



WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 16, 2019

MICHAEL GILTZ AT WORK

## THEATER: "Soft Power" In Hard Times

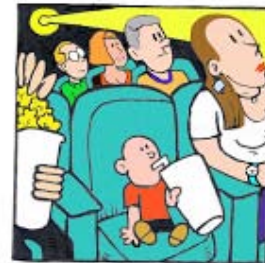
**SOFT POWER** \*\* out of \*\*\*\***THE PUBLIC THEATER**

In 2015, playwright David Henry Hwang had a very bad November. First, Hillary Clinton was the choice of most Americans, including Hwang. But the antiquated and ill-conceived Electoral College system meant Donald Trump became President of the United States. If that wasn't bad enough for a Tony-winning New York liberal, Hwang was attacked on the street. He was stabbed in the neck, nearly dying from a random hate crime. The assailant took no money and fled after Hwang shouted out in clear, unaccented English "What the fuck?," which apparently threw the bastard for a loop.

These twin assaults on democracy and decency led Hwang to question everything. Is the American experiment reaching an end? Will he always be too Chinese for some Americans and too American for some Chinese? Where does he belong? Where does *anyone* belong? And why do musicals starring Asians appear on Broadway only once every decade or so? And why is it almost always a revival of *The King and I*?

Like any real artist, Hwang turned his pain and probing into art. *Soft Power* is an awkward, ugly duckling of a play that yearns to transform into a swan of a musical. It's a mess but boy is his heart in the right place: on his sleeve.

Actually, I've just described the set-up of the show. In it, the character DHH (a too-earnest Francis Jue) is meeting with a producer from Shanghai named Xūe Xíng (Conrad Ricamora). Xūe company wants to turn Shanghai into the Broadway of Asia (though it kind of already is), starting with a big, fat, American-style musical with a Chinese perspective. And they want DHH to write it!



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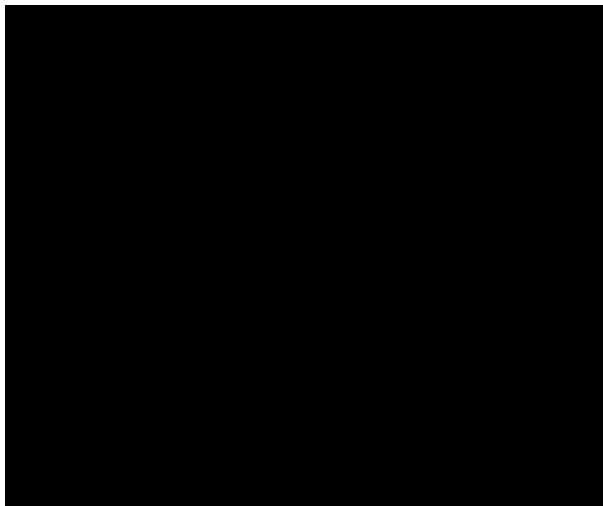
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The movie they want him to adapt into this show? A hugely popular romantic comedy about a husband and wife who are both miserable, explore the idea of dating others but end up staying together for the sake of their vows and their child. It's called *Stick With Your Mistake* and the very Chinese idea of sacrifice for the greater good (of the marriage, the family, the community, the country) is precisely what appeals to Xūe and turns off Hwang.

Nonetheless, they go to a performance of *The King and I*, dissect the musical's very problematic attitude towards non-Westerners, acknowledge its emotional power, grab a chance to meet Clinton at a meet-and-greet...and then Hwang is stabbed in the neck.

Hwang slips into a fever dream while recovering from his attack (in which he lost a third of his blood). Hwang's desire to flip *The King and I* on its head comes to life, with Xūe in the role of Anna coming to the United States to civilize the barbarous Americans. *Soft Power* turns into a full-on musical through the looking glass, showing how China might see the US, from its obsession with guns to its ethnic prejudices to its absurd system of government where the people choose their leader, rather than an elite group of professionals. In China, Xūe tempts Hillary, she'd already be the leader since Clinton is so clearly qualified and ready. Maybe democracy is over-rated.



