

# Getting in Dutch

By Michael Feingold

**Deshima**  
By Ping Chong  
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At the end of the 16th century, traders from the Dutch East India Company began negotiating with Japan. Young Asian Americans can dance a spectacular Lindy. "Arles," declared Van Gogh, "will be the Japan of the future." Portuguese missionaries converted many 17th-century Japanese. The Dutch novelist Multatuli (Edward Douwes Dekker) tried in vain to stop his countrymen's maltreatment of the Indonesians. On the streets of New York, artists sometimes sell handpainted postcards three for a dollar. Dutch merchants brought the Shogun and his court many gifts, including a shipment of black slaves. To Japanese Americans, the World War II internment camps are the central trauma of modern history. When the Dutch surrendered Indonesia in World War II, the invading Japanese army was welcomed by anti-Dutch Javanese nationalists, many of whom it subsequently imprisoned or tortured to death. The atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki were nicknamed "Little Boy" and "Fat Man" by the Air Force. In one of Stephen Sondheim's musicals, an Asian American actor played the role of Commodore Perry. Most of the 17th-century Japanese who converted to Christianity were subsequently massacred. Shortly before losing his mind, Van Gogh painted *Flight of Crows*. To prevent Western cultural influence from spreading, the *daimyos* built a fan-shaped island in Nagasaki harbor, to which the Dutch traders were confined; it was called Deshima.

As is Ping Chong's rich, winding, evocative new piece, from which most, though not all, of the above facts are taken, in a sequenced disorder meant to convey Chong's complex and quirky stage tactics. Like its namesake, *Deshima* is fan-shaped, its themes and images curving round to, or folding back on, one another in startling juxtapositions. It's also, like the island, elaborately artificial, and not wholly successful in containing its materials. Taken singly, the ironies it pulls up from history and flashes flamboyantly in your face are sometimes all too familiar—a few of them, as noted, from *Pacific Overtures*—and all too glibly laid out. But they're made up for by the overall gorgeousness of the piece—Chong's eye, as always, is near infallible—and the bigness of its conception: As irony succeeds irony, and Western brutality gives way to Eastern (or vice versa), you get the sense of history as one long, perplexing hell, in which the Western obsession with trade and profit slowly engulfs the East, the ways of which are not the ways of the



**Deshima: Unpacific overtures make cross cultures clash.**

parallel obsession with isolation and integrity of spirit.

One of Chong's great moments, early on, has the Dutch trader and the *daimyo* simultaneously spouting at the audience the most bigoted descriptions imaginable of each other—which would sum up the whole matter in one neat joke, if the bigotry didn't have the numerous and horrible grand-scale ramifications Chong goes on to narrate. The Christian missionaries, welcomed in peace, smash and desecrate Buddhist and Shinto shrines; the Shogun's men, in due course, throw Christianized Japanese into pits of poisonous snakes, or force them to put out their parents' eyes. And the roll call welcoming newly baptized Japanese into the Catholic church is paralleled by a later one, using the same names, that summons Japanese Americans to the internment camps; Chong twists a silent visual irony round the verbal one by juxtaposing this second roll call with a projected collage of Japanese Americans in U.S. Army uniforms, one of many moments when the images speak as lucidly as the piece's astonishingly large (for Chong) number of words.

Van Gogh comes into Chong's picture as the Dutch-born artist who invented his own exotic land of the artist's imagination, with

attempting to Westernize an Eastern place or vice versa. He's embodied by the black performance artist Michael Matthews, Chong's co-creator on the piece, who functions as its narrator and interlocutor, his African heritage partially isolating him from the claims of both East and West. Van Gogh's madness, his loneliness of spirit, his struggles to survive, make a running counterpoint to what's essentially the story of a struggle for economic dominance, with God and nationalism as its covert masks, and an ironic coda when the Japanese buy *Sunflowers* for an enormous price (while Matthews, dressed as one of Van Gogh's sowers, plays a starving contemporary artist peddling his postcards). In a similar double twist earlier on, a fabulous, noisy jitterbug gives way to the austere gravity of a Javanese *wayang*, over which we hear the CEO of Sony describing the creation of the Walkman. Here, as in all its best moments, *Deshima's* disruptions of word with image, image with sound, send out tendrils of disturbing thought, rather than neat, encapsulating ironies. Instead of settling history's hash, it raises the notion that the world might be a perpetual culture clash, in which we forever get each oth-

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