



Presented by Toy Factory; starring Nelson Chia and Mark Richmond. Get a 10% discount off tickets, say the password "Porcelain Lavatory" at any SISTIC outlet.

PEOPLE

5 Apr 2005

chay yew

by Sylvia Tan

Fridae interviews Singapore born, LA-based playwright of *Porcelain*. The controversial play, which was bestowed the prestigious London Fringe Award for Best Play in 1992, will be staged by Toy Factory in Singapore on April 7-10 and 12-17.

Written in 1989 as his graduate thesis movie script at Boston University, *Porcelain* had to be shelved for several years as no student wanted to audition for a film about a gay Asian man who murders his Caucasian lover in a London public lavatory. Chay Yew later wrote and re-adapted *Porcelain* while he was a resident playwright at Mu-Lan Theatre Company, a London-based Asian theatre company. It was later transferred to the Royal Court Theatre. In 1992, it was bestowed the prestigious London Fringe Award for Best Play after its first staging directed by Singapore Glenn Gloei. The 38-year-old is currently artistic director of Northwest Asian American Theatre in Seattle.

æ: Your play, *Porcelain*, follows a young Asian man's struggle to find himself in the face of homophobia and racism after shooting his lover in a Bethnal Green's Tube's toilet known to gay men looking for casual sex. Some reports on the Internet quoted the play as being based on your "teenage experiences of loneliness, identity, anger, and sexuality as a member of a racial minority in a Caucasian society," looking back - how had what you had felt then inspire your writing?

Chay: Playwrights write from personal emotional experiences. The circumstances and situations are always the stuff of fiction (and I've learned from Truman Capote about never to write about your life) but the emotional reality of the moment is truthful, honest and painful. I never flinch from that. Sometimes playwriting is better than therapy. You address all your emotional baggage in plays, live lives you'd never live, and travel to corners of the world you'll never go.

æ: What's the significance of the title?

Chay: Having been heavily influenced by Tennessee Williams during my first few years of my misspent youth in the theatre, the title was a heavy-handed exercise in symbolism. "Porcelain" is a euphemism that people call the toilet and the



Singapore born, LA-based playwright, Chay Yew.

process in which porcelain is created◆ crude sands and powders under extreme heat to create something beautiful and fragile◆ accurately describes the play's protagonist's inner life.

æ: In a (Singapore) *Straits Times* report on March 30, 2005, it was reported that other local theatre companies were interested to stage the play but had run into difficulties getting the rights from you or the necessary permits from the authorities. Could you elaborate on whether there had to be any compromise on the script for the upcoming staging to happen given that Toy Factory has been planning the production since 2002?

Chay: I believe Ivan Heng [founding Artistic Director of Wild Rice] had applied for a license to produce *Porcelain* several years back and failed to get permission. There has never been reluctance on my part to have my work produced in Singapore. In fact, it's always a very personal pleasure to have my work performed by Singaporean artists and in Singapore.

æ: In 1988, *As If He Hears*, your first play written for TheatreWorks where you were then working at was banned by the censorship board in Singapore because it dealt with "issues not true to Singapore values" - namely, homosexuality and AIDS and the gay character acted realistically "too sympathetic and too straight-looking." What happened to that play?

Chay: *As If He Hears* was finally produced at TheatreWorks in 1989 (thereabouts). The play was written specifically for TheatreWorks and for Singaporean audience. I have to say that without TheatreWorks' commission and belief in me, I would have never written the play or been a playwright. I'm sure my parents blame them for my career in the theatre.

æ: *Porcelain*, the first play in a trilogy of chamber plays about the gay Asian experience. The second play in the trilogy, *A Language of their Own*, received its premiere at the New York Public Theatre in April 1995 while *Half Lives*, the third play, has been commissioned by the East West Players in Los Angeles. Are there any plans to stage them in Singapore in the near future?

Chay: Ong Keng Sen [Artistic Director of TheatreWorks] applied to have *Language* produced at TheatreWorks in the late 90s and was rejected. There has been a production of *Language* a few years ago by a theatre company in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. *Half Lives* was produced at TheatreWorks a few years ago. At the present, there is some talk from several theatre companies in Singapore wanting to produce *Language*.

æ: Coming back to *Porcelain*, it sounds shocking, sordid and fetishistic with men having sex in public toilets and one man killing his lover. Have you ever been accused of being sensationalistic or being too honest?

Chay: The latter and I'm glad both audiences and critics have embraced this play since its first production. It's especially gratifying when I meet college students who have studied the play in their theatre classes, Asian American studies or Gay studies program who tell me what the play had meant to them or their lives.

I've never written a play and directed a production for the purpose of shocking audiences. If my plays seem "shocking," it's probably truthful◆ that means I'm doing my job.

æ: What do you hope for the audience to go away with?

Chay: I never dictate what my audiences leave with. Everyone has a different opinion how they view art. I just hope they're not bored or want their money back.

æ: *Porcelain* toured the US after being staged Royal Court Theatre and winning the prestigious London Fringe Award for Best Play in 1992, how did the gay Asian-American and Asian-British audiences respond to it?

Chay: This play has largely been warmly received by all kinds of audiences. I'm not sure exactly why◆ perhaps there is always a John Lee that's within all of us.

æ: What is your earliest childhood memory?

Chay: Decapitating my sister's Barbie Doll.

æ: How are you misunderstood?



Porcelain makes its long-anticipated debut in Singapore under the helm of the award-winning directorial duo, Goh Boon Teck and Beatrice Chia, and starring Nelson Chia and Mark Richmond (top). Get a 10 % discount off tickets by saying the password 'Porcelain Lavatory' at any SISTIC outlet.

Chay: By what I say. Actually even I don't believe what I say.

æ: What was the most important thing that happened to you in the last 12 months?

Chay: Discovering I'm still 26.

æ: What do you think is important in a relationship?

Chay: My partner knows for a fact that I walk on water.

æ: What's your biggest guilty pleasure?

Chay: Disco.

æ: What is your vision for the gay community?

Chay: As with any disenfranchised community, never forget how you fought to get here and never let them forget it for a single moment. Make them pay.

æ: Tell us about a cause that you support?

Chay: Prada.

æ: Who would your dream date be if you were straight for a day?

Chay: Eleanor Wong [A prominent Singapore playwright and Associate Professor of Law]. She's smart, sexy and dresses wonderfully.

æ: Tell us something even your mother doesn't know.

Chay: I love her and will always remember all the sacrifices she has made to make me the terrible person I am today.

'Porcelain' makes its long-anticipated debut in Singapore under the helm of the award-winning directorial duo, Goh Boon Teck and Beatrice Chia, and starring LIFE! Theatre Awards Best Actor nominees, Nelson Chia and Mark Richmond.

Porcelain is also playing at The Chance Theatre (www.chancetheater.com) in Anaheim Hills on Sat and Sun through April 17. Watch out for another production at Crowded Fire (www.crowdedfire.org) in San Francisco in July 2005.

Chay Yew's PORCELAIN R(A)

Presented by Toy Factory Theatre Ensemble in collaboration with Esplanade Theatres on the Bay

Date/Time: 7-10, 12-17 April 2005/ 8pm

Matinee Shows on 9, 10, 16, & 17 at 3pm

Venue: Esplanade Theatre studio

Ticket Price: \$32 *Free Seating

Concession / NS men / Senior Citizen: \$26

Get a 10 % discount off tickets by saying the password "Porcelain Lavatory" at any SISTIC outlet.

Excludes \$2 Sistic charge

Tickets are available from Feb 24 at all SISTIC outlets.

Booking Hotline: 6348 5555
