

"M. Butterfly": An Interview with David Henry Hwang
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M. Butterfly

An Interview with David Henry Hwang

John Louis DiGaetani

David Henry Hwang's *M. Butterfly* went into rehearsal during the first week of January 1988 and into preview on 6 February at the National Theater in Washington, DC. On 10 February the play opened and played to excellent reviews until the first week in March. On 20 March 1988 the play opened on Broadway at the Eugene O'Neill Theatre, where it has been successfully running ever since.

M. Butterfly takes place today in a Paris prison, and, in recall, the years 1960–1985 in Beijing and Paris. The events of the play were suggested by recent newspaper accounts of an actual international spy scandal. A French diplomat by the name of Bouriscot (Gallimard in the play) was stationed in Beijing, China, during the period of the American war in Vietnam. During Bouriscot's stay, he started a long-term affair with someone he thought was a female star of the Beijing Opera. When the lovers tried to enter France, they were both charged with espionage. Only then did the diplomat discover that his mistress was a spy for the Chinese government—and also a man. M. Bouriscot was tried, found guilty of espionage, and sentenced to prison. He was released from prison in 1988.

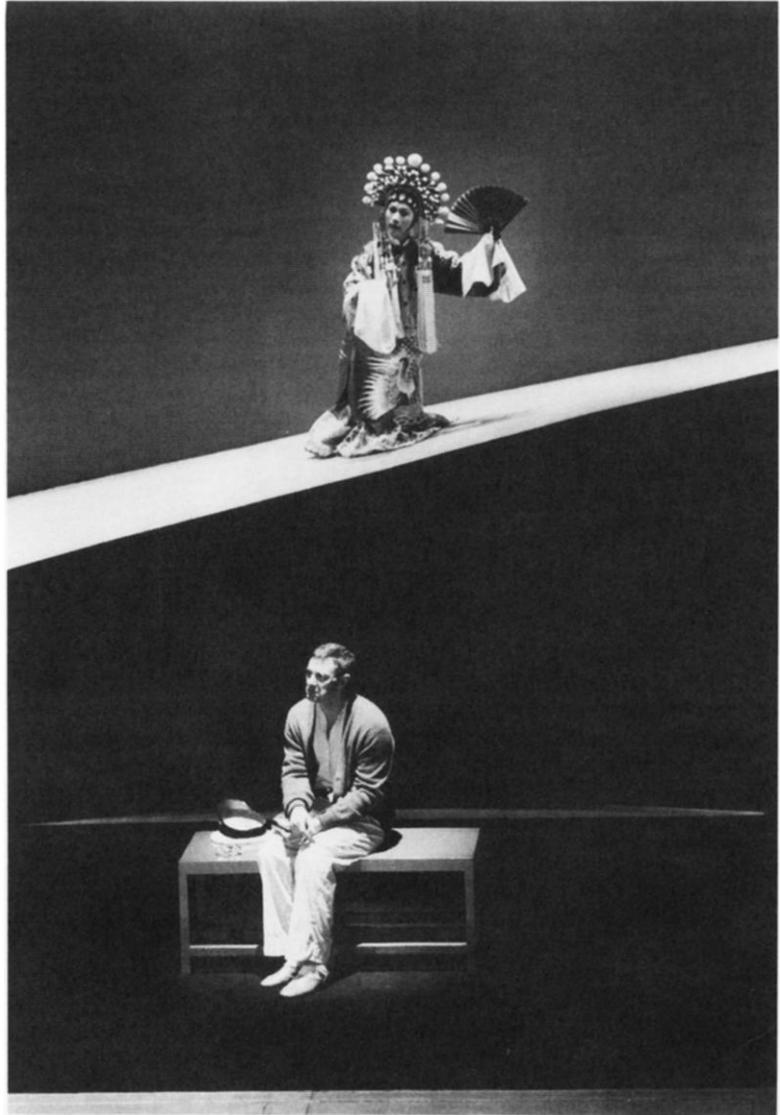
I spoke with Mr. Hwang in New York City in September 1988.

HWANG: I wrote *M. Butterfly* as an attempt to deal with some aspects of orientalism. I assumed that many in the audience would be coming to the theatre because they hoped to see something exotic and mysterious, but what exactly is behind the desire to see the "exotic East"?

