Wedding Gift," in which she uses a stranger in a strange land—a really strange land—to help us

empathically grasp the experience of being oppressed by a society that regards you as not just lesser, but as an object to be employed or dismissed on a whim; to be treated as sensate, but not altogether human; to occasionally be the object of sympathy, but of a mostly condescending kind... in short, to experience a new world as African-Americans often experience this world and our society today.

Any play dealing with issues of race in this time and place enters a fraught territory where what should be a vicarious theatrical experience can, if not handled deftly, deteriorate into polemic. The challenge facing the cast and crew of "The Wedding Gift" is to deliver Chisa Hutchinson's play in a way that immerses us not in message, but in visceral sensation. And the responsibility for managing that high-wire act falls primarily on the play's director, May Adrales.

May Adrales comes to us from the borderlands of our social and cultural divide. Her parents immigrated to this country from the Philippines and settled in southwest Virginia in the Appalachian foothills, where racial and cultural diversity begin to recede into a sea of whiteness. Her parents are professionals—her father a surgeon and her mother a nurse—so she enjoyed an economically comfortable childhood. At the same time, as a child of immigrants whose Asian heritage is evident in her features, Adrales was aware of and was occasionally reminded of her status as an outsider.

From that milieu emerged a young woman determined to "be the change you wish to see in the ►

world.” After a flirtation with becoming a lawyer and an abortive stint as a staffer at The Council on Foreign Relations in New York City, Adrales succumbed to a passion at which she had been dabbling all along.

Introduced to theater while in high school, Adrales continued to exercise her nascent interest by spending evenings and weekends writing and directing what she now describes as “very political plays” and “feminist diatribes”—just the sort of thing that will earn you a nasty comeuppance once a reviewer deigns to pay attention to what you’re doing. And that’s just what Adrales got. Fortunately for her, the reviewer also recognized that, while her writing was a tad tendentious, her skill at directing was evident. And Adrales was humble enough to realize the reviewer might have a point.

So, the advocate for social justice who at that point had no formal theatrical training decided to dedicate herself to pursuing a career in directing. And that change in direction enabled her to discover something about theater, about audiences and about herself—we’re all suckers for a great story.

Any actor or wannabe actor who has ever trod the boards discovered with her first step on stage that the imperative is to connect emotionally with the other characters and with the audience because, without their empathic support, you’re alone, naked, and in irredeemable misery. And when that fear burns in your gut, peripheral concerns about the play’s message, its insights into the human condition, in fact any abstract consideration whatever, completely evaporates. It’s all about human beings caring with and for each other in the moment... or it’s nothing.

For some activists who try to make the transition to artist, that leap is impossible. It takes them too far from their real passion, it may feel like an abandonment of the cause, or it’s simply too frightening a place to go. But, for those who do make the leap, a revelation awaits them. In telling stories, the kinds of stories over which human beings bond, insight and even ideology just emanate and, in a few triumphant instances, they are internalized by audiences who may not have the slightest idea they’ve been infused with a new or expanded outlook.

Generations of people have gone around humming “Wouldn’t it Be Lovely” and “On The Street Where You Live” from “My Fair Lady,” utterly unaware they’ve

just seen and, more importantly, assimilated a commentary that savages class-dominated society and insists on the intrinsic nobility of us all. Even George Bernard Shaw, whose play “Pygmalion” was the basis for “My Fair Lady,” might have winced at what some people have derided as a cheesy bowdlerization of his work. But, my guess is that he would have recognized that while the sugar coating of “My Fair Lady” makes the pill go down more easily, it doesn’t diminish the way in which it’s digested. It just makes the play and its message accessible to a far wider audience.

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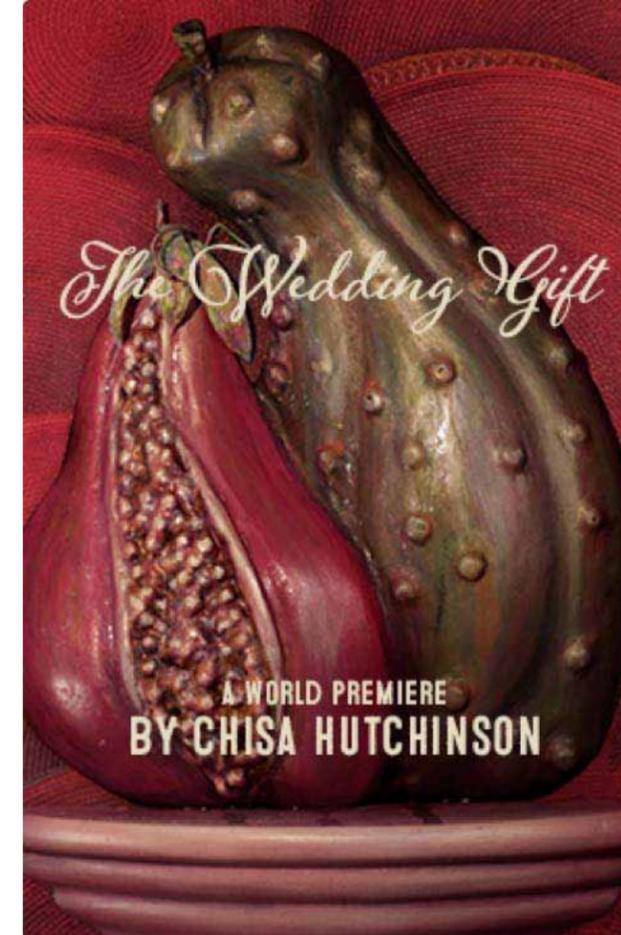
But, while audiences may be oblivious to the trick being played upon them, the artists who create the trick cannot be oblivious. So, in a play like “The Wedding Gift” that endeavors to empathically bridge the gap between the lived experiences of two groups of people who share the same society while encountering it from radically different points on the spectrum, it’s appropriate and maybe even necessary that we have a director from the borderlands like May Adrales—one who is not an immigrant, but is the daughter of immigrants; one who is not African-American, but neither is she Caucasian; one whose family was not impoverished, but neither were they rich; and most importantly one for whom both sides in America’s most searing and entrenched divide are emotionally and intellectually accessible.

Those experiences and the resulting sensibilities probably account for why May Adrales often finds herself directing “stranger in a strange land” types of plays in New York and in regional theaters nationwide. They include Katori Hall’s “Whaddabloodclot!!!” at

the Williamstown Theater Festival, David Henry Hwang’s “Chinglish” at Portland Center Stage and Syracuse Stage, Kimber Lee’s “Tokyo Fish Story” at the Old Globe and at the Manhattan Theater Club, Lauren Yee’s “Ching Chong Chinaman” at Pan Asian Rep, and most recently Qui Nguyen’s “Vietgone” at South Coast Rep and the Oregon Shakespeare Festival, which won the 2015 Harold and Mimi Steinberg/American Theatre Critics Association New Play Award.

It’s an astonishing body of work that has brought May Adrales innumerable awards, including the Stage Directors and Choreographers Foundation’s inaugural Denham Fellowship and the Paul Green Emerging Directing award.

In short, May Adrales is highly esteemed and in even higher demand, which is testimony not just to the popularity of her work, but also to its importance for us as individuals and as a society. So, in the end, by telling stories, May Adrales has become the social activist she always intended to be. [fluent](#)



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