

DO YOU EVER REALLY KNOW THE PERSON YOU LOVE?

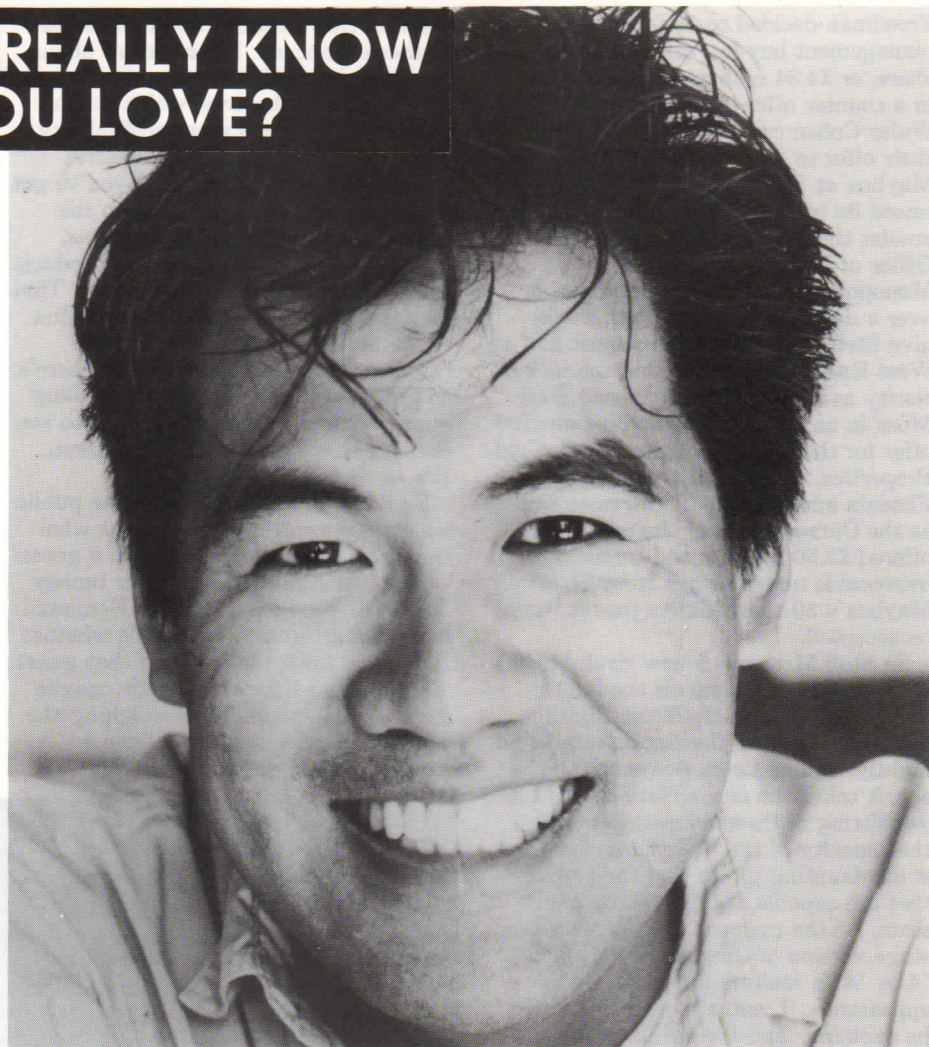
David Henry Hwang talks to Gerard Raymond in New York about his new play, *M Butterfly*, opening in April at the Shaftesbury

Playwright David Henry Hwang is about to make his West End debut with *M Butterfly*, which opens at the Shaftesbury on April 25. 'The only thing I worry about,' the 32-year old Chinese-American author says, 'is that the success of the play in New York makes us a larger target, so to speak, in London. I think I prefer the idea of sneaking in, but we won't be able to do that now.'

M Butterfly, which marked Hwang's Broadway debut last March, is an unqualified success in New York, having won the Tony, New York's top theatre award, for Best Play of 1988. The inspiration for it came from a sensational news item Hwang read in the *New York Times* in May, 1986. The report stated that Bernard Boursicot, a former French diplomat, along with his lover Shi Peipu, a star of the Beijing Opera, had been sentenced by a French court for spying for China. Their affair had lasted 20 years, during which period Shi presented the diplomat with 'their' child. During the trial, it was revealed that Shi was in fact a man and Boursicot claimed that he was unaware of the true gender of his lover. In the play, the diplomat is called Rene Gallimard and his lover, Song Liling.