DIGAETANI: One of the things I found interesting is that your play suggested the Western naivete about the East. Many Westerners tend to think of the East as a pretty little Madame Butterfly rather than seeing what is actually there in the orient. It's a kind a racism combined with sexism.

HWANG: Yes, that's true. The play has been taken as a commentary or a criticism of Western attitudes toward the East, and I think that's accurate. But I would like to think that the play is fairly even-handed in saying that the East also misperceives the West. The East is guilty or complicit in this dual form of cultural stereotyping. The West, having had the advantage of

1. B.D. Wong as Song Liling and David Dukas as Gallimard in *M. Butterfly* at the Eugene O'Neill Theatre on Broadway in New York, 1989. (Photo by Peter Cunningham)



being the colonial power and of being the more powerful of the two over the past couple of hundred years, has an attitude of condescension toward the East. But the East has played up to that to its short-term advantage without thinking of the long-term ill effects that reinforcing those racial stereotypes causes. I think both parties are equally guilty.

In terms of Western misperceptions, there is Edward Said's term, "orientalism." I read Said's book after I wrote the play. John Dexter, the play's director, recommended it. It was one of the reasons he was interested in doing the play. This notion that the East is mysterious, inscrutable, and therefore ultimately inferior, is something that definitely is consistent with themes in Puccini's *Madame Butterfly*.

DIGAETANI: Well, an aspect of the Puccini opera that I think is often overlooked is its attack on that Western view. Pinkerton is one of the great heels in all opera. Puccini presents the West as oafish and insensitive.

HWANG: Puccini presents that view at the same time that he presents a view of the East as helpless to resist. I think that the East has played into that stereotype by saying, “Oh, yes, we are helpless” and therefore trying to manipulate the situation to its own advantage.

DIGAETANI: Naivete can be used as a ploy. One of the interesting things about the Puccini opera is that it presents the East as a place in the early stages of its victimization by an imperialist power. In other words, in the beginning people think that the changes are all wonderful and mean progress and the modern way. They don’t realize that they are being used. Of course *Madame Butterfly* does eventually realize the horrible consequences of being colonized. Are you an opera fan?

HWANG: I was trained as a musician, so I’m a music fan in general. Opera is actually something that I’ve only become interested in during the past couple of years, and to some degree because of *M. Butterfly*. Ironically, when I decided I wanted to incorporate the plot of Puccini’s *Madame Butterfly* into the play, I actually didn’t know much about opera. So I started listening to a lot more of it, and particularly during the rehearsals for the play I started listening to the Puccini opera and I really learned to appreciate it. My play, which sets out to lampoon opera, has made me an opera buff.

DIGAETANI: Your play brings up lots of interesting questions, one of which is: Can we love a person as a person if we are unsure of that person’s gender?

HWANG: The play is to some degree about the nature of seduction—in the sense that we seduce ourselves. Sometimes when you have the desire to fall in love or you desire to have someone to be some kind of ideal, you can make that person ideal in your own mind whether or not the actual facts correspond to the reality. I think that it’s often true in a smaller, less extreme sense that we get involved with people and decide to blind ourselves to their faults so that they can be the perfect love that we’ve always wanted. And on some level we’re aware that that is not the case. But we prefer the fantasy over the reality. The play presents an obviously more extreme and less common situation, where the reality is so radically different from fantasy that at the core, even the simple, fundamental fact that it’s a man instead of a woman is something that the person in love chooses to block out. But it’s not actually that different qualitatively from everyday types of deceptions that people make in order to convince themselves they’re in love.

DIGAETANI: I remember when I first read the story in the newspaper. I thought, how could this have happened? What was your reaction?

HWANG: Of course, I had the same reactions as everybody else—how could it have happened? But then on some level it seemed natural to me that it should have happened, that given the degree of misperception generally between East and West and between men and women, it seemed inevitable that a mistake of this magnitude would one day take place. As a metaphor, the story made perfect sense in the context of the general misunderstanding that I have always perceived takes place between these different groups. In retrospect, it seems to me that that was what really piqued my imagination. I felt the impossibility of the situation and the inevitability of it, both at the same time.

