

A whodunnit with ethnic and sexual twists

Gritty 'Porcelain' is flawed but still engrossing

By Robert Hurwitz
EXAMINER THEATER CRITIC

A MAN IS dead. Shot, six times, in a public men's room in London. His alleged assailant, found cradling the dead Englishman in his arms, is a 19-year-old Chinese immigrant.

There's no doubt about the identity of the murderer. The mystery that playwright Chay Yew explores in "Porcelain" is one of motivation: the textures of ethnic and sexual alienation that led to the act. The play had a successful run in London last year, and made its U.S. debut in Los Angeles last January. Saturday, it opened at Theatre Rhinoceros to kick off the company's 16th season.

It's a tough, gritty and affecting piece of work. "Porcelain" has many of the flaws of the work of a beginning playwright (Yew's first play was commissioned and banned in Singapore just a few years ago). It's heavily derivative and heavy-handedly symbolic. It doesn't probe as deeply into its characters as it tries to. It falls just short of realizing some of its key scenes.

But it's also the work of a distinctively original voice. Rhino artistic director Adele Prandini gives it a staccato, propulsive production on Iva Walton's stark set of exposed metal struts and bare platforms, festooned with dirty toilet bowls and harshly lit by Wendy Gilmore. For most of its 85 minutes, "Porcelain" is an engrossing drama.

The murderer, John Lee (Phil Begin), sits in an imaginary cell onstage with dozens of red paper cranes spread out before him like a pool of blood. The rest of the cast plays a variety of characters on the platforms above and behind him.

"Porcelain" begins in a wail and a babble of voices, blending mundane concerns with outrage about the "sex murder in a loo." Then TV reporter Alan White takes over, played by John Gardiner as a cross between Mike Wallace's tenacity and David Frost's incredulity and accent (if only he knew how to pronounce a British zed). He's preparing a sensational special on "cottaging" (slang for sex in public restrooms) and the "spread" of homosexuality.

He's also apparently trying to expose Dr. Worthing (Mikael Duden), the unprincipled criminal psychologist who's working on Lee's case — although that subplot soon evaporates. It's Worthing's sessions with Lee that become the main focus, as he gradually gets beyond the young man's bitter, su-

percilious facade to the rejected lover-murderer beneath.

What's discovered is actually pretty much what we expect: a crime of passion with roots in Lee's conflicted, thwarted desire to join a society that rejects him as an Asian and a homosexual. That rejection is personified by his victim, William Hope (Dean Rehman), an opera-loving worker (after David Henry Hwang's exhaustive treatment, it may be time to lay the "Madame Butterfly" analogies to rest) who considers the clinging Lee a mere detour from his hetero life.

Lee's sessions with Worthing may be the heart of Yew's drama, but they're the weakest scenes in the play. Yew hasn't quite worked out the mechanics and degrees by which Worthing wins Lee's confidence. Begin, too, is least believable in portraying Lee's wise-guy uncooperativeness, while Duden does what he can with the partially realized role of Worthing.

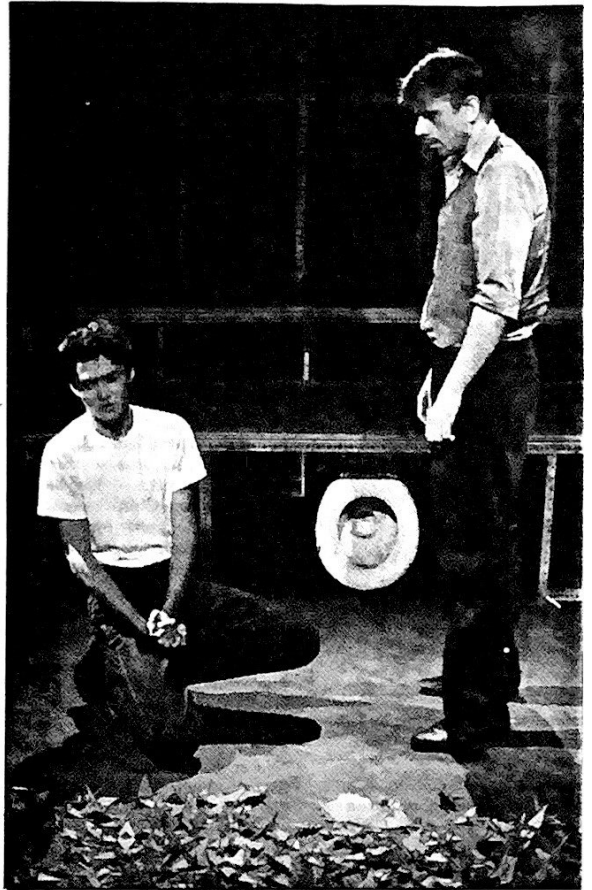
Far more effective are the flashbacks depicting Lee and Hope's affair, from its chance beginning to its grisly finale. Begin and Rehman play these scenes at a tantalizing distance, never looking directly at each other, moving from tentative gropings on through tender and callously brutal, graphic sex to Hope's fatally casual rejection of Lee.

