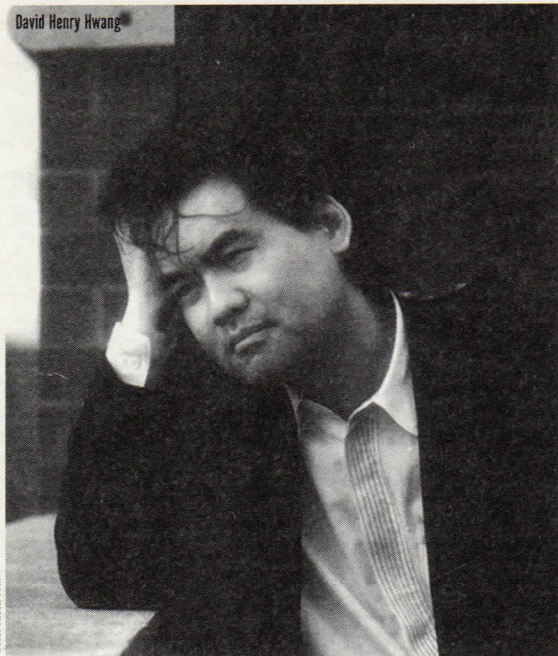


David Henry Hwang

Photo: Jason Han



**D**avid Henry Hwang was eleven years old when he started writing down his family's history. While he was growing up in Southern California in the late '60s, his Chinese-born maternal grandmother would tell him stories about one of their ancestors, who converted to Christianity. The young writer compiled those stories into a "novel." Decades later, that 90-page juvenile effort has provided the source material for a new play, *Golden Child*. And coming back to this subject matter has helped the playwright to a new understanding of his past.

Hwang's return to his roots is paralleled by a homecoming of another sort: *Golden Child* is having its world premiere at The Public Theater, the institution where the playwright launched his career in

# FULL CIRCLE

**16 YEARS** AFTER HIS CAREER WAS LAUNCHED AT THE PUBLIC THEATER, DAVID HENRY HWANG RETURNS WITH A NEW PLAY ON AN ANCIENT THEME: LEARNING TO LIVE WITH PERSONAL HISTORY. GERARD RAYMOND MEETS ONE OF THE COUNTRY'S LEADING PLAYWRIGHTS.

1980. "There are a number of playwrights — David Hwang and Sam Shepard among them," says Public Theater Producer George C. Wolfe, "who had success early on in their careers at The Public and then, for any number of reasons, moved on. So it is particularly gratifying with Sam's play, *Simpatico*, and with *Golden Child*, that these writers have come home to The Public."

Hwang is equally pleased to be back on Lafayette Street. "There is some satisfaction about coming full circle back to The Public," says Hwang, as we sit talking in his Upper West Side apartment. "I feel like I've been through a lot of adventures in the intervening time."

Hwang's Public Theater debut came when he was 20 years old and still a senior at Stanford University. Public founder Joseph Papp had seen a workshop production of Hwang's *FOB* (*Fresh off the Boat*), a comedy about a young Chinese immigrant attempting to fit into Los Angeles culture, and was so struck by the play's surreal humor and originality that he gave it a full production in the 1979-80 season. The play earned rave reviews and an Obie Award, and Hwang, who had previously considered a career in music, found his path permanently rerouted. The whole experience, he says, "was way beyond my expectations."

Papp recalled his impressions of Hwang in an interview he gave nearly a decade after the New York premiere of *FOB*: "David was looking for his past. That was very refreshing for me, because usually it's lost into the American culture — or nobody can articulate it properly." Indeed Hwang wrote out of a sense of disconnection from his personal history: his father, a successful banker from Shanghai, turned his back on his roots after he came to the U.S. in 1948. "If my father had been extremely traditional, I'm sure I would be terribly assimilated," Hwang says. "In order to claim my own independence or identity — whatever — it was necessary for me to demonize the very strong influences I grew up with." Hwang vented his frustration with his Christian fundamentalist upbringing in the 1981 absurdist farce *Family Devotions*.