DIGAETANI: Men playing women is of course very much a part of Western theatre. But one of the ways I interpret your play, and I’d like



2. & 3. *B.D. Wong and David Dukes as Song Liling and Gallimard—creating and maintaining the “mirage.”* (Photo by Peter Cunningham)



your comments about this, is that Gallimard was really a homosexual from day one. He was living in a much more homophobic period than today, and the thing about his affair with Song Liling, the thing about the mirage that he and Song Liling created, was that he never had to face his own homosexuality. In other words, he had an affair with a man and never told anyone, not even himself.

HWANG: The lines between gay and straight become very blurred in this play, but I think he knows he's having an affair with a man. Therefore, on some level he is gay. Our director John Dexter told me that he never found the situation to be that unbelievable because of an experience he once had. Dexter once shot a movie for Columbia called *Virgin Soldiers*. He hired macho Englishmen and brought them to Singapore where they went to Boogie Street, the transvestite street. A few of these men picked up these guys, I mean these women who were really men, and the next day Dexter overheard them talking and they said, "No, it was a girl. I know men and I know women, and that was a woman." If you want to believe it's a woman, that's fine. I mean, the fact is you're sleeping with a man, but if you choose to believe you're heterosexual, then that's your prerogative, to live in that fantasy. I think this would apply today to people in Chinese, Italian, Spanish, and some of the other Latin cultures. People in these cultures believe that if you have sex with a man and you do the screwing, you are not gay, but if you're screwed, you're gay. I mean, that sort of distinction has existed since time immemorial.

DIGAETANI: Oh, the Chinese believe this is true?

HWANG: So what does gay mean at that point? I don't know.

DIGAETANI: In what you're saying, gay means being a passive homosexual. If you're not passive, you're not gay.

HWANG: Correct. So, the situation in *M. Butterfly* is not so far-fetched. Gallimard chooses to believe he is heterosexual.

DIGAETANI: Is Gallimard still in jail?

HWANG: The name of the real Gallimard is Bouriscot and he just got out of jail.

DIGAETANI: Have you tried to contact him?

HWANG: No. I think we may want to have some kind of legal arrangement with him, but we'll see what happens.

DIGAETANI: He might want a cut of the royalties.

HWANG: Probably.

DIGAETANI: And he deserves it?

HWANG: I wouldn't mind giving him a little.

DIGAETANI: Not a lot?

HWANG: No, since the play is not literally based on him. I don't know that it's his story. But on the other hand, I think the guy's been in jail, he's suffered a lot of indignity, so since it's him, why not?

DIGAETANI: Have you tried to incorporate many elements of Oriental opera or theatre into this play? Or was it primarily Dexter who wanted to do this?

HWANG: The main reason we ended up using Chinese opera was because it was relevant. In reality, Song Liling was a practitioner of Chinese opera. But I also wanted to explore why it is that in Asian theatre and also in Shakespearean theatre men play women's role. It's just touched on briefly. Song Liling says, "Why are women's roles played by men?" And the answer is: "Because only a man knows how a woman should act." Let's look at that in kabuki terms because in kabuki it's expressed much more clearly. In kabuki they say that a woman can only be a woman whereas a man can be the idealization of a woman. This is obscene, and it's inherently sexist. What it's saying is that only a man can be a man's idealization of a woman.

DIGAETANI: Not a woman's.

HWANG: Right. Song Liling is able to be such an effective fantasy for Gallimard because, as a man, she knows how a man wants to see women, and therefore can become a man's woman—which is why Gallimard says toward the end of the play: "I was a man in love with a woman created by a man, and now everything else simply falls short." I thought the play was a very interesting way to deal with the concept of the onnagata in the context of a Western play.

DIGAETANI: Another interesting conflict I saw in the play was between Japanese and Chinese cultures. They're really different.

HWANG: One of the things I wanted to do was to indicate both the differences between cultures as perceived by Asians and the similarities as perceived by Westerners. In other words, the West looks at the "East" as sort of a monolith. Whether we've been at war against Japan or Korea or Vietnam or in a Cold War with China, it's all "Oriental." But of course the Asians see themselves as very different. I also have to say, again, that the reverse is true, that Asians tend to see the West as very monolithic. Perhaps from each point of view, it's a legitimate position to take because there are probably more similarities between the Asian cultures as opposed to the West than differences, and vice versa. But from the point of view of the West, America does not consider itself to be the same as France. And Japan does not consider itself to be China.

