Welcome to "The First Twenty."
I'm James King.

Ma Yi is the term used by ancient Chinese traders to refer to a group of islands known today as the Philippines.

In this next episode, Ma Yi theater artistic director Ralph Pena showcases the evolution of the Asian-American playwright over the last 20 years, taking a close look at the shift in how Asian-American plays are broadly perceived, as well as the widening scope of subjects tackled by Asian-American writers that move far beyond identity politics.

Let's listen in
as renowned playwright
David Henry Wang,

author of "M. Butterfly"
and "Aida,"

along with his contemporaries,

discuss 20 years
of Asian-American play writing.

Hwang: I think I've been
really fortunate
to have mentors and gatekeepers
who opened the door for me.

It's always worth noting
that I got my start

when I was 22

at the Public Theater,

with Joe Papp producing me

because Asian-American actors had protested a year earlier,

a production at the Public Theater

in which a Caucasian actor was cast in an Asian role.

And so you have to acknowledge that confluence

between community activism and art.

And then Joe Papp being who he was,

he invited the protesters into his office

and hired one of them onto his staff with a brief

to find plays for Asian actors, and it was just about that time

that "FOB" came across across his desk.
I'm the beneficiary of affirmative action.

[01:03:08.03] Lee: I started play writing seriously in around 2002.

[01:03:13.01] And I think that, you know, it's hard for me to gauge

[01:03:17.04] how much theater has changed over the past 20 years,

[01:03:21.01] just insofar as I was very much outside of mainstream theater

[01:03:26.01] for most of that time. And I think that the rules

[01:03:29.05] operated differently in the world

[01:03:32.02] that I was working in for most of that time.

[01:03:34.00] So I started out working in downtown experimental theater

[01:03:40.01] in New York, and I feel that at that time,

[01:03:45.07] downtown experimental theater and the people who supported it

[01:03:49.02] were really kind of ahead of the curve

[01:03:52.07] when it came to diversity and inclusiveness.
Yew: My story's very different because I had a play in London,

and that was basically an opportunity

and an invitation from a friend

who ran a small Asian company in London.

When I wrote the play, the play played at a pub theater

got to the Royal Court. So as a result of that,

I had that one play to send around in the United States,

and that was basically my foray.

I basically was licking envelopes,

mailing a Xerox play to everyone.

And then when that got some steam,

which is a very fortunate,
other opportunities appeared.

[01:04:32.02]
So I kept doing what I needed to do to get to where I was.

[01:04:37.08]
Yee: So I remember when I was growing up,

[01:04:41.07]
I really didn't see Asian-American faces --

[01:04:46.06]
It's a very specific sort of invisibility.

[01:04:50.00]
I remember "All-American Girl" Margaret Cho's sitcom,

[01:04:54.09]
but it, but it was really few and far between.

[01:04:57.01]
I remember, like, as a child,

[01:04:58.09]
if there was like a toilet paper commercial

[01:05:01.01]
with an Asian-American face on it,

[01:05:02.05]
I would watch it because I was like,

[01:05:05.01]
You don't, you don't see that every day.

[01:05:07.08]
I remember at the library in San Francisco, I was like looking.
I was looking through kind of the theater, the theater section, and they, you know, they had like Christopher Durang, they had their Neil Simon, Tennessee Williams. And then I came across this anthology of plays that Che-Yu had curated and compiled. And just to see like how many different voices there were that I didn't know anything about and had never heard about in any other context was such a revelation.

We met in 2005 in my writer's lab, and for the first, like five to 10 years of knowing each other, literally all we did was know each other's work through
and through pass pages
back and forth,

like,

have a dramaturgical eye.

And got to be
very good at seeing

this is what you're trying
to do with this narrative,

and sort of based on that,

here's my thoughts
on how you can create that

in a more sort of potent,
searing way.

- Mrs. York, you already accepted
my candidate papers.

Plus! Plus my signature page.

Gathering two 200 signatures
was not trivial.

It shows the people
want me on their ballots.

- Clarissa, I appreciate
the lunch period

you spent gathering signatures,
but your GPA is not above board.
How am I getting, a, a, a
B-minus in English?

Or -- Class Council.
It's class freaking council.

