

back over the events of his life as the narrator and you see these scenes come to life. That is how *Equus* works, that's how *Amadeus* works, and that's how *M. Butterfly* works.

But because of the way Hwang understands human nature, *M. Butterfly* veered away from the previous Shaffer models. He questioned the idea of someone being able to keep control of his own story. He was skeptical "about whether or not it's possible for an individual to hold on to the narrative of their whole life. I feel that at some point in our lives we tend to lose hold of our own narrative; we feel like we don't have control over it anymore." Someone else steps in to seize command, so to speak, and they tell the story instead of you, with their intentions instead of yours.

M. Butterfly diverges radically from the Shaffer structure by changing the master of the narrative. In the first act, Hwang explained, the character that steps forward and begins to address the audience at the beginning of the play is, in this case, René Gallimard, the French diplomat in China: "He has control over the narrative. But he begins, over the course of the story, to have an affair with a Chinese actress, whose name is Song Liling. So then in Act Two of the play, the two of them struggle for control of the narrative. And in the third act, the other character, Song Liling, has control over the narrative." Hwang switched the point of view drastically in the last act, completely reversing the power dynamics, drastically modifying the Shaffer structure.

Then he moved on to the next problem for this idea to take shape as a theatrical work. He needed a beginning and an end, and for that he drew upon the original Puccini opera:

At the beginning of the play, the diplomat fantasizes that he's Pinkerton, the American Lieutenant from the opera *Madame Butterfly*, and that he has found his butterfly. And then by the end of the play, the Frenchman realizes that it's actually *he* who's the butterfly and that it's *he* who was deceived by love. And the Chinese spy who perpetrated that deceit is therefore the real Pinkerton. Once I knew that, it was relatively easy to write the play.

There's a lot more to writing a play, of course, such as creating compelling characters that speak in believable dialogue, so it's not quite *that* easy. But now that he had the idea fully articulated, he could move on to all the other elements. In the end, a small anecdote grew into a full-blown dramatic concept through a dialogue with source texts and structural models.

The trick is to throw in your line and be ready when you feel a tug. Once an idea has bitten, you have to give it play and then reel it in.

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GILLIAN PEDERSON-KRAG

Rehearsal, 1991
oil on canvas, 32 x 36 in



courtesy: the artist