

TRYING
TO FIND
CHINATOWN
(1996)

Production History

Trying to Find Chinatown received its premiere at the Actors Theatre of Louisville (Jon Jory, Producing Director), as part of the 20th Annual Humana Festival of New American Plays, in Louisville, Kentucky, on March 29, 1996. It was directed by Paul McCrane; the set design was by Paul Owen; the costume design was by Kevin R. McLeod; the lighting design was by Brian Scott; the sound design was by Martin Desjardins; the original violin music was composed by Derek Reeves; the dramaturg was Michael Bigelow Dixon; and the stage manager was Julie A. Richardson. The cast was as follows:

BENJAMIN
RONNIE

Richard Thompson
Zar Acayan

Characters

BENJAMIN, Caucasian male, early twenties.
RONNIE, Asian-American male, mid-twenties.

Time and Place

A street corner on the Lower East Side, New York City. The present.

Note on Music

Obviously, it would be foolish to require that the actor portraying Ronnie perform the specified violin music live. The score of this play can be played on tape over the house speakers, and the actor can feign playing the violin using a bow treated with soap. However, in order to effect a convincing illusion, it is desirable that the actor possess some familiarity with the violin or another stringed instrument.

Darkness. Over the house speakers, sound fades in: Hendrix-like virtuoso rock 'n' roll riffs—heavy feedback, distortion, phase shifting, wah-wah—amplified over a tiny Fender pug-nose.

Lights fade up to reveal that the music's being played over a solid-body electric violin by Ronnie, a Chinese-American male in his mid-twenties; he is dressed in retro-'60s clothing and has a few requisite '90s body mutilations. He's playing on a sidewalk for money, his violin case open before him; change and a few stray bills have been left by previous passersby.

Benjamin enters; he's in his early twenties, blue-eyed, a Midwestern tourist in the big city. He holds a scrap of paper in his hands, scanning street signs for an address. He pauses before Ronnie, listens for a while. With a truly bravura run, Ronnie concludes the number and falls to his knees, gasping: Benjamin applauds.

BENJAMIN: Good. That was really great. *(Pause)* I didn't . . .

I mean, a fiddle . . . I mean, I'd heard them at square dances, on country stations and all, but I never . . . wow, this must really be New York City!

(Benjamin applauds, starts to walk on. Still on his knees, Ronnie clears his throat loudly.)

Oh, I . . . you're not just doing this for your health, right?

(Benjamin reaches in his pocket, pulls out a couple of coins. Ronnie clears his throat again.)

Look, I'm not a millionaire, I'm just . . .

(Benjamin pulls out his wallet, removes a dollar bill. Ronnie nods his head and gestures toward the violin case as he takes out a pack of cigarettes, lights one.)

RONNIE: And don't call it a "fiddle," OK?
 BENJAMIN: Oh. Well, I didn't mean to—
 RONNIE: You sound like a wuss. A hick. A dipshit.
 BENJAMIN: It just slipped out. I didn't really—
 RONNIE: If this was a fiddle, I'd be sitting here with a cob pipe, stomping my cowboy boots and kicking up hay. Then I'd go home and fuck my cousin.
 BENJAMIN: Oh! Well, I don't really think—
 RONNIE: Do you see a cob pipe? Am I fucking my cousin?
 BENJAMIN: Well, no, not at the moment, but—
 RONNIE: All right. Then this is a violin, now you give me your money, and I ignore the insult. Herein endeth the lesson.

(Pause.)

BENJAMIN: Look, a dollar's more than I've ever given to a . . . to someone asking for money.
 RONNIE: Yeah, well, this is New York. Welcome to the cost of living.
 BENJAMIN: What I mean is, maybe in exchange, you could help me—?
 RONNIE: Jesus Christ! Do you see a sign around my neck reading "Big Apple Fucking Tourist Bureau"?
 BENJAMIN: I'm just looking for an address, I don't think it's far from here, maybe you could . . . ?

(Benjamin holds out his scrap of paper, Ronnie snatches it away.)