Eddie is getting an A
and he can't even add fractions!

- What? What's fractions?
- You three, out.

- No, no, no, no, stay.

We're now at the point where
we're co-writing a musical,

a trilogy, a screenplay,

and I have a hard time
figuring out,

like, what's an individual
project and what's a joint one.

But I do know that, like,
our storytelling principles

are the same,
like, in terms of, like,

what we want to do politically
with the narrative

and sort of the having
a very character-based
sort of emotion-driven engine
to it like,

like, the sort of root
principles are the same.

But it has been a really
interesting journey
to go
from really different voices
to sometimes we have stories
that sound like our joint voice

and sometimes we have stories
that sound like our individuals.

For me, like developing
the humor of it

has been always about,
like,

trying out different things
and being, like,

"Does that work?
Is he laughing?

Okay, great.
It's going in the script."

And so I think
that's sort of been

how I have developed my humor
and sort of, you know,

[01:07:35.07]
some of Mike's
very principled ideas

[01:07:39.01]
about comedy has come into play,
and some of my principled ideas

[01:07:42.04]
about about character
and emotional heart

[01:07:44.06]
has come into play in his work.
The comedy doesn't matter to me

[01:07:47.09]
if I'm not emotionally
connected to it.

[01:07:50.06]
So you have about a page of
jokes that I don't care about,

[01:07:53.07]
and they would land so much more
if I actually cared.

[01:07:55.08]
And so like, you know,
having those conversations

[01:07:58.02]
and really just bartering
back and forth

[01:07:59.08]
and, you know,
make sort of like,

[01:08:01.02]
this is like,
I can't listen to this

[01:08:03.02]
because there's no comedy
in here, like.
After my play "A Language of Their Own" was at the Public Theater Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles called and asked whether I was interested in being a Mellon Fellow. And I quickly said, "I don't want to be a Mellon Fellow because I don't want to be a token."

And Gordon Davidson, the artistic director, said "You won't be a token, because with other people here doing work."

And I noticed there were labs of color, labs of color, which is the Black Lab, the Disability Lab, the Latin X Lab. And I said, "If I'm going to join you,
I'm going to start the Asian Lab."

And God bless this man.

He gave me the carte blanche to start it.

And after the grant had ended,

he continued to fund the workshop

and my stay there for the next seven years.

And while I was developing work, I realized

I didn't have enough directors some of these new plays.

And then my friends said, "Hey, why don't you direct the play?"

And of course, it's like crack.

Once you get used to it, it becomes a floodgate.

And I've been directing for the last 15 years
because of that first experience.

♪♪

♪♪

♪♪

Everyone deserves a superhero.

And so I started that with Vampire Cowboys.

And now that I get to do it for freaking Disney,

It's still important for my kids to be able to have that because I think it's -- one --

It's one thing for me as a parent to tell my kids, "Hey, be proud that you're Asian."

But me telling my kid, "Be proud that your Asian" has the kind of social and emotional equivalency of me telling them,
"Hey, eat your vegetables.
Broccoli is cool."

[01:09:49.07]
It means nothing.
It means jack all.

[01:09:51.06]
It means something else
for them to be in a room

[01:09:54.09]
staring at a giant screen
with a strong Asian character

[01:09:58.05]
and having their white or black
friends beside them going,

[01:10:01.03]
"Hey, she or he is cool,
I want to be like them."

[01:10:04.07]
That little little thing
that they get to hear

[01:10:07.04]
will effect, their kind of,
like, self-esteem DNA forever.

[01:10:10.06]
So a lot of my work is
about intergenerational rifts.

[01:10:17.03]
I think it's a it's a lot
about people

[01:10:20.00]
coming to terms
with their history

[01:10:22.05]
and the history
of their parents

[01:10:23.09]
and the history
that happened before them.
When my daughter is 15, which I guess won't be too far off in the future, I'm interested in kind of her seeing what my imperfect version of the truth is. I'm never going to show you what the authentic Chinese-American or the authentic whatever experience is, because I think authenticity is kind of a tricky word. I think I can only show you, kind of, what my, my take on, on this history was. She's going to see it and she's going to be like, "Mom, you got some of these things totally wrong. That's not how it is." And hopefully it will inspire her to
tell her own version of it and contribute in whatever way --

She doesn't have to be a storyteller --

but contribute to the world

whatever way she sees what's in front of her.