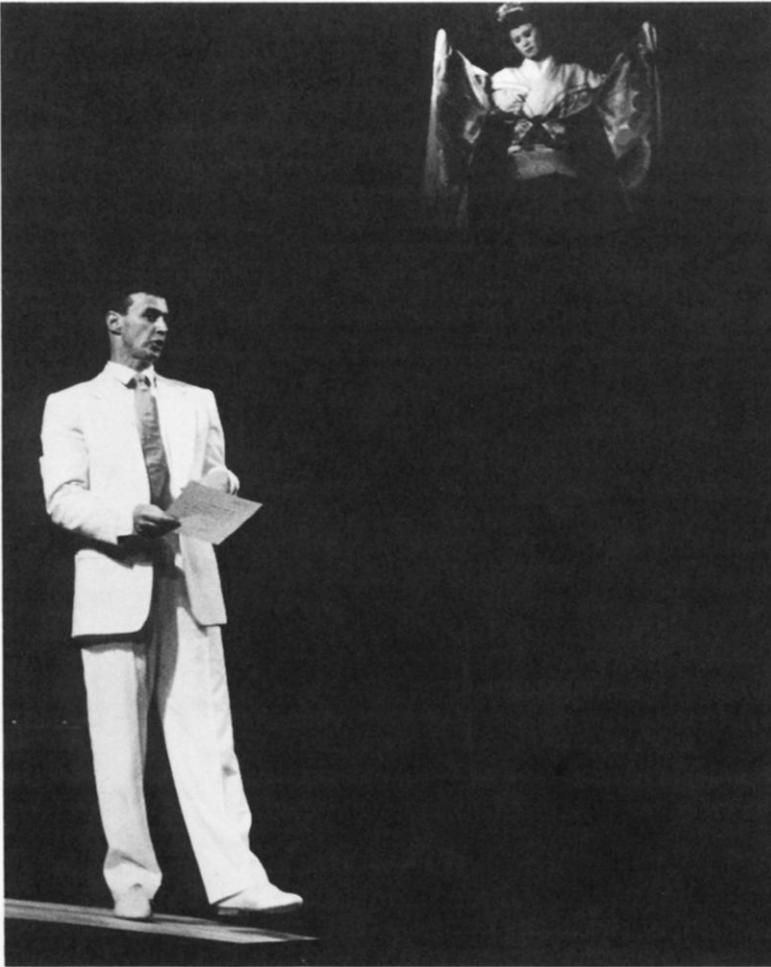
I think one of the more simple things the play's trying to say is that eventually one must look past all the cultural stereotyping we do of each other, West to East and East to West, and deal with each other just as humans if we're really to reach any point of true understanding.

DIGAETANI: In the play, when the truth is finally out, Song Liling offers to continue the relationship as a man but Gallimard absolutely cannot deal with that. In part, he realizes he's been abused, and he's very angry. Another reason why is that this would force him to deal honestly with his own homosexuality, and he's never had to do this because he's been able to live a fantasy, even though he's known deep down that Song Liling was a man.

HWANG: Such a fundamental component of the relationship is the fantasy. Without that, it is no longer the same relationship. Gallimard is in love with a butterfly, he's not in love with this Asian man.

DIGAETANI: Do you mean that fantasy is necessary for all love? That strict realism will destroy love?

HWANG: Gosh, am I saying that?



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4. *“I was a man in love with a woman created by a man, and now everything falls short.”* (Photo by Peter Cunningham)

DIGAETANI: I'm just bringing it up as a possibility.

HWANG: I'm asking because the answer doesn't roll off my tongue immediately. I would hate to be so cynical or so rigid as to say that we can only fall in love with a fantasy. It is possible, I think, to fall in love with someone in reality, and it's also possible to fall in love with a fantasy that's completely disassociated from the real person. They're both equally possible, but the latter is more dangerous because then someday your bubble may burst and leave you with nothing.

DIGAETANI: And there are some people who perceive that you want a fantasy and are very, very willing to create it.

HWANG: Yes, that's true.

DIGAETANI: As with Song Liling.

HWANG: Yes. I think one of the things that I tried to do, though I was not quite successful and would like to work on more in future productions of the play—or in a movie version—

DIGAETANI: There's going to be a movie?