None of this captures the loopy nature of the show. It lovingly spoofs and quotes everything from *A Chorus Line* to *The Music Man* and of course *The King and I*, among many other shows. At one point, when Hillary is trying to dumb down her message to appeal to the masses, she belts out a song at a McDonald's and rides rodeo on a giant french fry. *My Fair Lady*'s "The Rain In Spain" is transformed into a number where Xūe genially coaches Hillary on how to pronounce his name and the meaning of fourth tone and so on.

The Chief Justice of the Supreme Court even goes all *Schoolhouse Rock* on us to explain our election system and the glory of the Ballot Box. Remember, this is all from the perspective of a Chinese-funded

BOOKS: Don't Bother Trying To  
"Find Me"

THEATER: "The Sound Inside"  
Gets Muffled By Final...

THEATER: Stuff and Nonsense  
for Friendly Crowds --...

THEATER: "Scotland, PA" or,  
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THEATER: "For Colored Girls"  
Returns. Finally!

The Movies, Books, Theater,  
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Broadway" Is Back and  
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THEATER: "Terra Firma" Is On  
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Reach For "Chasing Rai...

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THEATER: BOO! A Halloween  
Scare Fest Closes Its Ey...

THEATER: "A(loft) Modulation"  
-- A Play With Jazz ...

THEATER: "Freestyle Love  
Supreme" and "Derren  
Brow...

BOOKS: A Fantasy Classic  
Finally Translated Into E...

► September (10)

► August (9)

and mounted show that becomes Asia's seminal idea of what America is really like, just as *The King and I* symbolized Western attitudes towards Asia. Indeed, there's even a bizarre detour for a 50th anniversary celebration of the musical we're watching, complete with panel discussion and a silly Westerner they can gently mock. (Gently, because they're the one with all the power and America has long since faded from preeminence.)

You might imagine Hwang delivering a scathing take-down of the US or a sly skewering of China's imagined fears about America and democracy. But you'll get neither. *Soft Power* is indeed soft in every way -- it's gentle, earnest, polite and really not out to offend much of anyone. Are we meant to be amused by China's distorted idea of America or perhaps laugh at ourselves when seeing the US through the eyes of outsiders? Neither happens. McDonald's as a symbol of US consumerism? Well, sure. (And hey, they've got one in Beijing.) An obsession with guns? Duh. If that's how China sees us, well, they're pretty spot on there too, aren't they? So what's the point?

It's a treat to see an almost all-Asian cast in a musical. But that's not enough. *Soft Power* is too timid to do more. If this is the flip-side of *The King and I*, why is Xūe talking to Hillary? She lost, Hwang! Hillary is not the leader of the country. Xūe (or really, a Chinese woman) should be civilizing *Trump*. I can't blame Hwang for not wanting to grapple with Agent Orange, even in his imagination. But if he's going to update *The King and I*, that's what he needed to do.

Since they kept Clinton, why cast a white woman? Alyse Alann Louis has a lot of fun in dual roles, especially when Hillary is chowing down on ice cream and pizza while singing the blues and surely her casting is there to clarify the gap between East and West. But since Broadway (and Hollywood) has such a long history of casting white people in yellow face, surely it would have been more on point to include, say, the sole Japanese actor in a sea of Chinese faces to play the white woman. (Or at least a woman of color.) This certainly isn't a criticism of Louis, one of the show's bright points.

The cast is game for this grab-bag of a goof, even though *Saturday Night Live* tries to be more pointed on a weekly basis. (And *South Park* actually succeeds.) By far the show's best element is Conrad Ricamora as Xūe. He's sexy, charming, magnetic and all on his own rescues the evening.