Suh:
American Hwangap is a play

that, that was an important one in my overall process.

It's a play that I wrote in 2005.

That year was the 60th anniversary of Korean Independence. I was thinking about it a lot

because, you know, Korea is a divided country.

And that division is very palpable.

That play was pivotal for me in that it was an opportunity
to really investigate
my relationship

[01:11:59.02]
with a variety of different competing things

[01:12:02.01]
that were swirling around in my head --

[01:12:04.02]
family, social-political identity,

[01:12:07.00]
Korea, the United States, all in one thing.

[01:12:10.07]
And it became this kind of was toying with this metaphor

[01:12:14.05]
of the division between North and South Korea over 60 years.

[01:12:20.05]
The completion of a life, a full life lived

[01:12:23.04]
and it's a time the 60th birthday is hwangap,

[01:12:27.03]
a time to look back on those 60 years of life

[01:12:31.09]
and consider it a full life lived.

[01:12:33.07]

[01:12:39.09]

[01:12:46.02]
I was born in
Guangdong Province in 1820.

My father is an officer
in the Chinese government.

I am one of seven children,
the youngest.

My family has told me
for two years of service

to Misters Nathaniel
and Frederick Carne.

I was part of
the Lark Development Center
like I have been
in and out of that circle

and I was in Indo-American
Arts Council

Playwright-in-Residence
at the Lark.

And as part of that,
we got this, um, commission

with Lark to write "Soldier X,"
which was a play.

Really informed upon my time,
stuck in San Diego with Mike,
because that's where he's from.
And I was really struck by how different it is out there from the East Coast in terms of just the military presence and, you know, the way in which, you know, it's so separated out here.

And so I started to look into a little bit more about military life and how reintegration process works with that.

♪♪

Nguyen: One of my first plays was this play "Trial by Water" when it was produced, I remember so vividly this moment when Ralph said to me, "Hey, you were a really good boy on this."

And I was like, "Oh, thank you."
And his response was, "That wasn't a compliment."

[01:14:14.00]
That's not the person who I hired.

[01:14:15.05]
I was looking for this person,

[01:14:17.01]
this the person who I was in life."

[01:14:19.07]
And that and it was also then also supported

[01:14:24.06]
by a very similar response from my mom.

[01:14:27.03]
You saw that work up there and was like,

[01:14:29.02]
"I don't know who that is." And I was like,

[01:14:30.05]
"What do you mean? You don't know who that is?"

[01:14:31.08]
Like, "I know you. You don't sound like that play."

[01:14:35.03]
You are rude. You are funny, you are mischievous.

[01:14:39.03]
And none of that was exemplified what was on on stage.

[01:14:46.00]
If the attacks of the last year have taught us anything,
it's that representation is not just about visibility,
but it's also a matter of life and death.
When we are portrayed as less than human,
then it becomes much easier to hate us to attack us
and even to kill us.
AAPI stories are part of the fabric of this country,
and people of color are used to watching stories
about white people and empathizing with them,
and the reverse has to happen as well.
I don't think there's a problem in American theater
with diversity, I just think they're not doing it.
Because if you want to do what, you do it.
If you don't want to do it, don't say you're doing it
because we can see what you do in every season that you produce.

So to some extent, if you want a full American theater, that the question also becomes what audiences do you see that are American?

These days, as Americans, we can't just say, "Oh, I'm Asian-American, so I'm only interested in Asian-American history." No.

The American today needs to embrace, understand and know that they are part of Black history, Black stories, Mexican stories, Latin X, all kinds of stories that make up this wonderful fabric of this country.
And if these stories are not being told on the stage,

you are not an American theater company.

There just needs to be more Asian-American stories on stage, film, and media.

Let's say we get Avengers, you get Shakespeare,

and maybe you do get like an action adventure story here

or there in the Shakespearean verse.

So in that verse, you don't get to find all these incredible,

different ways that white American people have figured out how to fight like MMA and things like that.

You get to fight with fencing, just that fencing.

And on top of that, maybe you get to punch someone,

but you get the punch
kind of like this.

[01:16:38.00]
Remember white American?
You made that up.