RONNIE: You're lucky I'm such a goddamn softy. *(He looks at the paper.)* Oh, fuck you. Just suck my dick, you and the cousin you rode in on.
 BENJAMIN: I don't get it! What are you—?
 RONNIE: Eat me. You know exactly what I—

BENJAMIN: I'm just asking for a little—
 RONNIE: "13 Doyers Street"? Like you don't know where that is?
 BENJAMIN: Of course I don't know! That's why I'm asking—
 RONNIE: C'mon, you trailer-park refugee. You don't know that's Chinatown?
 BENJAMIN: Sure I know that's Chinatown.
 RONNIE: I know you know that's Chinatown.
 BENJAMIN: So? That doesn't mean I know where Chinatown—
 RONNIE: So why is it that you picked *me*, of all the street musicians in the city—to point you in the direction of Chinatown? Lemme guess—is it the earring? No, I don't think so. The Hendrix riffs? Guess again, you fucking moron.
 BENJAMIN: Now, wait a minute. I see what you're—
 RONNIE: What are you gonna ask me next? Where you can find the best dim sum in the city? Whether I can direct you to a genuine opium den? Or do I happen to know how you can meet Miss Saigon for a night of nookie-nookie followed by a good old-fashioned ritual suicide? Now, get your white ass off my sidewalk. One dollar doesn't even begin to make up for all this aggravation. Why don't you go back home and race bullfrogs, or whatever it is you do for—?
 BENJAMIN: Brother, I can absolutely relate to your anger. Righteous rage, I suppose, would be a more appropriate term. To be marginalized, as we are, by a white racist patriarchy, to the point where the accomplishments of our people are obliterated from the history books, this is cultural genocide of the first order, leading to the fact that you must do battle with all of Euro-America's emasculating and brutal stereotypes of Asians—the opium den, the sexual objectification of the Asian female, the exoticized image of a tourist's Chinatown which ignores the exploitation of workers, the failure to unionize, the high rate of mental illness

and tuberculosis—against these, each day, you rage, no, not as a victim, but as a survivor, yes, brother, a glorious warrior survivor!

(Silence.)

RONNIE: Say what?

BENJAMIN: So, I hope you can see that my request is not—
RONNIE: Wait, wait.

BENJAMIN: —motivated by the sorts of racist assumptions—
RONNIE: But, but where . . . how did you learn all that?

BENJAMIN: All what?

RONNIE: All that—you know—oppression stuff—tuberculosis . . .

BENJAMIN: It's statistically irrefutable. TB occurs in the community at a rate—
RONNIE: Where did you learn it?

BENJAMIN: I took Asian-American studies. In college.
RONNIE: Where did you go to college?

BENJAMIN: University of Wisconsin. Madison.
RONNIE: Madison, Wisconsin?

BENJAMIN: That's not where the bridges are, by the way.
RONNIE: Huh? Oh, right . . .

BENJAMIN: You wouldn't believe the number of people who—

RONNIE: They have Asian-American studies in Madison, Wisconsin? Since when?

BENJAMIN: Since the last Third World Unity hunger strike.
(Pause) Why do you look so surprised? We're down.

RONNIE: I dunno. It just never occurred to me, the idea of Asian students in the Midwest going on a hunger strike.
BENJAMIN: Well, a lot of them had midterms that week, so they fasted in shifts. (Pause) The administration never figured it out. The Asian students put that "They all look alike" stereotype to good use.

RONNIE: OK, so they got Asian-American studies. That still doesn't explain—

BENJAMIN: What?

RONNIE: Well . . . what you were doing taking it?

BENJAMIN: Just like everyone else. I wanted to explore my roots. And, you know, the history of oppression which is my legacy. After a lifetime of assimilation, I wanted to find out who I really am.

(Pause.)

RONNIE: And did you?

BENJAMIN: Sure. I learned to take pride in my ancestors who built the railroads, my Popo who would make me a hot bowl of jok with thousand-day-old eggs when the white kids chased me home yelling, "Gook! Chink! Slant-eyes!"

RONNIE: OK, OK, that's enough!

BENJAMIN: Painful to listen to, isn't it?

RONNIE: I don't know what kind of bullshit ethnic studies program they're running over in Wuss-consin, but did they bother to teach you that in order to find your Asian "roots," it's a good idea to first be Asian?

(Pause.)

BENJAMIN: Are you speaking metaphorically?

RONNIE: No! Literally! Look at your skin!

BENJAMIN: You know, it's very stereotypical to think that all Asian skin tones conform to a single hue.

