

M. Butterfly



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF DAVID HENRY HWANG

David Henry Hwang was born in Los Angeles, California in 1947. He was the eldest of three children, and the only boy in his family. Hwang received his undergraduate degree at Stanford University, where he majored in English and conducted his first-ever play. Hwang attended, but did not graduate from, the Yale School of Drama. His first play, *FOB*, premiered in 1980 and went on to win many other plays, including *The Dinner and the Railroad* (1982), which was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize for Drama, and the Tony Award-winning *M. Butterfly* (1988). Hwang has also built a career writing for radio and music of theater, and worked on adaptations of Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* and Giuseppe Verdi's *Aida*, among other projects. His most recent plays, *Kingfisher* and *Calm and Alert*, premiered in 2014. The same year Hwang began working as director of the playwriting concentration at Columbia University School of the Arts.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In 1949, a conflict between the Chinese Communist Party and the Nationalist Party, also known as Kuomintang, led to the installation of a Communist government led by Chairman Mao Zedong. The frequent reference to "the Revolution" that characters like Song make throughout the play refer to that period of political upheaval. The events of *M. Butterfly*, which begins in 1960, take place shortly after the Indochina War, in which France fought unsuccessfully to maintain control of its colonies in Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam. The Vietnamese forces that led the resistance against France were aided by the Communist government in neighboring China, who supplied modern weapons from the Soviet Union that helped the Vietnamese to match and eventually defeat what might otherwise have been overwhelming French forces. Other Western nations, including the United States, refused to intervene to help France hold onto their colonies, and so the war was lost. The Indochina War ended in 1974, and in 1975, when the action of the play begins, North Vietnamese forces are preparing to send thousands of troops into Vietnam and soon control of the country will fall to their grasp — this mission is an early initiative in what Americans will come to know as the Vietnam War. The Cultural Revolution, a violent, decade-long effort by the Communist government under Mao to purge remnants of Western capitalist influence from Chinese culture and enforce Communist ideology across the nation, also provides a backdrop from the events of the play. As an opera singer — a profession that caters to bourgeois values — Song is

considered a rival by the Communist government, and is consequently sent to work on a commune in rural China to be "reeducated" in the political ideology of his country.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Throughout a work of literature, Edward Taylor's *Orientation* is an academic exploration of many of the same political and cultural questions Hwang examines through drama in *M. Butterfly*. Other extremely popular works of Asian-American literature, such as Minnie Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* and Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*, are often grouped with *M. Butterfly* as texts that formed a foundation for postcolonial American literary tradition. As a work of post-colonial literature, *M. Butterfly* has elements in common with the works of Salman Rushdie, Homi K. Bhabha, and Arundhati Ghosh, among many others. As a dramatic work based on true events, what follows with political issues as well as interpersonal relationships, *M. Butterfly* bears some resemblance to Milan Kundera's *The Laughing Project* and Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*, though these plays differ from Hwang's in many significant regards.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *M. Butterfly*
- **When Written:** 1988
- **When Published:** Published on Broadway March 25, 1988
- **Literary Period:** Post-Modernism, Post-Colonialism
- **Genre:** Drama
- **Setting:** Beijing, 1960-1968 and Paris, 1968-70 and 1988-1989
- **Character:** Song, singer, is seduced by Gullmond for the first time, and Gullmond marries Song in favor of the fantasy of *Butterfly*.
- **Antagonist:** The question of antagonism is a complex one in *M. Butterfly*. In some ways, Song is the antagonist, since he is responsible for Gullmond's imprisonment and sends much of the play's meaning to Gullmond. In some important ways, Gullmond himself is the villain — he embodies the West's (and ignorance and prejudice the play condemns). Both characters are victims of the racist and sexist social context in which they live, and of the legacy of Western imperialism that provides them. Gullmond exhibits his terrible class from other Westerners eager to justify the exploitation of Asia, and Song becomes entangled with a political movement that grows in response to that exploitation.

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