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Making Overtures

B.D. Wong was thrilled by *Pacific Overtures* when he was a kid. Now he's in the lead **By Michael Giltz**

Surely it's fate that B.D. Wong would star in the first Broadway revival of Stephen Sondheim's *Pacific Overtures*. After all, it's the show that convinced the Tony-winning Wong that he could be an actor in the first place.

"It came through San Francisco right after it closed on Broadway," says Wong during a break from rehearsals for the

show, which opens on December 2. "I chased [the star] Mako down the street after the performance and got his autograph on my *Playbill* and kept it forever."

Wong is also busy editing *Social Grace*, the first film he has directed. Somewhere in between, he films episodes of *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit* and, of course, cares for his 4-year-old son. All of this activity he

traces to seeing *Pacific Overtures* that first time.

The 42-year-old Wong struggles to explain exactly what that moment meant: "It meant that if I wanted to be an actor—which I did; I was extremely passionate about school plays—and I was cursed—and you know I use the word with tongue in cheek—in my body and in my race, I was not going to be banished to a life of playing horrible, menial, embarrassing, and demeaning roles. I was energized with a sense of hope."

Wong—who shot to fame and won every award in sight with his legendary Broadway turn as a gender-bending spy in *M. Butterfly*—says the most exciting part of this show is getting to work with Sondheim. He explains passionately why having the show helmed by a Japanese director, Amon Miyamoto, lets *Pacific Overtures* resonate in ways it never did before. "It's similar to the idea that gay actors give gay roles more resonance. A brilliant nongay actor can be brilliant in a gay part. And yet there's something that often happens when a gay actor plays a gay role that is extremely powerful. The pain is true. The joy is true. And any gay person can identify it immediately."

Wong is loath to discuss his private life other than to say that he and his longtime partner Richie (who have apparently broken up and reportedly no longer live together) love and respect each other and are taking their son together on interviews for kindergarten. But Wong doesn't hesitate to say that coming out in *The Advocate* in June 2003 was a powerful, positive experience.

"I've come to the point very recently—in the last five years, definitely—of fully understanding that who I am is a great thing," he says. "I don't mean I'm better than anyone else, but I used to really bemoan my gayness and my Asian-ness. They were intertwined inextricably. I could not separate what bothered me more about myself, what gave me more pain."

How did it change? "The core of that is parenthood," says Wong. "The fatherhood led to coming out, and coming out led to feeling extremely liberated. The coming-out released me from shame, and releasing myself from shame helped me to...see, I don't know. To see me through [my son's] eyes? I don't know. It's just very positive." ■