

# My Cultural Landscape

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## Deep Down Inside

Whereas psychology is generally thought of as the study of the mind, depth psychology refers to the examination of the more subtle or unconscious parts of the mind. [Sigmund Freud](#) and [Carl Jung](#) were early pioneers in exploring how dreams and archetypes affect our perceptions and behavior.

The use of [hypnosis](#) and [psychoanalysis](#) to get beneath the surface of a person's mind has been a frequent topic for playwrights and scriptwriters. In 1941, Broadway was rocked by the premiere of [Lady in the Dark](#) (with book by [Moss Hart](#), music by [Kurt Weill](#) and lyrics by [Ira Gershwin](#)), a new musical starring [Gertrude Lawrence](#) as a woman undergoing psychoanalysis. Two years later, when [Rodgers & Hammerstein](#) upended the traditional format for a Broadway musical with [Oklahoma!](#), audiences were thrilled by [Agnes DeMille's](#) dream ballet in which Laurie confronts her choice of accepting Jud Frye's invitation to the social instead of going with Curly.

In [Henry Denker's A Far Country](#) (1961) [Kim Stanley](#) portrayed a young woman whose hysterical paralysis was helped by Sigmund Freud. In 1964, [Beatrice Lillie](#) returned to Broadway as the eccentric medium, Madame Arcati, in [High Spirits](#) -- a musicalized version of [Noel Coward's](#) 1941 comedy, [Blithe Spirit](#) which is being revived this month on Broadway with [Angela Lansbury](#) as Madame Arcati. In 1965, [On A Clear Day You Can See Forever](#) (with music by [Burton Lane](#) and book/lyrics by [Alan Jay Lerner](#)) focused on Daisy Gamble's powers of [extrasensory perception \(ESP\)](#).

For many people, however, one of the most crucial emotional breakthroughs to be depicted onstage occurs at the end of 1959's [Gypsy!](#) (book by [Arthur Laurents](#), music by [Jule Styne](#), lyrics by [Stephen Sondheim](#)). In her now legendary musical flameout, [Gypsy Rose Lee's](#) mother, [Rose Hovick](#), undergoes a gutwrenching emotional breakdown as she realizes that her children no longer need her. Here is [Tyne Daly](#) performing "Rose's Turn" in the 1989 Broadway revival:

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Doubts and emotions that lie beneath a person's outward calm can motivate or inhibit their behavior. The new drama (meticulously crafted by the talented young playwright [Christopher Chen](#)) being performed by Berkeley's intimate [Central Works Theater Ensemble](#) is a complex psychological thriller. In his program notes, Chen writes:

"The 1920s saw a convergence of revolutions in thought and expression of the human psyche. The Modernist movement in art and literature found new ways of capturing the true multi-dimensional scope of human experience; psychoanalysis, originating earlier but reaching its popular peak at this time, pushed further into human instincts than ever before; and World War I, our first modern war, brought us face to face with our collective inhumanity in terrifying new ways. *The Window Age* captures this period of transition, reminiscent of our current age of change, and explores the ambiguities that surface when an old order is replaced by a new one. One of the play's primary questions is: In an era of breaking old structures apart, how do we create order out of the chaos that remains?"

In the spirit of the Modernists, *The Window Age* explores alternatives to traditional structure, as seemingly conventional scenes and beats are distorted to display multiple perspectives of the unconscious. To create this kaleidoscopic and continuously shifting structure I cast my net of inspirations wide, roping Harold Pinter, Virginia Woolf, Sigmund Freud, and Samuel Beckett (among others) together under one massive Modernist umbrella."

Staging *The Window Age* with a collaborative theatrical company that boasts an organic development process yet has few, if any

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financial resources, was an obvious challenge for all parties. Thanks to the intricate lighting design by Gary Graves (coupled with Gregory Scharpen's eerie sound design), Central Works has managed to stage Chen's play with a rare sense of psychotic style.

Set in an English country house in the 1920s, the first segment of the play unravels like the kind of murder mystery in which every sentence is dripping with portent, a sense of intrigue, hidden agendas, and bitter recriminations. One almost expects to see Margaret Rutherford, magnifying glass in hand, make an entrance accompanied by an ominous clap of thunder.



Christopher Chen

Chen's play examines what lies beneath the surface of a person's mind as well as the simmering resentments to be found when the dynamics change among three people who share an intimate involvement in each other's past. Simon Floyd is a narcissistic professor and psychological theorist who is all too eager to use his friends as raw material for his studies. Valerie Fox is Simon's close friend and former flame, an author who seems to have acquired a nasty case of writer's block. Her husband, Jeremy, returned from the trenches of World War I as a cynical, self-doubting hero. Years ago, Jeremy was one of Simon's brightest and most promising students. Simon has never recovered from the fact that Valerie chose to marry Jeremy over him.

As Chen's play progresses, the original dialogue returns for a second reading in a slower and more complex fashion as the characters speak the same lines but with pithy asides that reveal their inner thoughts and doubts. In the second act, with a Rashomon-like

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### Power Of The Subconscious

approach to finding the truth, the exact same dialogue is revisited through the perspectives of Simon (with all his inner torment) and Jeremy (who has obviously been changed by his war experience).

Because this is a process that resembles peeling away the layers of the brain as if it were an onion, I won't reveal the play's ending. The gifted ensemble (Richard Frederick as Simon, Joel Mullennix as Jeremy and Jan Zvaifler as Valerie) met the tough challenges of Chen's play with great skill. Navigating the slight changes of posture, lighting, and temper necessary to portray the conscious and subconscious parts of each character, it was fascinating to note how the Central Works ensemble maintained their British accents throughout the evening (in far too many productions an actor's foreign accent usually disappears after the first 10 minutes).

Chen's script may seem overly verbose at times, until one perceives how he is using the initial dialogue as a map to explore the subconscious. People who spend a lot of time surfing the web will find the experience similar to following a trail of mysteriously connected hypertext links (except that instead of going from one website to another, these links take one to the deeper recesses of the mind).

*The Window Age* is a challenging piece of theater, uncompromisingly written for intelligent minds. If you're the kind of playgoer who prefers dramatic substance to a whole lot of smoke and tinsel, you'll find Chen's new psychodrama to be a probing, intimate and rewarding theatrical experience. You can order tickets [here](#).

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