The flashbacks and prison scenes develop in shardlike fragments, alternating with bits of a folktale about a crow trying to live among sparrows and scenes of White's continuing TV investigation. Duden, Rehman and Spencer Aste play a variety of interview subjects: good and bad cops; men-on-the-street expressing their views about cottaging — including vehemently "straight" men who only visit the boys in the restrooms because their wives and girlfriends either don't like oral sex or aren't very good at it.

Aste has a heartbreaking turn as Lee's angry, ashamed, inconsolable father. The murder scene is electrifying as performed by Begin and Rehman, with Duden reciting the final death scene from "Carmen." Using opera, folk tales and gritty confrontational drama, Yew has sought to fuse opposites to create art — echoing the metaphor Lee draws from the making of porcelain to describe his ideal of love. The final product is flawed, but full of promise.

THEATER REVIEW 'Porcelain'

- **PLAYWRIGHT** Chay Yew
- **DIRECTOR** Adele Prandini
- **CAST** Phil Begin, Mikael Duden, Spencer Aste, John J. Gardiner, Dean Rehman
- **THEATER** Rhinoceros, through Oct. 16 (415-861-5079)



Phil Begin, left, and Mikael Duden in "Porcelain" at Theatre Rhinoceros.

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Porcelain Theatre Rhinoceros

Premiered in Britain where it received critical praise and London Fringe Awards, this play also had a January, 1993 production at the Burbage Theatre in Los Angeles and is now a main-stage offering at Theatre Rhinoceros, 2926 16th Street in San Francisco through Oct. 16.

Chay Yew's disturbing drama concerns a young Chinese student accused of murdering his Caucasian lover in a public restroom and the subsequent issues of racism, betrayal and homophobia which his case provokes. The playwright says that while he was inspired by the media coverage surrounding a string of Boston arrests for gay sex in public restrooms (called "cottaging" in England) *Porcelain* is really about loving relationships "and about being different, which is a universal theme."

By Yew's admission, therefore, *Porcelain's* content is not all that original. We've had any number of plays, novels and films about gay loneliness, gay bashing, restroom sex, gay murders and homophobia. What makes this play exceptional and so compelling is the playwright's style and (at least here in S.F.) Adele Prandini's vibrant staging, plus powerful acting by a five member male ensemble.

We first meet the delicate, sensitive Chinese youth while he is incarcerated and being counseled by a Dr. Worthing. In flashback vignettes and monologues we get the story of the boy's involvement with a rather crude but virile man who cruises public restrooms. When the youth, yearning for love and affection, finally realizes that the man cares little for him and has merely been using him as a sexual convenience he is devastated and kills the lover he believes has betrayed him.

Staged on steel levels, the jailhouse scenes are at the forefront, while other scenes (with men on the street, a monologue by the boy's

father, interviews conducted by a radio/TV anchorman, etc.) are on higher platforms. The scenes of sexual encounters are staged by Prandini erotically but in good taste, no small accomplishment.

Phil Begin gives a touching performance as the Chinese youth so desperately craving love and acceptance in society. Dean Rehman paints a chilling and vivid portrait of the brutal Caucasian lover whose own psychological problems are incisively revealed by the playwright and the actor's performance. John J. Gardiner (who bears a striking resemblance to David Frost) is very good as the anchorman. "Do you think toilet sex spreads homosexuality?" he naively asks as he interviews one man. Spencer Aste has a moving moment as the boy's father, and Michael Duden is totally convincing as the psychiatrist. All of the men except Begin deliver rapid-fire commentaries, full-front, living newspaper style, at intervals throughout the performance, which is heady stuff and great for mature audiences but not for your Aunt Martha. (415) 861-5079.