HWANG: I think so . . . is this whole idea of the diplomat's wife. The diplomat's wife has a fantasy which is more commonplace, but which is, again, not qualitatively far from Gallimard's fantasy. She has the fantasy of being the diplomat's wife and playing that role and believing that she has a

completely faithful husband. But on some level she knows that the whole thing is a sham. And I think she does something not that different from what Gallimard is doing. While Gallimard plays the role of the macho Western male, she plays the role of the diplomat's wife.

DIGAETANI: One of the things I liked about the play was its use of various styles. There seemed to be a TV sitcom style, for example, when Suzuki/Comrade Chin says, "He's a loser. Dump him!" I like the fact that you wove that into the play. Some critics didn't like it. What's your feeling about this?

HWANG: Well, I'm very interested in the butting up of unlikes. You can take the crassest type of sitcom and butt it up against high culture like opera, and find a relationship between the two. That creates variety for the audience, it keeps them on their toes, it is inherently theatrical. The other reason I like it is because it allows us to cut through what I consider to be a line of misconceptions of what the piece is about. So many times when you deal with characters from the East as they are portrayed in the West, they seem very distant, "wise" and "inscrutable." But in fact Asians can be just as crass as people are here.

So it was fun to take an Eastern character like Comrade Chin and have her talk like the crassest person on television because in reality that probably would be how she would talk if she were speaking English. To me there's a certain emotional truth about it which is more interesting than something which might seem more seamless to a critic.

DIGAETANI: I thought you were also emphasizing the difference between Japan and China. She is not a meek little Japanese woman but a Chinese party member.

HWANG: Yes, I think that applies as well.

DIGAETANI: We have this concept of the little Plum Blossom as an ideal of Japanese culture, and Chinese women don't fall into that category.

HWANG: To some degree this is also a function of class. Since many of the party cadres came from the Chinese working classes, they would have a certain realistic way of expressing themselves. This image we have of the Plum Blossom is to some degree a Japanese upper-class image. The Japanese peasant woman has a different quality. And the same occurs in China. Wealthy Mandarin women, in part because their feet were broken, moved very slowly and gracefully, but again, that's a class difference.

DIGAETANI: I had an argument with a friend about the scene with the nude Danish student. My friend insisted that the scene was trashy. But I argued that the scene showed Gallimard's discomfort with liberated women.

HWANG: The scene had two purposes for me. One was the point you mentioned. As Gallimard says: "It is possible for a woman to be too open, so as to seem almost too masculine." That concept of femininity is false to the core. The fact that you have a real woman who acts "masculine," and a man who acts "feminine," is the ultimate irony. So that was one purpose for the scene, to show the difference in what we perceive to be the Western woman and what we perceive to be the Eastern woman. The other reason is a plot point. I wondered whether at some point in the relationship—after a couple of years when the initial lust waned—something would have happened to provide the impetus for the relationship to continue over the next 15 or so years?

DIGAETANI: Well, there is a child, for one thing.

