Prominent Taiwanese director and playwright Stan Lai wrote Secret Love in Peach Blossom Land for his theatre company in 1986. In the play, the casts of two very different plays accidentally show up on the same stage for their dress rehearsals. One, Secret Love, is a tragedy set in 1949 and the 1980s, and the other, The Peach Blossom Land, a farcical historical play. Lai recently came to OSF to talk about his play, which he will also direct. An edited transcript of that discussion follows.

The history of the production
Secret Love in Peach Blossom Land was the second play of our then-new theatre group, Performance Workshop, which will be 30 years old next year. Many people call our group the catalyst for modern theatre in Taiwan, which also makes it a catalyst for all of Chinese-speaking theatre. The first play we did we thought was a highly experimental two-man show about a dying tradition of stand-up comedy in Chinese, but it turned out to be a hit. The audiotaape of that performance sold 2 million copies in Taiwan, which only had 20 million people. Immediately, our theatre group was on the map.

In 1986, we came up with Secret Love in Peach Blossom Land. The inspiration for writing this play came when we were attending the dress rehearsal with a friend who was an avant-garde theatre artist. She was trying to finish her dress rehearsal at about 5:00 in the afternoon. Suddenly, we saw these people who weren’t part of her cast come onstage and go about their business. They moved the piano on and put up a banner that announced the graduation ceremony of some kindergarten! We’re sitting in the audience, wondering what is going on, and our friend is going nuts on the stage. She is shouting, “This place is mine, this is my time.” The parents and kids start coming in and we are watching all of this. This is what happened and still can happen in our part of the world.

If you had asked me in 1986 if we would still be doing this play in 2014, I would say, “You’re crazy!” The play has endured, and through many quirks of history it has become probably the best-known play in the modern Chinese language. We toured it in America in Mandarin Chinese in 1991. In 1992, we made a film with that cast and added a Mandarin film superstar so that the film crossed over into popular culture. The one copy of that film was shown at a film festival in China. Many of my friends from China, like movie stars, etc., saw the film through that print. The Chinese government confiscated our print, but then somehow it was shown, and everybody made videos of it and distributed it everywhere and people bought them. It was like an underground thing to be able to see Secret Love in Peach Blossom Land in China in the 1990s.

For almost 30 years now, people have been performing this play. The film version has been going around everywhere. We started performing in China in 2006 with some known stars in the cast who loved the play and wanted to do it. That production is still being performed. Every year, we come together to do a 10-city tour of it. In Taiwan, it has iconic status.
The story behind the play

We wrote it at a very delicate time in our history when martial law had not been lifted. I often think, what does a foreign audience need to know to be able to understand this play? When I made the film, which went around to international film festivals, I had two pieces of introduction at the top of the show. One of them explained 1949. This is when the Chinese civil war ended and the Communists took over China and the Nationalists moved to the island of Taiwan. If you don’t know that, the play doesn’t mean that much.

My parents and the parents of all of our cast went through 1949, which is for Chinese people in Taiwan deeply affecting, hugely significant. About two million people—including my father, who was a diplomat—crossed the Taiwan Straits in that year to run away from the war, which, basically, they lost. The slogans were: “We’re going to have a military maneuver and the U.S. is going to help us fight back and we are going to take over because we need to drive out the Commies.” Of course, it never happened and those people got old.

The story of Secret Love is like a lot of stories that I know from my father’s generation. Families and lovers who were separated in 1949 didn’t get to see each other for the rest of their lives, or until 1986, when people started saying, “The two sides aren’t talking and the hell, I am going to go back myself.” This is something very difficult for an Ashland audience to understand. You couldn’t call, and a letter would never be delivered. You just didn’t know what happened to your family or loved ones. In 1988, Taiwan lifted martial law and people could officially start traveling from China to Taiwan. To this day, I can leave my home at 7 in the morning and be in Shanghai rehearsing with actors at 10. It has been a long journey, but we are here now.

The second thing you should know is that A Chronicle of the Peach Blossom Spring is one of the most famous pieces of classical Chinese literature. It is a beautiful short piece written more than 1,000 years ago by the poet Tao Yuanming. Tao wrote about a fisherman who finds this idyllic land. The residents there tell him not to let anyone know about their place. Of course, he does. Then people all go to look for it, and they can’t find it. All of us in Taiwan and China memorized this piece as schoolkids. When I was thinking about using it in Secret Love in Peach Blossom Land, I revisited it for the first time since junior high school. You can memorize it, but you don’t see the nuances until you grow up. I was questioning what actually is “utopia” and what is so special about Peach Blossom Land. The way the poet describes it is that it is very normal—with fields, chickens and dogs. The people were refugees from a previous war centuries before they came into this place. The fisherman tells them stories of this dynasty and that one and they sigh, “Wow, so much has happened that we don’t know.” To me, to say that utopia is no knowledge of history, that is a pretty scathing representation of Chinese history, which was brutal 1,000 years ago and more brutal today.

On mixing comedy and tragedy

Shakespeare was the master at putting comedy and tragedy together. That’s why I thought if I had a chance I would try to put a comedy and a tragedy onstage at the same time and see what happens. I would not have ever written just Secret Love. That would be a very corny, sentimental sort of thing. With a comedy or farce next to it, you have a frame that is interesting for our times, which were very disjointed. Our experience in Taiwan was a time of modernizing buildings, arts and theatre. You are seeing the city rebuilt into high-rises, and you are losing all of these things you don’t even know about. For this production, we’ve changed the location to Ashland. The in-joke among us would be that the Peach Blossom Land actors weren’t supposed to go to the Bowmer but maybe they were supposed to be part of the Green Show or something like that. The premise is that the Secret Love director has been commissioned by OSF to do this semi-autobiographical work about himself and he is given a mixed-race cast, which he doesn’t know how to handle. He thinks everyone should be Asian. These are the things we are adapting to the environment here.