'I wasn't interested in writing a docudrama', says Hwang who was immediately attracted to the story. 'I think the thing that drew me to it was that while the facts were completely preposterous and unbelievable, it made a certain sense to me. I wanted to explore why this Chinese guy was able to pull off this deception and why it was that I understood what he was doing. It was only after I had written the play that I discovered it was really about power, all the isms: racism, imperialism, sexism; and their connection to each other. That they are manifestations of the same impulse, which is to dehumanise the other person, thereby raising oneself up in the process.'

Hwang felt that the concept of Puccini's *Madama Butterfly*, which he 'only knew as a cultural stereotype', was the perfect framework for his play. 'When I was in college,' he recalls, 'you would say 'Oh, she's pulling a butterfly' which means that someone was doing a submissive oriental thing. I liked the idea that you could de-



David Henry Hwang whose play *M Butterfly* has just won a Tony Award in New York and opens in London in April with Anthony Hopkins starring

construct *Madama Butterfly* in a sense, or create a revisionist *Butterfly*.' Also integral to the structure of *M Butterfly* are elements of the Peking Opera which contribute to the heightened theatricality of the work. Peking Opera has figured prominently in Hwang's earlier plays as well.

In *FOB (Fresh off the Boat)*, his first play produced in New York (1980), Hwang made use of stylized Peking Opera techniques to introduce a traditional Chinese god and goddess into a naturalistic story of an immigrant's arrival in California. The presence of John (*The Last Emperor*) Lone, an actor who trained in the Peking Opera as a child, was instrumental in this choice. 'Having hit upon that,' Hwang explains, 'I decided in *The Dance and the Railroad* (the play which followed in 1981), consciously to write something which would be a fusion between Eastern and Western theatre'. The play was specifically written for Lone and another Peking opera trained actor, Tzi Ma. In September of '87, *The Dance and the Railroad* was presented in a double bill entitled *Broken Promises* at London's Soho Poly, marking Hwang's British theatre debut.

Hwang says he returned to Peking Opera techniques in *M Butterfly* not only because the story dictated the milieu but also because the notion of men playing women, something more clearly articulated in Japanese Kabuki, fascinated him. 'This tradition of female impersonation, the theory of onnagata in the Kabuki, is that only a man can play a woman. The inherently sexist concept is that a woman is merely a woman, but a man can be the idealization of a woman. This seemed to be the psychological axis on which Gallimard's self delusion founders.' As Gallimard poignantly expresses it in the play, 'I am a man who loved a woman created by a man'.

Hwang feels that theatre can accomplish a 'sense of transcendental spiritually' and strives toward this in all his work. 'I think that in *M Butterfly*, dealing with a love that is literally unbelievable from a naturalistic standpoint, the heightened reality level of the opera helps the audience to suspend their disbelief'.

Hwang's use of language is also non-realistic. The characters, which include French, Chinese, Germans and Danes, all speak in a contemporary American idiom. 'I am interested in cutting

through what I presume to be all the crap about the way people write about characters from the East. I mean when these people are written about its always in this inscrutable poetic fashion. So, if anything, my tendency is to go to the other extreme and make it so slangy and so contemporary that it is jarring. I find that challenging.'

The British production of *M Butterfly* poses an interesting question in this regard. 'We are dealing, at the moment, with the question of whether they speak American or British English. Each choice has its advantages and disadvantages. The thing is, I like the American slang and at the same time I like everybody speaking in the local patois and these two may not be reconcilable, but then again they may not. It's a kind of a tricky question which is only going to be resolved once we see it in front of a preview audience.'