[01:16:40.01]
You get to do that.
That's all you get.

[01:16:42.02]
We get Avengers,
we get superpowers,

[01:16:44.05]
you get that little thing.

[01:16:45.09]
And here's the actors you get to
represent all your stories.

[01:16:49.08]
You get Dom DeLuise,
you get John Candy

[01:16:53.08]
and we'll give you
one action story.

[01:16:55.00]
You get Charlton Heston
and you're probably like,

[01:16:58.03]
"Whoa, whoa, Qui.

[01:16:59.05]
How in the hell does
Charlton Heston, Dom DeLuise

[01:17:03.04]
and John Candy
represent all of white America?

[01:17:07.00]
Hell, Shakespeare's
not even American.

[01:17:09.00]
And I'm like, "You're correct,
you're correct.

[01:17:11.03] But that is how Asian-American stories are often told."

[01:17:15.02] And then in a way,

[01:17:16.02] the Asian-American theater community

[01:17:17.09] is this --
it's not a monolith.

[01:17:20.04] It's a, it's a coalition of all these different groups

[01:17:24.03] who have come together that have some common experiences

[01:17:30.00] and really is just so much stronger together.

[01:17:33.01] ♪♪
[01:17:42.06] ♪♪

[01:17:52.01] ♪♪
[01:18:01.07] ♪♪

[01:18:11.02] ♪♪
[01:18:20.07] ♪♪

[01:18:30.02] Mirza:
I think one of the difficulties
that we've really been encountering

has been this dialog that we have at home

is so far ahead of some of the dialogs around representation

that's being had in the world and slowly starting to catch up.

I think we've seen a lot of that within the past 14 months.

During the pandemic, people have really had a reckoning

in terms of how people are treated in society

and how marginalized groups are empowered or not empowered.

And so for us, it's just wanting to move ahead.

It kind of feels like over, you know, our careers.

A lot of times we feel like we have to say

the same things over and over again
because it's not actually
penetrating into the ecosystem.

[01:19:10.08]
A lot of artists,
including myself,

[01:19:13.05]
we don't like to preach
to people with our art,

[01:19:18.06]
you know, we don't want
a clear moral lesson

[01:19:21.09]
that people can take away.

[01:19:23.08]
But what if that's
what's needed right now?

[01:19:28.06]
And it's hard to tell
what is needed right now,

[01:19:30.09]
sometimes because there's just
so much anger and hurt.

[01:19:38.06]
Those of us who were fortunate
enough to work

[01:19:41.04]
have, you know,
find ourselves on a treadmill.

[01:19:43.04]
Like, we're running from
one project to another.

[01:19:45.07]
And since we haven't
been able to do that,

[01:19:48.07]
we've been able
to take the time to go.
How can we do this better?

I'm old enough to know
that a lot of the ways
that we make theater
aren't set in stone.

They were created
during my lifetime
and they can be created
in a different way if we want.

I'm in this perpetual state
of thinking about my kids.

You know, they're both
Asian-American.

My oldest is part
of the LGBTQ spectrum.

And so I'm constantly
wanting to make sure
that they get representation
not just in the art they see,
but just being able to feel
like they're part of the American fabric.

That often I think, as you know, being people of color,

we're often exoticized and kind of pushed to the side.

And I don't want them to kind of have the same experiences I had growing up.

- When the pandemic hit,

I was in the midst of the New York premiere of my play "Cambodian Rock Band."

I was also supposed to be the second most produced playwright of the season,

as per American theater magazine,

and just having to suddenly juggle career work,

with child care with basically just trying to figure out how to survive.

The first performance of it
was on the night

[01:21:33.00]
that "Parasite" won the Oscar.

[01:21:35.03]
And this combined
with all the other shows

[01:21:39.07]
by Asian-American playwrights
in New York at the time.

[01:21:42.03]
It just gave us
this feeling out there.

[01:21:45.00]
And that felt like
such a galvanizing moment,

[01:21:47.03]
so it really was a slap
in the face

[01:21:50.09]
to recognize
how short lived

[01:21:55.03]
and, and kind of diminished some
of those accomplishments felt.

