

## Aging Youth Gang

by Norman Yeung

### ***Artist Statement***

**BRIEF SYNOPSIS:** A trio of senior citizens are none too pleased with yet another hipster coffee shop gentrifying their Chinatown, so they deal with the business the best way they know how: Sabotage!

#### **DEVELOPMENT HISTORY/AWARDS:**

Workshops and public readings by Theatre Passe Muraille, fu-GEN Theatre, and Crow's Theatre Workshop by Crow's Theatre at Loughborough Lake Writer's Retreat

Tom Hendry Award for Comedy – Finalist

Tyrone Guthrie Award at Stratford Festival

Ontario Arts Council Recommender Grants from Factory Theatre, fu-GEN Theatre, Tarragon, Theatre Passe Muraille

Ontario Arts Council Grant for Theatre Projects

Toronto Arts Council Grant for Playwriting

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When you see elder Chinese people collecting bottles on the street, do you wonder what their stories are? I wonder if they have someone concerned for their safety. I think about the role of elders in Chinese immigrant families. And that makes me think about Chinatown, that cornerstone of Chinese-Canadian history.

In *Aging Youth Gang*, a trio of Chinese senior citizens – one of whom collects bottles – are none too pleased with the new hipster coffee shop (or, “coffee-shop-art-music-performance-bar”) gentrifying their Chinatown. The seniors engage Zephyr, the shop owner, in diplomatic dialogue about how he intends to support the Chinatown community. Zephyr is dismissive and doesn’t care that his shop inside a slick, new condo building was built over a historic benevolent association. And so, the seniors deal with the shop the best way they know how: Sabotage! They get themselves kicked out – captured on video – and social media slaps Zephyr with a reputation for being a jerk to seniors. They reclaim the space by doing the same activities they used to do at the benevolent association, like playing mah-jong and ping-pong. They inject Chinese culture into the shop by playing traditional instruments and practising tai chi. In their subversive way, the seniors are trying to integrate the coffee shop with the old Chinatown they once knew.

Things take a turn when King-Fai, the leader of the troublemakers, discovers his own granddaughter Chloe has been hired to make the coffee shop more successful. The seniors must “save Chinatown” by executing their bizarre stunts... without getting Chloe fired. She has a journey of reconnecting with her heritage, while the seniors learn to accept some of Chinatown’s evolution, and respect how the new generation might carry their community forward.

I contemplate my own role in gentrification. Chinatowns are inextricable from my life; my father worked in Vancouver’s Chinatown and I choose to live within a few blocks from Toronto’s. I’m also an artist – that creative class that’s often the harbinger of gentrification as we seek affordability

to live and practice our craft. I reckon with keeping cherished neighbourhoods like Chinatown from disappearing, while supporting artists' spaces like the coffee shop in this play, as we risk losing both at the hands of unaffordable condo developments.

As my own parents get older, recent years of random, unprovoked abuse against Asian elders resonate profoundly. I'm attentive to the plight of older folks whom our society pushes aside. As loneliness and isolation can be pervasive among elders, I see how hang-outs over a cup of coffee can be vital, and how a loss of community can be damaging.

I am increasingly reflecting on the concepts of family and legacy. I consider the choices we make that delight or disappoint our parents, and how much we let their hopes influence our actions. King-Fai reconciles having no control over how his children and Chloe have grown and changed; his legacy looks nothing like he hoped, akin to that great legacy of Chinese-Canadian ancestors, in flux – Chinatown.

I am not intentionally writing metaphors for other communities and world events, but I welcome any audience finding resonance of colonialism, hegemony, and reclaiming space. I want this play to generate discussions about social issues and be meaningful to people of diverse experiences. *Aging Youth Gang* can speak to any cultural community as concerns about gentrification and our treatment of elders extend well beyond Chinatown and Chinese immigrants. It bridges audiences of multiple generations, reflected in King-Fai and granddaughter Chloe's relationship growing closer as their Chinatown evolves.

My objective is to bring more people from the Chinese and Asian diasporas to our theatres. I'm offering things we might identify with, from amusing details like White Rabbit candies to profound questions like how to keep our culture alive. This play presents Chinese traditions to be celebrated by those familiar, and invites the unfamiliar to join in the celebration. *Aging Youth Gang* is built to be accessible and entertaining to a mainstream audience, with opportunities for bold artistic choices like vibrant lion dance, tai chi choreography, and spoken word poetry and music. It welcomes everyone as a warm-hearted, fun, energetic comedy spotlighting an Asian-diaspora story with universal resonance and social commentary, while providing roles for older Asian performers.