STEVE SAVAGE

Phil Begin and Mikael Duden in 'Porcelain' at Theatre Rhinoceros



GENE PRICE

Porcelain

Chay Yew's beautifully crafted and intensely moving *Porcelain* is an indictment of racism, homophobia and the myriad thoughtless social indifferences that can erupt into a crime of passion. While murder is its focal point, Yew's drama is about loneliness, loving and rejection. Successful runs in London (where it won two Fringe Awards), Dallas and Los Angeles preceded its Northern California premiere as Theatre Rhinoceros' 16th season opener.

Yew wrote the play in response to media coverage of a number of arrests for gay sex in Boston University restrooms. Transferring the setting to London, where such sexual activity is called "cottage" (public restrooms were originally designed to look like man-cottages), the playwright created a vocal montage to depict and comment on the murder of a Caucasian man by his young Chinese lover.

Initially staged for five actors sitting on stools facing the audience, the drama has been opened up by director Adele Prandini to create a series of "sound bite" vignettes on Iva Walton's stark, metallic-framed platforms. Wendy W. Gilmore's bleak lighting design segues the feverishly paced action from the streets of London to a TV studio to a public lavatory to the lovers' bedroom, and to the jail cell of young John Lee. Grimy, upended toilets and a blood-smeared outline of a body against dirty white tile offer shocking counterpoint to the dialogue's cadences.

Porcelain opens with a chorus of random street voices rising to a crescendo of six vocalized gunshots, followed by a TV newscaster (John J. Gardiner) asking sundry passersby such typical inanities as "Do you think toilet sex spreads homosexuality?" The commentator also interviews Dr. Worthing (Michael Duden), the arrogant and indifferent court-assigned psychiatrist.

Fragile, withdrawn, unrepentant, the 19-year-old John Lee (Phil Begin) does not at first respond to the psychiatrist's aggressive probing. Having admitted his guilt, he seems uninterested in preparing a defense for himself and sits on the floor of his cell calmly folding the 1,000 blood-red origami cranes that will, in Japanese myth, grant his wish.

The devious psychiatrist is not above fabricating an unhappy affair of his own in order to break down Lee's reserve, and the young man tentatively unfolds a story of emotional deprivation as both an Asian and a homosexual. An invisible entity in the gay bar scene, he is reduced to anonymous "cottage" sex. After an encounter with 26-year-old William Hope (Dean Rehman), he is delighted to be invited for a drink and a visit to Hope's apartment. The two meet for sex over a period of several months but always in Hope's apartment, where they listen to recordings of *Madame Butterfly* and *Carmen* (both disconcertingly obvious examples of life imitating art). But the affair soon disintegrates into savage sexual assaults, with the drunken Hope raping Lee. Performed in semi-darkness with both actors fully dressed and not actually touching, the scene is frighteningly realistic. Eventually, Hope, who claims he is not "queer" but is just in it for the sex, rejects Lee. Secretly, following Hope to the public restroom where they first met, the devastated Lee, unsuccessful in his plea for a reconciliation, fires six shots into Hope and then cradles the dying man in his arms.

As he sits folding cranes in his cell, Lee says to the psychiatrist, "I have him where I want him. I've finally got Will all to myself."

Earlier Lee had used porcelain as a metaphor for his own feelings of being outside society's

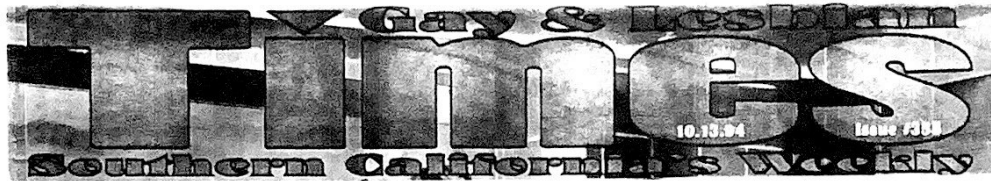


"Porcelain"—a beautifully crafted drama at Theatre Rhinoceros. Photo by Neil Savage

palette. Coarse stone powders and clay fused by intense temperatures to create something so delicate, fragile and beautiful—two opposites thrown together to create beauty.

As delicate and fragile as the porcelain he speaks of, actor Phil Begin delivers a remarkably restrained and touching performance in conveying his desperate need for love and his subsequent sense of loss. Dean Rehman exudes considerable charm and sex appeal as Will Hope, the "great white hope," whom Lee looks to as a resolution of his own shame and self-hatred. Spencer Aste was especially funny as a gushing queen in a TV interview and then gave the play's most emotionally compelling performance as John Lee's angry, brokenhearted father. Duden's characterization of the psychiatrist was enigmatic. I could understand the character's basic disinterest in a court-appointed criminal client, but his unrelentingly callous attitude was both off-putting and unmotivated. It's a powerful play and Prandini's production is a smashing success.