RONNIE: You're white! Is this some kind of redneck joke or something? Am I the first person in the world to tell you this?

BENJAMIN: Oh! Oh! Oh!

RONNIE: I know real Asians are scarce in the Midwest, but . . . Jesus!

BENJAMIN: No, of course, I . . . I see where your misunderstanding arises.

RONNIE: Yeah. It's called, "You white."

BENJAMIN: It's just that—in my hometown of Tribune, Kansas, and then at school—see, everyone knows me—so this sort of thing never comes up. (He offers

his hand) Benjamin Wong. I forget that a society wedded to racial constructs constantly forces me to explain my very existence.

RONNIE: Ronnie Chang. Otherwise known as "The Bow Man."

BENJAMIN: You see, I was adopted by Chinese-American parents at birth. So, clearly, I'm an Asian-American—

RONNIE: Even though you're blond and blue-eyed.

BENJAMIN: Well, you can't judge my race by my genetic heritage alone.

RONNIE: If genes don't determine race, what does?

BENJAMIN: Perhaps you'd prefer that I continue in denial,

masquerading as a white man?

RONNIE: You can't just wake up and say, "Gee, I feel black today."

BENJAMIN: Brother, I'm just trying to find what you've already got.

RONNIE: What do I got?

BENJAMIN: A home. With your people. Picketing with the laundry workers. Taking refuge from the daily slights against your masculinity in the noble image of Gwan Gung.

RONNIE: Gwan who?

BENJAMIN: C'mon—the Chinese god of warriors and—what do you take me for? There're altars to him up all over the community.

RONNIE: I dunno what community you're talking about, but it's sure as hell not mine.

(Pause.)

BENJAMIN: What do you mean?

RONNIE: I mean, if you wanna call Chinatown your community, OK, knock yourself out, learn to use chopsticks, big deal. Go ahead, try and find your "roots" in some dim sum parlor with headless ducks hanging in the window. Those places don't tell you a thing about who I am.

BENJAMIN: Oh, I get it.

RONNIE: You get what?

BENJAMIN: You're one of those self-hating, assimilated Chinese-Americans, aren't you?

RONNIE: Oh, Jesus.

BENJAMIN: You probably call yourself "Oriental," huh? Look, maybe I can help you. I have some books I can—

RONNIE: Hey, I read all those Asian identity books when you were still slathering on industrial-strength sunblock. (Pause) Sure, I'm Chinese. But folks like you act like that means something. Like, all of a sudden, you know who I am. You think identity's that simple? That you can wrap it all up in a neat package and say, "I have ethnicity, therefore I am"? All you fucking ethnic fundamentalists. Always settling for easy answers. You say you're looking for identity, but you can't begin to face the real mysteries of the search. So instead, you go skin-deep, and call it a day. (Pause. He turns away from Benjamin and starts to play his violin—slow and bluesy)

BENJAMIN: So what are you? "Just a human being"? That's like saying you *have* no identity. If you asked me to describe my dog, I'd say more than, "He's just a dog."

RONNIE: What—you think if I deny the importance of my race, I'm nobody? There're worlds out there, worlds you haven't even begun to understand. Open your eyes. Hear with your ears.

(Ronnie holds his violin at chest level, but does not attempt to play during the following monologue. As he speaks, rock and jazz violin tracks fade in and out over the house speakers, bringing to life the styles of music he describes.)

I concede—it was called a fiddle long ago—but that was even before the birth of jazz. When the hollering in the fields, the rank injustice of human bondage, the struggle of God's children against the plagues of the devil's white man, when all these boiled up into that bittersweet brew, called by later generations, the blues.