*Golden Child* finds Hwang revisiting similar themes, but with an outlook

clearly deepened by time and experience. As the play opens, Andrew, an Asian-American man in his late 30s, meets the ghost of his recently deceased grandmother, Ahn. The story then shifts to 1920s China to recount the tale of Tieng-Bin, Ahn's father and Andrew's great-grandfather, who is played by the same actor as plays Andrew. Tieng-Bin's decision to convert to Christianity sets off a power struggle among his three wives and alters the life of the ten-year-old Ahn (the "golden child" of the title).

Ahn is clearly a literary stand-in for Hwang's own story-telling grandmother, who still lives in California.

"I think that in some sense *Golden Child* allows me to reconcile myself with my family's religious history. This play is an attempt to reinterpret my ancestors' impulses in terms that I can relate to, now that I'm middle-aged", says the playwright (who's just turned 39.) In his youth Hwang used to chafe at his grandmoth-

**O**ld stories, like scripture, like religion, like literature in some sense, only exist and are important as long as they're interacting with people who are alive.

er's insistence that, because their ancestor had been converted to the Christian faith, the lives of all his descendents were also dedicated to the same Christian God. Now he smiles and says, "This is basically ancestor worship in Christian drag."

Since his last appearance at The Public (*Sound and Beauty*, in 1983), Hwang made a spectacular Broadway debut in 1988 with *M. Butterfly*. This thrilling drama of politics, gender, and East/West culture clashes was inspired by a bizarre news item in *The New York Times* about a French diplomat who lived through twenty years of marriage with a Chinese opera singer without realizing his spouse was a man. Post-*Butterfly*,

Hwang collaborated on two operas with Philip Glass and worked on several movie projects. His next full-length play, a farce called *Face Value*, written as a response to the *Miss Saigon* casting controversy, closed prematurely before its scheduled Broadway run.

**A** baby crying in the room upstairs pulls us back to the present day. It's Hwang's six-month old son Noah. Hwang looks up, distracted for a moment, but the child's mother, Kathryn, pacifies the infant. I ask if the writing of *Golden Child* has anything to do with becoming a parent. "When I first started writing the play, my wife wasn't pregnant, but we were talking about starting a family. Now, as I work more on the play, it's taken on more of the viewpoint of putting your heritage or your family history in some sort of perspective, and finding a way to own it as a prerequisite for raising a child," he says.

In *Golden Child*, Tieng-Bin's Western ways are not without their beneficial effects; he subverts, for example, the ancient custom of binding women's feet. "For Tieng-Bin, Christianity is much more complex than representing some kind of assimilation of the white God. It becomes an ideology (just like Marxism, which was also imported from the West) that allows him to find a framework for going forward in social history."

In the play, Tieng-Bin's three wives each have their own way of responding to their husband's embrace of

Christianity. Hwang says he was particularly interested in debunking the popular notion of Chinese women as victims of oppressive situations (he cites the movies *Raise the Red Lantern* and *The Joy Luck Club* as examples of this stereotype). "Yes, 19th- and early-20th-century Chinese society was horribly misogynist and terrible to women, but that doesn't preclude these women from saying, 'O.K., these are the rules of the game, and I'm going to play it as best I can.'" Hwang points out that with this play, for the first time in his work, there are more than two fully fleshed-out characters. "I was trying to stake out a different territory for myself.

This play is more three-dimensional and emotional, and, I hope, more about people rather than ideas."

**T**here is a sound again from upstairs and this time Hwang politely suggests that it's time to end our conversation;

he can't help worrying

about why the baby was crying earlier. I have a final question: what will Hwang tell Noah about his ancestors? "I think one of the things that the play is trying to say is that the old stories, like scripture, like religion, like literature in some sense, only exist and are important as long as they're interacting with people who are alive. All that you can really do for a child is tell the story as best you can. If they choose, they'll find a way to reinterpret and rewrite it." **P**

*Gerard Raymond writes on the theater for Harper's Bazaar, Out magazine, the Village Voice, and TheaterWeek.*



Young David Henry Hwang and his grandmother.