Porcelain continues at Theatre Rhinoceros through Oct. 16. Highly recommended. Call 861-5079.



Racism Meets Homophobia in Superb 'Porcelain'

'Glory Hole' Suffers From Lack of Focus

by CHARLES WILMOTH

Since the untimely and still heart-breaking death of Matt Mackey, there has been scant public address of racism within our community. One would think that it didn't exist. And, as typical of culture in general, one usually has to turn to art for moral discourse. So it was that I went looking last weekend for some read-out on racism in Diversionary Theatre's production of Chay Fiew's voice play *Porcelain*, and Ric Oquata's solo performance piece *Glory Hole*.

In what is Diversionary's most thoroughly satisfying production to date, *Porcelain* tackles racism and homophobia

Onstage

where it intersects with public sex, media sensationalism and institutional psychology. That *Porcelain* is essentially a static play, a voice play — the cast of five deliver their lines sitting on or standing in front

of red chairs on tiered empty black platforms — and that these subjects achieve such a dynamic and complex life, is a tes-

tament to the ensemble's superb acting and Robert Joseph's crisp direction.

We learn at the outset, in a mock TV news reportage on sleazy Channel 14, that a 19-year-old Chinese-British man

has killed a 26-year-old Caucasian man, shooting him six times in a London public toilet. What unfolds in the next hour and a half is how John Lee (played beautifully by Peter James Smith) came to murder Will Hope (played equally convincingly by Michael Myers). We come to John as he is interviewed by a forensic psychologist, Dr. Worthing (Martin Namaro), who is being paid to determine whether or not John was account-ably sane when he shot Will.

In talking to Dr. Worthing, John and Will get to play out the history of their chance meeting three months earlier for sex in that same public toilet. And what we find is a fiercely intelligent sex going to Cambridge in the fall, shy, insecure and alien-feeling young man falling in love with a "straight" working class guy, who is in strong denial about his own homosexuality.

Punctuating these interviews are mock TV documentary interviews with "men on the street" about "cottaging" (public sex in toilets), which serve as Yew's main vehicle for exposing homophobia. The sharp intercutting of these exchanges and interviews — as well as when the cast serves as a chorus of commentary, by blackouts (in Gary Lewis's smart lighting design) — create the action of the play, and director Joseph has perfectly paced this barrage of political ideas and potent human emotion.

What drives the play is the psychological mystery of why John killed Will, why John was found after the shooting holding Will's body as if in mourning. That John's actions, which are deemed "a crime of passion," are not entirely convincing is the sole fault of the playwright. The trouble begins when Dr. Worthing is initially presented in one-dimensional, flagrantly unambiguous and bigoted terms.

When we learn late in the play that Worthing has dissembled during the interviews to elicit John's self-disclosure, we should be shocked and upset, but we aren't. John's seduction and sense of betrayal by the good doctor should parallel and reinforce John's seduction and, then later, sense of betrayal when Will gets skittish about the evolving intimacy he enjoys with John.

That's not the only reason that John's murderous rage at Will's abandonment, exemplified by Will's return to the toilet for more anonymous sex, remains untenable. Yew has burdened the character of John with too many conflicting and contradictory attributes. As the primary spokesperson against racism, John has to exhibit a lofty and sophisticated pride and knowledge of his Chinese cultural heritage. We know that these are intellectual defenses when John talks of wanting to be white in a damning indictment of the near monolithic representation of gay white men in the media and pornography. John's racial self-hatred is painted even more darkly during interviews with John's father (finely played by Roman Jimenez). It doesn't quite add up.

What is most missing from John's character is a pathological desperation for love. The bottomless hunger for such a fatal attraction has not been established in the interviews with Worthing nor in the relationship with Will, though in the play's most disturbingly realized scene, which happens entirely in the dark, we know John will silently

endure even sexual violence to stay with Will. Though Peter Smith has eloquently rendered every nuance given John's character, Yew has not given the character the necessary psychological cracks in his porcelain personality.

Though the play's denouement is somewhat less than compelling, *Porcelain* is a challenging play, both technically and thematically, and all those responsible for its realization are to be commended and supported. I hope everyone in the community will find their way to a performance. Special kudos for Robert Joseph for curating such a sophisticated and complex play by the young and brightly gifted Chay Yew.