Ricamora was terrific in David Byrne's *Here Lies Love*. You can have fun going through the Playbill and spotting how many cast members appeared in that show. It's a testament to the top-notch talent here, but also a comment on how few roles written for Asian actors. Ricamora's Broadway debut after that breakthrough? *The King and I*. It's enough to make you cry.

In his Broadway debut, Ricamora played Tuptim's lover and I felt he

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was not up to the task vocally on the duet "I Have Dreamed." Here, his singing demands are quite different. Ricamora shines on the show's one solid number "Happy Enough," a piece illuminating the Chinese idea of sacrificing for the greater good. He is terrific in the serious drama, the romance and the song-and-dance, not to mention smoothly delivering two different accents. Thank goodness his hit TV show *How To Get Away With Murder* has just begun its sixth and final season. Ricamora should be available for a lot more theater and film work soon.

But this is mostly a musical and I fear the melodies by Jeanine Tesori are akin to her work on *Caroline, Or Change* and *Fun Home*. Sometimes her score can be beautiful and the 22-piece orchestra certainly does it justice. Yet she has no interest in melody and it shows. I don't need Jerry Herman, but I need *something* and Tesori offers it up rarely and grudgingly. You'll find no equivalent to *Fun Home's* "Ring Of Keys" here, though in its way "Happy Enough" comes close.

That song is also the show's best effort at exploring cultural differences between the US and China. Stereotypically, the US champions the individual, while Chinese culture celebrates the greater good. The song offers a nuanced moment and is worthy of Hwang's best intentions -- here, he's not spoofing or making a point, merely revealing. Otherwise, he can't bring himself to question much about the US any more than he can acknowledge that Trump won and is the real King right now.

If this show were the mirror-image of that Rodgers & Hammerstein show, it would end with the the King being "civilized" by the Chinese interloper who offers a new way of ruling. Instead, Hillary firmly rejects Xūe's idea of a one-party state or anything less than full democracy. If there's anything much to learn from Chinese culture (as opposed to the current Chinese government, of course), *Soft Power* doesn't grapple with it. No wonder director Leigh Silverman handles traffic nicely but can't bring this muddle into focus.

Hwang's message, his big revelation is the same as that Chinese romantic comedy: "stick with your mistake." In other words, you don't give up on the US just because Trump won an election. You stay and fight for the greater good. Well, I don't know about Hwang, but I had no intention of divorcing the US after the election. I never wanted to trash the American experiment. After 2016, [I just wanted to trash the Electoral College](#).

NOTE: Read more on the National Popular Vote Interstate Compact at [Wikipedia](#) or [its official website](#).

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[Minor Character: Under The Radar Festival at the Public](#) \*\*\*

Ink: Under The Radar Festival at the Public \*\* 1/2  
Choir Boy \*\* 1/2  
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Kiss Me, Kate \*\*\*  
Ain't No Mo' \*\*\* 1/2  
Ain't Too Proud \*\*  
The Cradle Will Rock \* 1/2  
Mrs. Murray's Menagerie \*\*\* 1/2  
Oklahoma! (on Broadway) \*\* 1/2  
Socrates \*\*  
The Pain Of My Belligerence \*  
Burn This \*\*  
Hadestown \*\*\* 1/2  
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Tootsie \*\* 1/2  
Ink \*\*\*  
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Betrayal \*\*\* 1/2  
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Derren Brown: Secret \*\*\*  
(A)loft Modulation \* 1/2  
The Great Society \*\*  
I Can't See \*  
Heroes Of The Fourth Turning \*\* 1/2  
Chasing Rainbows: The Road To Oz \*\*\*  
The Glass Menagerie (dir Austin Pendleton & Peter Bloch) \*\*  
Terra Firma (debut of The Coop theater company) \*\*  
Forbidden Broadway: The Next Generation  
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Soft Power \*\*  
The Decline and Fall of The Entire World As Seen Through The Eyes  
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POSTED BY [MICHAEL GILTZ](#) AT [1:12 AM](#) 

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