[01:22:01.00]
And now as we return,

[01:22:03.00]
I think that we are
trying to reconsider

[01:22:05.09]
how we create work
and sort of who it's for

[01:22:09.02]
and how to make it
a part of our daily practice.

[01:22:13.05]
Again, with that context
of like this is where

[01:22:17.04]
we kind of

grew up as artists,

[01:22:18.09]
it's also where
people have been attacked

[01:22:21.01]
over the past year,
which is a trip.

[01:22:23.02]
I was an hate attack survivor.

[01:22:25.06]
I was able to acknowledge
that in my work,

[01:22:30.07]
it's taken me a while

[01:22:32.04]
to overcome
my own sense of shame,

[01:22:36.06]
really over having been attacked
and embrace it

[01:22:41.03]
and feel like it's important

to say that I was

[01:22:43.09]
a hate attack survivor.
- This play,

[01:22:48.03]
"Charles Francis Chan's Exotic
Oriental Murder Mystery,"

[01:22:50.09]
it's a history of stereotyping,
the history of stereotyping

[01:22:53.07]
evasions in America
and the iconography.

[01:22:57.07] But how it also relates to legislation,

[01:22:59.06] how it relates to just everything that, like,

[01:23:04.00] what Asian-America has come to represent

[01:23:06.06] in our cultural mythology.

[01:23:08.09] And so, I just went on this deep dive

[01:23:10.06] into the history of all those stereotypes.

[01:23:15.01] Basically, "Hate[bleep]" was sort of my response to this idea

[01:23:21.03] of Muslim-American identity

[01:23:23.03] and how it's seen and how disempowered women

[01:23:27.05] tend to be within Muslim-American narratives

[01:23:30.03] and wanted to really just show sort of like

[01:23:33.05] how differing politics could attract people to one another,

[01:23:37.08] but also ultimately create
friction in the world view.

[01:23:42.09] And can they actually last together?

[01:23:45.02] We move through the world with many different personas,

[01:23:48.03] with many different ways in which we present ourselves.

[01:23:51.02] And so that’s part of my work is wanting to really challenge

[01:23:54.05] how the audience views things.

[01:23:56.07] "Tiger Style" was the last play that I wrote at Juilliard,

[01:24:00.04] and it was all the controversy around Asian tiger parenting

[01:24:04.03] But the kind of spark for it was all the controversy

[01:24:07.08] around Asian tiger parenting

[01:24:10.01] and that concept of a tiger mom.

[01:24:13.05] And me having lived through that and feeling as though the dialog

[01:24:18.05] around the talking heads that were sort of saying

[01:24:20.09] that this was terrible was
just like a little one-sided.

[01:24:23.05]
So it's about brother and sister

[01:24:25.08]
that were eggheads
that went to Harvard

[01:24:27.04]
and that we're really
successful at academics

[01:24:29.09]
like slamming
against being adults and feeling

[01:24:34.02]
as though they were boxed in
by stereotypes about Asians.

[01:24:37.07]
And the first half takes place
in Irvine, California.

[01:24:40.07]
The second half takes place
in Shenzhen, China.

[01:24:42.08]
And it's about them
kind of finding who they are

[01:24:45.08]
while squabbling
with each other.

[01:24:48.00]
Well, I'm working on sort of
new versions

[01:24:51.03]
of "Soft Power" and "Aida" also,

[01:24:53.05]
because Disney's going
to bring that back.

[01:24:55.07]
And we're doing a much more
African-centric version of that.

Directed by Shelly Williams.

One of the things during the pandemic

that I wanted to focus on is,

again, the sort of history of Asian-American activism

and I've been researching a show

about the San Francisco State University Third-World

Student Strike in 1968

because it's the place where, again,

the term "Asian-American" was invented.

It was a moment of solidarity between what we then called.

Third World people, and but it was also the moment

when the model minority trope

became introduced into the national discussion,
so it feels to me like an inflection point
that says a lot about where we ended up
when the pandemic started
and the spike in anti-Asian hate happened.
I have another play that's called "Exclusion"
that is around the legacy
of the effects of the Chinese Exclusion Act.
I have a new play called "The Heart Sellers"
that's set in the early 1970s.
That is, that deals with the effects of the Heart Seller Act,
the Immigration Reform Act of 1968.
I think if there were more producers that were interested
in taking an opportunity with Asian artists
and Asian work,
that would be a change.