It's unfortunate Ric Oquita hasn't studied with Yew and absorbed some of

Yew's wonderful poetic language, thematic cogency, intellectual dexterity and dramatic tension. Oquita's solo performance, *Glory Hole*, is a loud, monotonous mess that says nothing about public sex, homophobia, racism or anything else. Oquita never clearly orients us to place, nor are his cast of characters identified or related to one another or any theme.

Oquita has taken the kitchen sink approach to performance, throwing together every pun, sexual double entendre and alliterative line that's seemingly ever crossed his mind. A sophisticated sound-track, some gorgeous puppetry, a visually pleasing video sequence and other clever theatrics cannot save *Glory Hole* from being confusing mush.

Happily, you still have a shot at the enriching experience of *Porcelain*. Thursdays through Saturdays through

the end of October. All performances are at 8pm at the Diversionsary Playhouse, 4545 Park Boulevard. Thursday shows are \$10, and tickets for Fridays and Saturdays are \$12. For tickets and information, call 574-1060.

A special benefit performance of *Porcelain* will be presented Sunday, Oct. 16 at 7pm. A reception with Chay Yew precedes the performance in the Green Room of Twox Coffee, 4590 Park Blvd., beginning at 5pm. Tickets, which include the buffet and the performance are \$20, to benefit the Asian Pacific Islander Community AIDS Project of AIDS Foundation, San Diego. Tickets are available at Blue Door, Obelisk, Java De Paradigm and Art Trx. Call Arlene Rubin, 262-5557 ext. 331 or Eric Phoombour, ext. 386 for more informa-



Diversionsary Theatre's *Porcelain* Is Not Fragile

By Norman R. Bricker
For Update

"Porcelain," the term for a hard, white, translucent substance; the term for what John Lee wants very much to be. He changed his name but could not change his skin, nor his desire for the smooth white skin of his callous lover. His desire eventually led him to fire six shots into that same fair, white skin.

Chay Yew's voice play skillfully recounts both the event and the painful longings of John Lee. Diversionsary Theatre has assembled one of its strongest artistic teams to date as it takes

on this extremely well written piece. Yew's play relies on the human voice, rather than on fancy staging or physical action. The play is a choral arrangement for five voices that explores not only the main character's inner turmoil, but that of the psychiatrist who examines him, the policeman who was first on the scene, the father, the lover, the news media and the general public. Each voice must be different, yet woven into the seamless whole. The work becomes a modern version of a Greek tragedy with a chorus surrounding the principle pro-
See **PROCELAIN**, Page A-18



Pictured upper to lower are Michael Myers and Peter James Smith in Diversionsary's production of *Porcelain*.
Photo — Robert Joseph

PROCELAIN

Continued From Page A-17

tagonist and leading him through the fateful events.

Peter James Smith heads the cast as John. He quickly wins the audience's sympathy with his fierce desire for affection that will last longer than a casual blow job in a public toilet. His work is complemented by that of Martin Namaro, Allen Bernstein, Michael Myers and Roman Jimenez each playing a multitude of voices. Despite frequent lapses in dialect, all effectively differentiated the many characters.

Director Robert Joseph wisely let the language do its work and avoided gratuitous movement. It's surprising how effective the human voice can be. Vocally, the production would have been just that much stronger had there been more consistent attention to dialect coaching. Yew's work depends upon the different rhythms of distinct class-based British dialects for much of its power and its meaning.

Joseph was also responsible for the understated set design that allowed one to focus on the faces and hands of each performer. Carrying out the less-is-more principle, costume designer Michael Coleman's subdued clothing further defined the four voices as the chorus. Lighting designer Gary R. Lewis tightly controlled the focus so that there would be no distractions from the intensity of Yew's writing.

Diversionsary Theatre has been selecting much stronger plays lately and the quality of its acting, directing and design has risen to meet the artistic challenge.

The production will play Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays through October 29 at the Diversionsary Playhouse (4545 Park Blvd). Tickets are available at the Blue Doors Bookstore, Obelisk Bookstore, Java de Paradigm, Arts Tix and at the ticket office one hour prior to curtain. For information, call (619) 574-1060.

Company responds well to 'Porcelain's' challenge

By MICHAEL PHILLIPS
Theater Critic

In "Porcelain," playwright Chay Yew deals with particularly intense subject matter: a murder in an East London public bathroom, perpetrated by a gay 19-year-old Asian. The victim: his lover, whom he met while trolling the stalls — "cottaging," in the British parlance — some months earlier.

This is not the sort of tale that requires extra melodramatic sauce. Yew knows this. Subtitled "a voice play," "Porcelain" is written and is intended to be staged in Reader's Theatre style, with largely motionless performers seated in a line on stage, neutrally costumed, their rapid-fire lines popping like firecrackers.