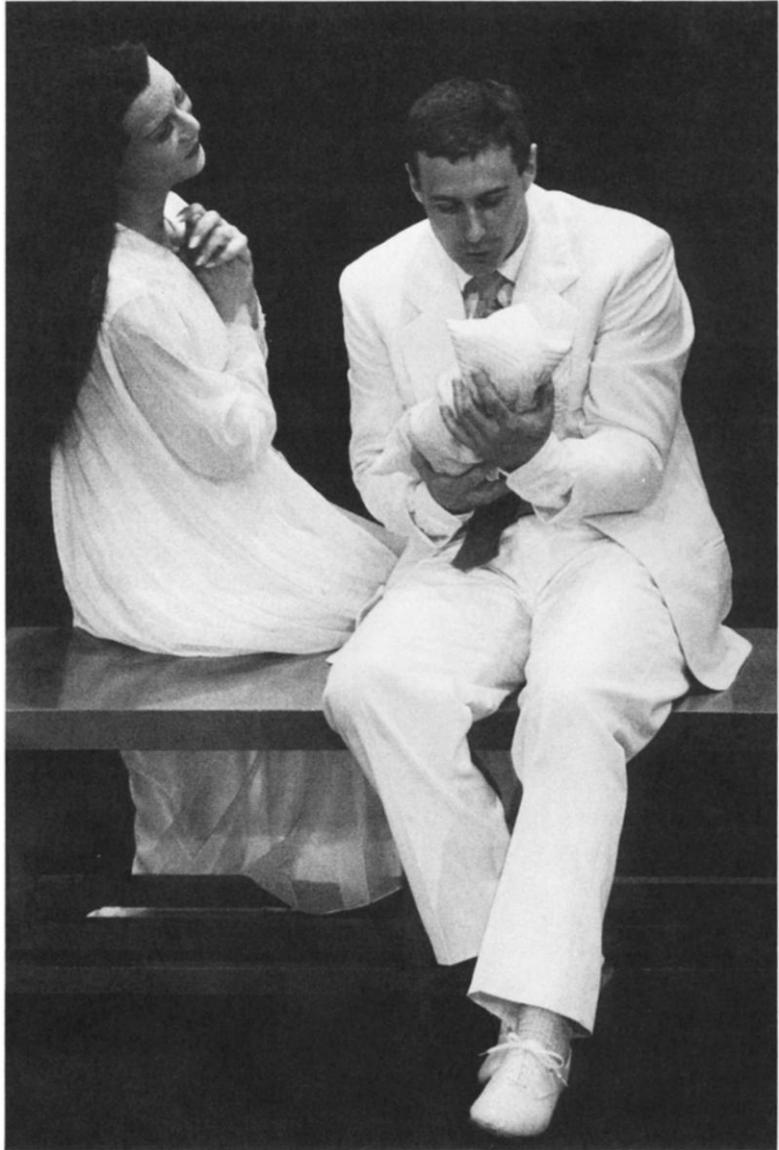
HWANG: Right. But I thought it would be interesting plotwise if he did go out and now, feeling his oats as a macho male, have an affair with another woman. But having had that relationship, Gallimard goes back to Song Liling, causing lust to evolve into some sort of real love, and this child could come out of that. The Danish student, Renee, serves, then, as the trigger or the transition from Gallimard's growth as a macho male to someone who falls in love in some deeper sense with his Madame Butterfly.

DIGAETANI: Why was the only frontal nudity in the play that of a female? Song Liling never appeared frontally nude. I was surprised at that because the audience is, of course, curious.



5. Kathryn Layng (who took over the role from Lindsey Frost) as the Danish student with whom Gallimard has an affair. (Photo by Peter Cunningham)

6. *Song Liling, Gallimard, and the baby.* (Photo by Peter Cunningham)



HWANG: Well, that was kind of an interesting little aesthetic debate we had. What John Dexter said one day was that he'd done male frontal nudity with actors and he found that you had to deal with the fact that it was extremely distracting. He said if you have a penis here and you have Sir Laurence Olivier there, everybody looks at the penis. At that point in the play it's very important to focus on Gallimard's reaction rather than to focus on Song Liling's penis. So we decided to stage the scene the way we did, with Song Liling downstage and Gallimard upstage where we were basically seeing his reaction, because that really is the important thing at that moment.

DIGAETANI: Were the actors willing to do frontal nudity?



7. *When the deception crumbles, both characters realize what they've lost. Hwang's use of comedy underscores a situation that's "essentially tragic."* (Photo by Peter Cunningham)

HWANG: Yes. There are some actors who feel comfortable with nudity on stage and others who don't. I think Lindsey Frost, who plays the Danish student, does not feel totally comfortable with her nudity on stage, and Brad Wong [Song Liling] seems to be the opposite—he seems to grow into his nudity on stage.

DIGAETANI: He wants to do it all the time?

HWANG: Yes, such that I find now he is angling himself to the audience more and more.

DIGAETANI: I guess some people can really get into nudity.

HWANG: John Lithgow was nude in his first Broadway play, *The Changing Room*, for which he won a Tony Award. He said that after getting over the initial shock of doing it, it became extremely liberating. So maybe that's how Brad Wong is taking it.

DIGAETANI: I was interested as well in your choice of language in the play.

HWANG: We decided to use the American convention in language. It's such an international play in the sense that there are French, Chinese, Chinese playing Japanese, Japanese playing Chinese, even Danish people. If we had everybody in accents, I think it would actually be rather confusing and pointless. One of the advantages of the stage is that, since you are working in metaphor in general, you can make a decision like that. You might as well just face the fact that we're all Americans, so let's speak American and make that the convention of the play. So I made a very conscious choice to be American and use a lot of American slang. In particular in the male bonding scenes between Gallimard and Marc, the way they talk about sex is very American. That's something that some critics have problems with, but it's a very conscious choice, a reflection of the fact that I perceive this as being a very American play, in spite of the fact that it's about a number of intercultural topics.