[01:26:25.08]
And I also think Broadway's
its own creature

[01:26:27.07]
because it's about
being commercial.

[01:26:29.07]
And I think people who want to
make the money selling tickets

[01:26:33.05]
can be smarter in thinking that
there must be more audiences

[01:26:36.09]
than just a tourist audience

[01:26:38.03]
that we're catering to
at the moment.

[01:26:40.02]
So it takes innovation
that all sides,

[01:26:42.03]
particularly again from the top,
the leadership.

[01:26:45.00]
How do we develop a pipeline
for not only more BIPOC writers

[01:26:53.01]
and directors and playwrights,
but also technical people,

[01:26:58.09]
people on the crew,
designers, all of these areas,

[01:27:03.05]
everything needs to be
re-envisioned.
I'm working on a new work by Christina Wong, who is a performer in Los Angeles at New York Theater Workshop.

She has been chronicling her experiences during the pandemic.

And one thing that I do admire her, beyond that she is a great writer as well, is that she has taken on a great task during the pandemic by sewing masks for a lot of people and created an Auntie Sewing Squad.

So I think this project is to kind of see what she has done and also kind of bring us closer as a community together after a long pandemic being --

having been so isolated.
I think in the,
in the next 20 years,

[01:27:52.01]
I'm interested in seeing

[01:27:54.06]
the next generation
of artists coming up.

[01:27:57.03]
I'm interested in kind of
uplifting and mentoring.

[01:28:01.00]
Who's, who's coming after
and who's doing work

[01:28:04.01]
that's wildly different
from my own

[01:28:06.04]
and kind of making
that community healthier.

[01:28:09.03]
I think I'm also interested
in how my storytelling skills

[01:28:14.09]
transfer to other forms,

[01:28:18.02]
whether, whether it's TV
and film or musicals

[01:28:21.06]
or something else
I haven't even thought of.

[01:28:24.01]
I think it's it's always
exciting to jump into something

[01:28:27.04]
that you don't quite have
full control over yet

[01:28:32.00]
and to have to play, catch and learn.

[01:28:34.02] So I just want to keep learning.

♪♪

[01:28:43.05] And so I think that then to have a residency

[01:28:46.02] within Ma-Yi and think of ourselves as our art is,

[01:28:49.03] our job has then shifted the way that we,

[01:28:53.06] if we have a production somewhere else,

[01:28:56.02] think about what we're bringing.

[01:28:58.04] And I think with Ma-Yi like, we've become very empowered,

[01:29:01.07] like, as playwrights and as individuals,

[01:29:03.07] because I think, you know,

[01:29:06.02] Ma-Yi itself is an institution that's like you are.

[01:29:09.04] You are, you know, you're both great playwrights

[01:29:11.00] and you deserve to be
working on your plays full time.

[01:29:13.07]
You know, as parents, it felt impossible.

[01:29:16.06]
Every theater was like we're child-friendly.

[01:29:18.05]
And then all of a sudden, you know,

[01:29:20.05]
like I had to park a stroller in a parking spot

[01:29:23.09]
and climb up with a like a crawling baby

[01:29:27.01]
up like six flights of concrete without -- Yeah.

[01:29:30.08]
And so and at a certain point, we're just like, you know what?

[01:29:33.08]
Well, it's going to get what we need and

[01:29:36.00]
and we're just going to do like clear the space

[01:29:40.01]
for us to do the work we need to do.

[01:29:42.03]
I've been telling a lot of people that

[01:29:43.09]
this is the disruption

[01:29:45.03]
that you've been praying for
and you did nothing.

[01:29:47.08]
So our job right now
is to rebuild,

[01:29:50.00]
reconstruct new ways of looking,
living and working.

[01:29:54.06]
So I'm hoping that once
we come out, a lot more people,

[01:29:58.02]
particularly the next generation
of people, are going to say,

[01:30:01.00]
I'm going to start creating
my own theater.

[01:30:03.00]
I'm not going to do work
that feels right, equitable.

[01:30:07.02]
I'm going to find homes
which mean something to me

[01:30:10.00]
instead of going back and
returning to what was before.