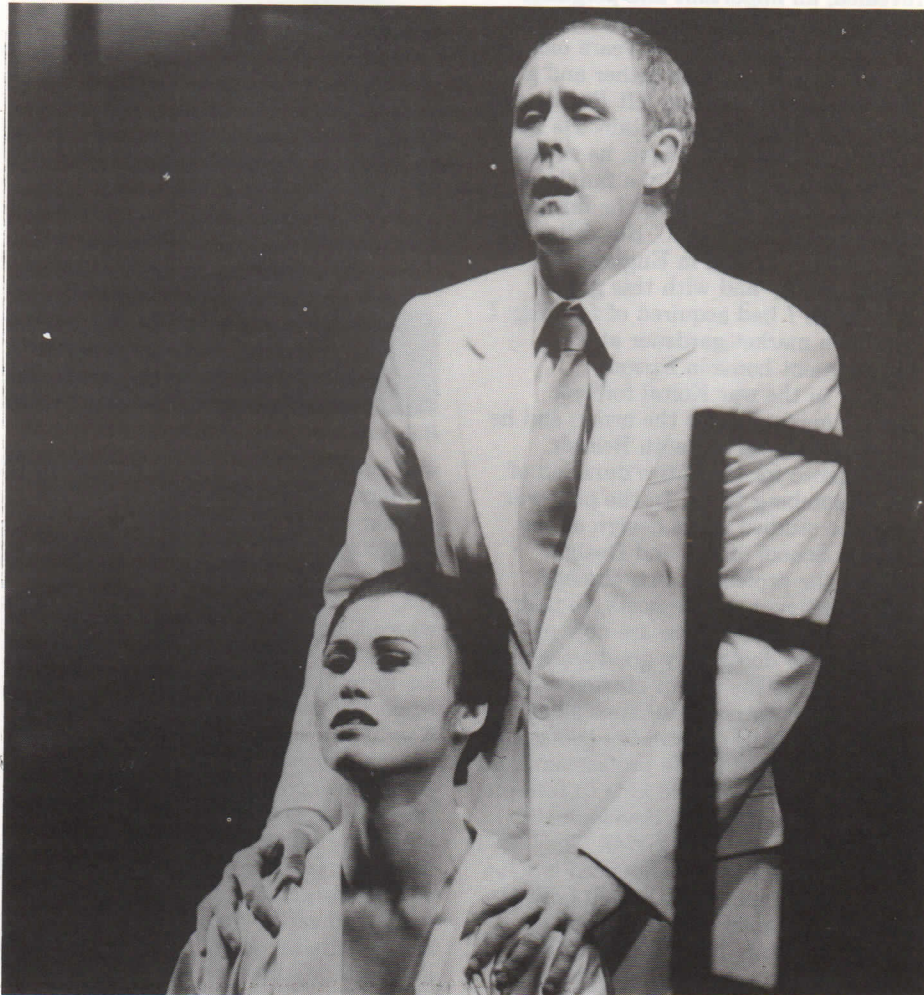
M Butterfly represents a certain shift in the focus of David Henry Hwang's work. After his early plays on the Chinese-American experience, he wrote a fantasy around the Japanese Nobel Prize-winning novelist, Yasunari Kawabata's, *The House of the Sleeping Beauties* in 1983. This play formed the second half of the *Broken Promises* double-bill with *The Dance and the Railroad* directed by Tony Craven at the Soho Poly two years ago. His next play, *Rich Relations*, was produced in New York in 1986 and featured no Asian characters at all. It was very unfavourably received, but Hwang says it paved the way for him to write from a different point of view.

'When I first started working', Hwang explains, 'I was very interested in Chinese-Americanism and my own background. I seem to have worked through a certain of those concerns in my work and my life. I find that a lot of the things that concerned me in these Chinese-American issues, when put on a larger scale, become issues about imperialism and colonialism and the relationship between politics and love. I imagine that will continue to interest me for a while because I don't think I have quite figured all that out yet.'

In July last year, Hwang's *1,000 Airplanes on the Roof*, a 90 minute monologue about a man who is abducted by aliens, received its world

premiere at a hangar in the Vienna International Airport. Since then the experimental theatre-piece, written in collaboration with composer Philip Glass and designer Jerome Sirlin, has travelled through Europe and the United States. Hwang is scheduled to write the libretto for *The Voyage*, an opera by Glass about Columbus' discovery of America, which has been

play has had on audiences in New York took him by surprise. 'I had hoped that the show would do well, perhaps make back its investment and expenses, but the degree to which it has been accepted by the public and the way it has permeated the public consciousness is something that I had not really anticipated.' He speculates that the play has tapped into the 'fear that men



John Lithgow and B D Wong in the original Broadway production. Photo: Joan Marcus

commissioned by the New York Metropolitan Opera for their 1992 season. Hwang is working on a screenplay which he is slated to direct in the near future. He has also been researching a new play which he hopes to write when his is not attending rehearsals of *M Butterfly* in England.

Hwang confesses that the impact his

and women are feeling about each other' in this age. 'I think that our play deals with that fear in terms of the question, do you ever really know the person you are in love with? We are also dealing with the basic fear and confusion that people have about the shifting relationship between East and West.'

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