DIGAETANI: If this play were done in England, would you insist on the cast speaking American English?

HWANG: Well, that's a whole other question. I'm not sure about that. We are in fact planning a London production, and I may not be quite so rigorous about the choice of slang in London. I talked earlier about the butting up of unlikes, to have this American slang and then also sometimes to have a more classical type of English, and to see the relationship between those two types of languages and the way that they can attract.

DIGAETANI: I also liked your play's mixture of comedy and tragedy because the story itself is tragic. Gallimard winds up in jail, and I'm glad to find out he's finally out. But I found myself laughing a lot in the play. Do you want to comment on how you tried to combine tragedy and comedy—or maybe you didn't see the play as essentially tragic.

HWANG: I do see the situation as essentially tragic. I think it's a tragedy for both of the characters because to some degree even the Song Liling character, like Pinkerton at the end of *Madame Butterfly*, realizes what it is that he's lost. The Song Liling character has enjoyed to some degree being able to perpetrate this deception, and being able to continue to stay adored by someone in spite of his sexual confusion. When Song Liling loses that, he realizes his narcissism is not as great as his need for the adoration which he has built over the last 20 years, so he realizes what he's lost in the same way that Pinkerton realizes too late at the end of the opera.

But, as for the use of comedy, first of all I think that comedy is very theatrical. I am generally interested in ways to create total theatre, theatre which utilizes whatever the medium has to offer to create an effect—just to keep an audience interested—whether that's dance or music or opera or comedy. All these things are very theatrical, even makeup changes and costumes—possibly because I grew up in a generation which isn't that acquainted with theatre. For theatre to hold my interest, it needs to pull out all its stops and take advantage of everything it has—what it can do better than film and television. So, it's very important for me to exploit all those

elements, and comedy is one of them. I think that, secondly, there's the fact that in this particular play, since we're dealing with a number of important issues, it's necessary to leaven those issues with some comedy in order for the play to be palatable even to me, let alone to an audience. I would not be comfortable with a play of mine which very stridently or humorlessly hammered home a particular message.

DIGAETANI: You're not a Brechtian, it sounds like.

HWANG: Brecht uses humor. But, while I admire some of Brecht's principles, I personally don't feel comfortable with my own work taking a strident tone, and so I think that these messages need to be delivered in a humorous context. I then feel more comfortable with the material and I think the audience feels more comfortable with it.

Also, many of the situations in *M. Butterfly* are inherently comic. The comedy helps the audience to suspend its disbelief, particularly in the face of this seemingly impossible plot. If we dealt with some of these situations humorlessly, doubt and sarcasm would start to pop up in the minds of the audience. If instead we take those doubts and sarcasms and put them on the stage and let the audience laugh at them and then address them, we're much more able to help the audience suspend its disbelief and get into the head of the character who's in this impossible situation. So I think the comedy actually becomes an essential element, particularly when you're dealing with a seemingly impossible plot.

The cocktail party scene at the beginning of the play is at the beginning to get over a lot of things that would be in the audience's mind anyway. So let's laugh at it now, get it all out in the open, and then let's go in and really look at this thing.

DIGAETANI: You're saying that while the situation is essentially tragic, it is also essentially comic.

HWANG: Definitely. There is certainly a dimension of personal tragedy which is inherent in the situation. But anyone who steps outside and looks at that situation, just at the bare bones of the plot, would have to say that it's comic as well.

DIGAETANI: What plans do you have for future plays?

HWANG: I have a couple of ideas for my next play, but they are not anything I can really talk about right now. I've gone through phases in my life when I've said I was only writing plays which in some way relate to Asia. And I've gone through phases when I've said that I wasn't going to do anything more that had to do with Asia. And now I think that I'd have to say honestly that I don't know.

John Louis DiGaetani, PhD, is Associate Professor of English at Hofstra University in Hempstead, NY. His most recent books include: Carlo Gozzi: Translations of "The Love of Three Oranges," "Turandot," and "The Snake Lady" (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press); Puccini the Thinker (New York: Peter Lang); and An Invitation to the Opera (New York: Facts on File). He is currently editing an anthology of essays on Luigi Pirandello for Greenwood Press, to be titled The Companion to Pirandello Studies.