

Something to crow about

Hong Kong beat off Hollywood in wresting the rights to Blackbird, a controversial play about sex abuse, writes Yenni Kwok

For a small theatre, securing the right to stage *Blackbird*, David Harrower's much talked-about play, is a coup – even more so when the company hails from Hong Kong, not exactly at the centre of the theatrical world.

Blackbird, a confrontation between a middle-aged man and a 27-year-old woman who was 12 when they had sex, created a storm when it was staged at the Edinburgh International Festival two years ago. Legendary German director Peter Stein, who once said “I don't read new plays,” made an exception to direct the premiere in Edinburgh.

Sean Curran, co-artistic director of Theatre du Pif, says that convincing Harrower to allow the play to be performed in Hong Kong wasn't easy. “I fought tooth and nail,” he says. “Hollywood knocked on Harrower's door, wanting to make his play into a film, and he turned them down. We had to prove to Harrower that we had the calibre to stage it.”

Luck played a role. Curran met Harrower when the Edinburgh-born playwright read his first play, *Knives in Hens*, in the Scottish capital more than a decade ago, “before he became a big star”, Curran says. “It also helped that he's Scottish like me and we're both from Edinburgh.”

Blackbird won the 2007 Laurence Olivier Award for best new play, and Curran got the idea of bringing it to Hong Kong about 12 months after seeing it in Edinburgh in 2005. “*Blackbird* is a great play,” he says. “It was one of the most powerful, beautiful pieces of theatre I ever saw. I was so much into the play, forgetting to notice anything else like the lighting and props. It pulled me in – and that rarely happens in theatre.”

The work was commissioned by the festival and attracted some major theatrical talent. It has been staged in London's West End (also by Stein), in Berlin's Schaubuehne am Platz (Stein's old base, although the German-language version was directed by Australian Benedict Andrews), and in New York (with Hollywood actor Jeff Daniels as the lead).

Theatre du Pif's performance will be the first in the Asia-Pacific region - even preceding the Sydney Theatre Company's production, to be directed by Australian-born actress Cate Blanchett in December.

The Asian premiere is a collaboration of Hong Kong and Canadian artistic talent and will be directed by Canadian Jovanni Sy, who says theatre actors should "comfort the disturbed and disturb the comforted". It will star Theatre du Pif's Bonni Chan Lai-chu as Una and Ashley Wright, one of Canada's leading stage actors, as Ray.

Sy was in Hong Kong last year to present staged readings of three Chinese-Canadian plays, including one he wrote, at the Fringe Club. The artistic director of Cahoots Theatre in Toronto, Sy says theatre should be the voice of an outsider. In which case, *Blackbird* may be his ideal play, dealing as it does with two ostracised characters: a paedophile and his victim. "They are, indeed, outcasts of society," Sy says. "They're drawn together because they have no place in society."

In the play, Ray has changed his name after his release from jail and built a new life. But Una remains haunted by the affair. At one point, she says she feels like a ghost and that people talk about her as if she isn't there. Nobody will let her speak, either. "Both are certainly placed as outcasts for different reasons," says Curran, who produces the show. "The victims of sexual abuse are often like Una. They're rejected and neglected by both society and their family."

Sy says there's nothing black and white about the play. "It's about human relations, about how they move on from the past, and the complexities of their relationship. It presents a much larger philosophical argument about a horrible trauma."

Although Ray tries to move on with his life – he has since married and become a parent – Una relives the trauma every day and is unable to forget him. Fifteen years after the affair, she stumbles on a photo of Ray in a trade magazine. She seeks him out and confronts him.

Sy says the play asks many crucial questions about life, trauma and relationships. "Can you escape the past? How important is it to move on? There are no easy answers to these questions."

Curran says *Blackbird* “presents shades of grey. More than anything, we want people to ask questions.”

The provocative theme aside, *Blackbird* is a rare chance to see a major contemporary play in Hong Kong. “There aren't many contemporary plays coming from Europe,” Curran says. “There are productions of old classics like Chekhov or Shakespeare, and sometimes modern classics like Tennessee Williams, but not important contemporary pieces.”

For Theatre du Pif (French slang for nose and the sixth sense), staging *Blackbird* is a departure from its regular repertoire, which is largely devised theatre. However, Sy is used to text-based theatre, and both sides say they're at ease with the collaboration.

”Theatre work often consumes life,” Sy says. “It can be demanding and it's tempting to cut corners. But not with Sean and Bonni. With them, I feel like kindred spirits.”

Curran wanted to invite Harrower to the Hong Kong performance. “Unfortunately, he has no time. He's so busy now. But perhaps when we have re-runs.” Curran sounds optimistic – perhaps he has a sixth sense.

Blackbird, Studio Theatre, Hong Kong Cultural Centre. In English with Chinese surtitles. Thu, Fri, 8pm; Sat, 4pm, 8.30pm; Sept 2, 5pm, HK\$120-HK\$180. Inquiries: 2904 2030

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