The piece is structured in a loop: We first hear four of the five performers hollering London tabloid headlines, all about the toilet stall murderer. A smug Channel 4 interviewer (Allen Bernstein) grills a homophobic criminal psychologist (Martin Namaro) about his dealings with the accused, John (Peter James Smith). In flashbacks, we see how John met his ill-fated pickup (Michael Myers). We hear stories from other denizens of the public restrooms (Roman Jimenez plays several), men who consider themselves straight but who have somehow reconciled that label with their frequent presence in the public loos.

It's just a physical thing, one self-deluding voice says: "It's just sex."

Yew's primary issue here is that "just sex," whoever's engaging in it, can lead down some highly combustible alleys. Yew is not subtle with his symbolism. Porcelain itself, we're told by Chinese art-loving John, is itself material created by an act of combustion.

The sex in "Porcelain," mostly verbally conveyed but graphic nonetheless, is surprising by Diversionary standards. The company, now beginning its second season in its new Park Boulevard playhouse, has heretofore largely confined its play selection to amiable gay and lesbian comedies, along the lines of

THEATER REVIEW

"Porcelain"

Diversionary Theatre presents Chay Yew's drama. 8 p.m. Thursdays-Saturdays through Oct. 29 at the Diversionary Playhouse, 4545 Park Blvd. \$10-\$12. 574-1060.



DIVERSIONARY THEATRE

Peter James Smith Stars in "Porcelain"

the recent "Street Theatre."

Diversionary artistic director Robert Joseph presumably knew a lot was riding on this project, and he has responded well to its challenges. His cast, led by a strong, intriguingly insolent performance by Smith, could stand some seasoning and subtlety. Too much of it is served up at maximum intensity. But the rhythms are secure.

The play, finally, doesn't transcend its Reader's Theatre origins — it's too pat in its explanation of motives, too blunt in its square-off between the psychologist (who calls his patient, among other things, a "lousy homo Chink") and the seething John. But Yew's ear is precise; he knows how to build tension. He's a writer to watch.

Diversionary needn't be afraid of astringent material. There's a lot of it out there, and a lot of it is vital.

Director-scenic designer: Robert Joseph. Lighting designer: Gary R. Lewis. Cast: Peter James Smith, Allen Bernstein, Martin Namaro, Michael Myers, Roman Jimenez.

Porcelain: a gallery of distinctive voices

The central image of Chay Yew's *Porcelain* is a powerful one — a man cradles his dying lover in a public restroom, red blood spilling over the white tiles.

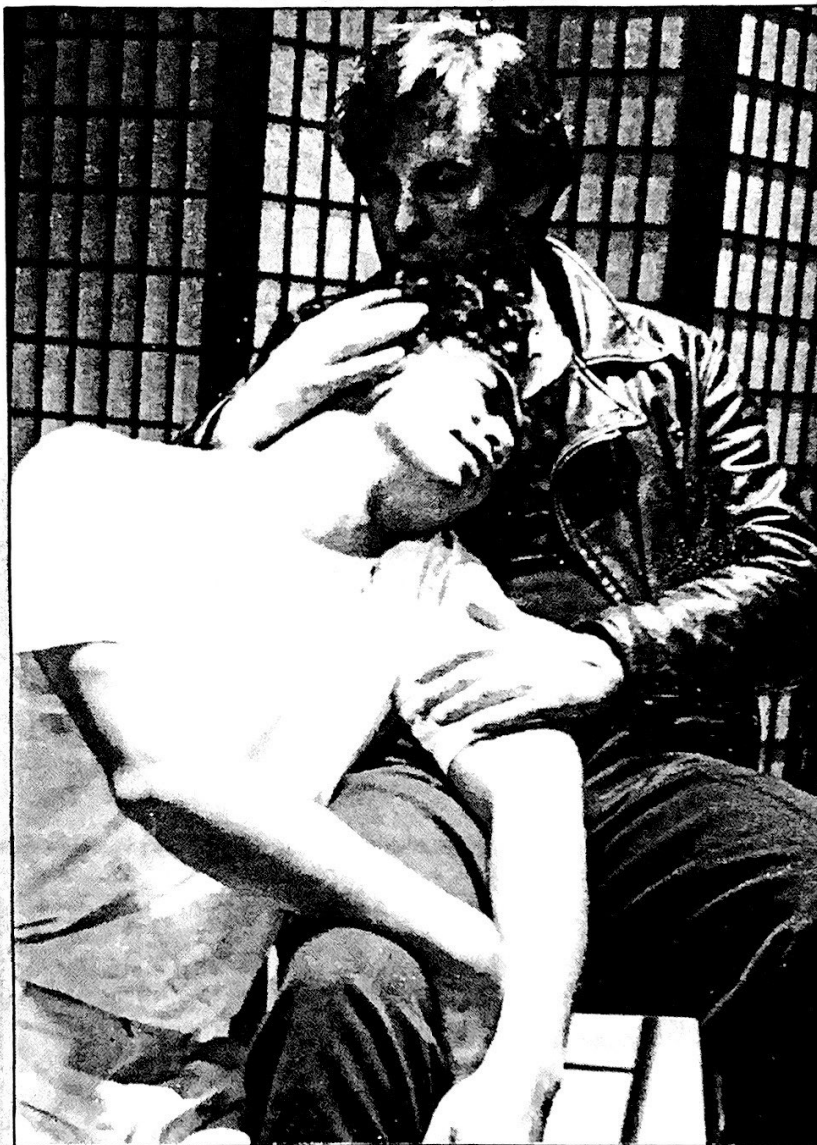
What makes *Porcelain* remarkable is that Yew explores not only the personal and political dimensions of that tableau, but exploits the unexpected poetic elements as well. It's also interesting that the scene is never literally staged, but only described by various witnesses and a chorus of voices. But Yew provides yet another twist: the man has just murdered his lover.