That's when fiddlers like Son Sims held their chin rests at their chests, and sawed away like the hillbillies still do today. And with the coming of ragtime appeared the pioneer Stuff Smith, who sang as he stroked the catgut, with his raspy, Louis Armstrong—voice—gruff and sweet like the timber of horsehair riding south below the fingerboard—and who finally sailed for Europe to find ears that would hear. Europe—where Stephane Grappelli initiated a magical French violin, to be passed from generation to generation—first he, to Jean-Luc Ponty, then Ponty to Didier Lockwood. Listening to Grappelli play "A Nightingale Sang in Berkeley Square" is to understand not only the song of birds, but also how they learn to fly, fall in love on the wing, and finally falter one day, to wait for darkness beneath a London street lamp. And Ponty—he showed how the modern violin man can accompany the shadow of his own lead lines, which cascade, one over another, into some nether world beyond the range of human hearing. Joe Venuti. Noel Pointer. Sven Asmussen. Even the Kronos Quartet, with their arrangement of "Purple Haze." Now, tell me, could any legacy be more rich, more crowded with mythology, and heroes to inspire pride? What can I say if the banging of a gong or the clinking of a pickax on the Transcontinental Railroad fails to move me even as much as one note, played through a violin MIDI controller by Michael Urbaniak? (*He puts his violin to his chin, begins to play a jazz composition of his own invention*) Does it have to sound like Chinese opera before people like you decide I know who I am?

(*Benjamin stands for a long moment, listening to Ronnie play. Then, he drops his dollar into the case, turns and exits right. Ronnie continues to play a long moment. Then Benjamin enters downstage left, illuminated in his own spotlight. He sits on the floor of the stage, his feet*

dangling off the lip. As he speaks, Ronnie continues playing his tune, which becomes underscoring for Benjamin's monologue. As the music continues, does it slowly begin to reflect the influence of Chinese music?)

BENJAMIN: When I finally found Doyers Street, I scanned the buildings for Number 13. Walking down an alley where the scent of freshly steamed char siu bao lingered in the air, I felt immediately that I had entered a world where all things were finally familiar. (*Pause*) An old woman bumped me with her shopping bag—screaming to her friend in Cantonese, though they walked no more than a few inches apart. Another man—shouting to a vendor in Sze-Yup. A youth, in white undershirt, perhaps a recent newcomer, bargaining with a grocer in Hokkien. I walked through this ocean of dialects, breathing in the richness with deep gulps, exhilarated by the energy this symphony brought to my step. And when I finally saw the number 13, I nearly wept at my good fortune. An old tennement, paint peeling, inside walls no doubt thick with a century of grease and broken dreams—and yet, to me, a temple—the house where my father was born. I suddenly saw it all: Gung Gung, coming home from his sixteen-hour days pressing shirts he could never afford to own, bringing with him candies for my father, each sweet wrapped in the hope of a better life. When my father left the ghetto, he swore he would never return. But he had, this day, in the thoughts and memories of his son, just six months after his death. And as I sat on the stoop, I pulled a hua-moi from my pocket, sucked on it, and felt his spirit returning. To this place where his ghost, and the dutiful hearts of all his descendants, would always call home. (*He listens for a long moment*) And I felt an ache in my heart for all those lost souls, denied this most important of revelations: to know who they truly are.

David Henry Hwang

(Benjamin sucks his salted plum and listens to the sounds around him. Ronnie continues to play. The two remain oblivious of one another. Lights fade slowly to black.)

END OF PLAY

DAVID HENRY HWANG, is a playwright, screenwriter and librettist. His plays *FOB* (1981 OBIE Award), *The Dance and the Railroad* (1982 Drama Desk nomination), *Family Devotions* (1982 Drama Desk nomination), *The Sound of a Voice* and *The House of Sleeping Beauties*, were all produced at The Joseph Papp Public Theater/New York Shakespeare Festival. His other plays include: *M. Butterfly* (Broadway, 1988 Tony, Drama Desk, Outer Critics, John Gassner awards); *Face Value* (Off-Broadway); *Bondage*; *Trying to Find Chinatown* (both produced by Actors Theatre of Louisville's Humana Festival) and *Golden Child*, which was commissioned by South Coast Repertory, premiered at The Joseph Papp Public Theater/New York Shakespeare Festival, and moved to Broadway (1997 OBIE Award, 1998 Tony, Outer Critics nominations). His adaptation of Ibsen's *Peer Gynt*, written with Stephan Müller, premiered in 1998 at Trinity Repertory Company. His libretti include two works for composer Philip Glass: *1000 Airplanes on the Roof* and *The Voyage*; *The Silver River* with music by Bright Sheng; and with Linda Woolverton and Robert Falls, he has co-authored the book for *Aida*, with music by Elton John and Tim Rice. Mr. Hwang has received fellowships from the Rockefeller and Guggenheim foundations, the National Endowment for the Arts, the New York State Council on the Arts and The Pew/TCG National Artists Residency Program.