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## What a Drag: East West Players Opens 'La Cage Aux Folles'

By Eddie Kim   May 17, 2016



Little Tokyo theater company East West Players is staging a new production of the 1983 show *La Cage aux Folles*. It opens Wednesday, May 18.

photo by Michael Lamont

DTLA — Tim Dang is sitting in the middle of a quiet David Henry Hwang Theater, the venue that Little Tokyo's East West Players calls home. The light scent of cut plywood hangs in the air, wafting from the construction onstage.

The days are numbered for Dang to perch like this, peering at the stage, imagining his actors darting left and right as music fills the room. Last summer he announced his impending retirement as producing artistic director for East West Players, a title he has held for 22 years. The musical *La Cage aux Folles*, which opens this week, will be the last show he directs for the company.

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The timing is intentional. About two years ago, when Dang was pondering his retirement, he daydreamed about staging *La Cage* for his farewell show. He had never directed or performed in the 1983 musical by Jerry Herman and Harvey Fierstein, but found inspiration in the story of a gay couple (a drag club owner and a drag queen), struggling to contend with their son's straight-laced, socially conservative future in-laws.

"I thought this was a good fit for what was happening in the world, at least a few years ago, with the gay community pushing for marriage rights," Dang, who is gay, said. "As it happens, the talk about diversity is really heating up now, with even the federal government getting into transgender rights, for instance. So the show feels relevant."

*La Cage* opens Wednesday, May 18, and runs through June 26. The musical begins with Georges (the club owner, played by veteran stage actor Jon Jon Briones) and his high-strung partner Albin (Gedde Watanabe) getting ready for another nightly show.

Albin departs for the stage, but Georges is interrupted by his 24-year-old son Jean-Michael (born after a fling with a woman), who announces his engagement to Anne Dindon. Embarrassed by Georges and Albin's relationship, Jean-Michael has fooled his fiancée and her parents into thinking that Georges is a retired diplomat — and married to Jean-Michael's biological mother, Sybil.



La Cage Aux Folles  
photo by Michael Lamont

The story unfolds as Georges and an initially reluctant Albin try different ruses to fool the Dindons, ultimately leading to a disastrous reveal. In typical EWP fashion, La Cage is pulled from its European setting and placed in an Asian locale, partly inspired by a psychedelic Thailand episode of Anthony Bourdain's travel show "Parts Unknown."

"What's really interesting is that our set designer, Victoria Petrovich, took note of this episode and the 'ladyboy cabaret' that Bourdain goes to," Dang said, referring to Thailand's rowdy and iconic drag shows. "Our idea is that the show takes place somewhere where same-sex marriage is not approved, like Thailand, yet there's a kind of paradoxical fascination with drag clubs."

The theater company reached out to Briones and Watanabe for the lead roles. Both have long resumes, with Watanabe's credits including the over-the-top Long Duk Dong in the 1984 John Hughes film Sixteen Candles, while Briones is a Broadway and West End star who recently performed the role of The Engineer in a London staging of Miss Saigon.

La Cage's main duo requires sensitivity, Briones noted, because they could quickly become a comic image of a gay "odd couple," rather than two people trying to adjust their identities and expectations when faced with an unhappy son.

"When I was thinking about accepting the role, I thought about my gay friends, 'gay' gestures, things like that. You play a real human, and they can't be a caricature," Briones said. "For me, I connected with Georges trying to be a good father. I have a family, too. I kept it really grounded."

### **Show Before the Show**

The show doesn't begin and end on stage.

East West Players secured a grant from Los Angeles County to hire six at-risk LGBT youth as paid interns, with the aim of educating the cast about LGBT rights and terminology, and teaching the youngsters the business of theater. The move was a partnership with the Los Angeles LGBT Center, where Dang's partner, Darrel Cummings, serves as the chief of staff.

“We’re building a dance floor out in the courtyard, and these interns are programming the outdoor stage with dance music from the ’80s to now that drag entertainers love to sing or dance to. Everything from Madonna to Beyonce to Gaga to Donna Summer,” Dang said.

The music will be bumping early, with EWP also staging a drag show in the courtyard 15 minutes before each performance. The main-floor bathrooms are also being relabeled as gender neutral, out of respect and advocacy for transgender and gender-fluid people.

Yet Dang is quick to point out that La Cage isn’t solely serving as a lesson on LGBT issues. Briones added that it uses a flamboyant narrative to drill into a universal idea: that romantic love between two long-term partners, and familial love, ebbs and flows in unpredictable ways.



La Cage Aux Folles  
photo by Michael Lamont

“The issues are about what it takes to be accepted, and that anxiety you feel when you introduce your family to somebody,” Briones said. “It could be about being poor and the pressure to pretend to be rich. It’s a similar feeling.”

Amid the rollercoaster of feelings unfolding on stage, Dang appears to be his usual unflappable self. He flashed a wry smile as he talked about stepping away from EWP. Guiding the nation’s oldest performing theater of color has been, as he bluntly put it, “an incredible grind.”

Dang will remain at EWP for several months as a consultant while the theater searches for his successor — likely to be split into two positions, with one person on the artistic side and another focusing on management and fundraising. After that, he’s interested in continuing his efforts running the annual national Asian American Theater Conference and directing shows around the city.

For now, though, Dang is focused on getting ready for opening night.

“The dress rehearsal this past weekend was the expected train wreck,” Dang said, a laugh echoing through the theater. “Even if this is the last show, some things don’t change.”

*La Cage aux Folles runs May 18-June 26 at East West Players, 120 Judge John Aiso St., (213) 625-7000 or [eastwestplayers.org](http://eastwestplayers.org).*

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