Consenting Adults Theatre Company does an excellent job with this unusual drama. Richard Dorton is outstanding as John Lee, a quadruple outsider: Chinese man living in London, homosexual, rejected lover, murderer. Lee initially hides inside an emotional shell, but gradually his passions emerge, culminating in a re-enactment of his crime and an explosion of pain and frustration. Dorton captures these complex emotions well, skillfully etching Lee's loneliness, joy, despair, and desire for atonement.

Dorton is backed by four actors who play various characters and serve as a chorus. They function smoothly as an ensemble, moving easily from well-defined individuals to cries within Lee's head and generic bystanders. David Jackson is fine as Dr. Worthing, the hack court psychiatrist who lies to Lee to draw out his story and then sells the tale to the media. Jackson finds the conflicted core of the character, making him understandable if not entirely sympathetic.

Christopher Wilson plays Will Hope, Lee's reluctant lover. Hope's not unwilling to have sex with Lee — he's simply unwilling to admit that he's Gay, and terrified that the neighbors will find out. Wilson adeptly captures Hope's mood swings. Tom Mallan is strong as an overbearing television reporter, and David Fendig shines in a variety of roles, including an outstanding turn as Lee's anguished father.

Yew's writing is vivid; he creates a gallery of distinctive characters and voices and unaffectedly strives for poetic language. The story moves along quickly and compellingly, keeping the audience interested in what will happen next. And Yew explores the complicated issues of racism, homophobia, and



Richard Dorton and Christopher Wilson in *Porcelain*.

media sensationalism in a sensitive and thoughtful manner.

Yew is well served by Van Riley's clean and effective staging, as well as the technical work of Howard Vincent Kurtz (costume and sets) and Lee Mikeska Gardner (lights). Worthy of special note are David Maddox's multi-layered sound design and Jennifer Mendenhall's work as dialect coach.

The talented production team also smooths over the two weaknesses in Yew's script. The re-enactment of the murder is rather obviously presented in counterpoint to the finale of Bizet's *Carmen*, and the ending of the play

goes on too long.

Still, this is a provocative evening of theater. The playwright and the production aim high, and they hit their mark squarely.

—Brian Carney

Consenting Adults Theatre Company's production of Chay Yew's *Porcelain* plays at Woolly Mammoth Theatre, 1401 Church St., NW. Performances are Sunday through Tuesday at 8:00 p.m. and Fridays at 11:00 p.m. through November 28. Tickets are \$12. For more information, call (202)526-1011.

Overnight

Monday, June 5, 1993

The Dallas Morning News

AFTER HOURS

THEATER

Big D festival opens with daring choice

DTC's bold, poetic 'Porcelain' offers kind of drama rarely seen

By Jerome Weeks

Theater Critic of The Dallas Morning News

Crimson on white, hundreds of tiny folded-paper cranes litter the floor. As you enter the Dallas Theater Center's Basement space, a young Asian man sits peacefully on a white stool, folding more.

It's a strikingly delicate image, the central one in *Porcelain*. Symbols of long life and love, a thousand origami cranes are a traditional gift in Japan. Here, they also recall the splattered blood of the gay Englishman the young man just shot to death in a London washroom.

A stark cross between *M. Butterfly* and the public-toilet sex scene in the film *Tick Up Your Ears*, *Porcelain* opened the

new Big D Festival of the Unexpected on Thursday with the kind of drama rarely seen at the Theater Center since the late Ken Bryant's 1989 staging of *Through the Leaves in the Basement*: poetic and bold, explicit yet almost chastely simple.

Written by the Singapore-born Chay Yew, *Porcelain* begins as something of a "living newspaper" exploration of the issues raised by "cottaging," British slang for gay sex in washrooms. Four actors dressed in black sit on either side of John Lee (Steven Eng) and in a fugue of voices repeat news reports and the horrified or raucous public comments generated by the "queer Chink" and his bloodbath.

Despite the avant-gardelike purity of the staging, at heart, the 80-minute intermissionless *Porcelain* is more old-fashioned than *M. Butterfly*: It's actually another psychological inquiry. The chorus of voices filters down until we meet both the criminal psychologist (Martin Rayner) trying to determine John's san-

ity and the TV reporter (Bruce DuDose) cornering the shrink for his verdict.

For a while, *Porcelain* becomes an unrewarding cat and mouse game of easy types (sleazy reporter, overworked shrink, sneering suspect) and easy attitudes about homophobia and racism. It even resembles the model of the burned-out shrink and younger, passionate subject in *Equus*.

Yet the rituallike staging and the unfolding of the touching love affair behind the murder draw us in. In *M. Butterfly*, it was the wonky Frenchman who longed to donate the "female" Orient Here, it's the young Asian-Englishman who longs to belong, to become part of the big, dominant white world around him.

There is a strain of self-pity in *Porcelain*. Unlike the comic narrator Frenchman in *M. Butterfly*, *Porcelain* keeps John a martyr-outsider. We sympathize, but until we can see ourselves as him, we can't truly take on his anguish or anger.

Nevertheless, it's a pleasure to see a play pack so much into such a compact package, a mix of the sordid and elegant. That pleasure is augmented by longtime Theater Center actors whom we don't see often enough (Mr. Rayner, Stephen Kalstrup, Allen McCalla) and Undermain regular Bruce DuDose making his overdue Theater Center debut. Even in such talented company, Mr. Eng more than holds his own.

Considering that the performers had only two weeks to rehearse and *Porcelain* demands rapid-fire ensemble work, they're to be congratulated.

PERFORMANCE INFORMATION

Porcelain, presented by the Dallas Theater Center in the Basement, 3636 Turtle Creek, through June 12. Performances are 10 p.m. Saturday, 9:30 p.m. Sunday, 9:00 p.m. Thursday and 10 p.m. Friday. Tickets: Pay what you can, reservations recommended. Call 522-TIXX.

THURSDAY MORNING

JUNE 14, 2001

The Seattle Times



'Porcelain' mixes violence, humor

Award-winner premieres in Northwest

Theater review

"PORCELAIN," by Chay Yew, directed by Valerie Curtis-Newton. Northwest Asian American Theatre, 409 Seventh Ave. S., Seattle. Thursdays-Sundays through July 1. 206-325-6500.

BY RICHARD FARR
Special to The Seattle Times

John Lee blows away his lover in a squalid London urinal — and we're supposed to sympathize? Chay Yew's gritty, violent play "Porcelain" has won a fistful of awards partly because we can.

Now receiving its Northwest premiere production at the Northwest Asian American Theatre, where author Chay Yew is the new artistic director, "Porcelain" tells Lee's story in "a heap of broken images" — snatches of news footage, shouted headlines, bits of his prison-cell conversation with his incompetent shrink.

Maybe this fracturing matches his mental state . . . or only that of

his accusers. Lee, brilliantly portrayed by Ray Tagavilla, seems paradoxical but far from confused. He's fragile yet poised, an exceptionally smart, articulate young man who plays comical cat-and-mouse with his slow-witted shrink.

Tagavilla actually gets to do very little: Most of the play, he sits on the floor, smiling seraphically while he folds paper cranes. And you can't keep your eyes off him.

The multitude of other characters are played by a strong team of just four other actors (Gavin Cummins, Brandon Whitehead, Conor Duffy and P. Adam Walsh). There's too much stereotyping here, but some of it is very funny

and all of it is, within its limits, convincing.

The chameleon quality of one or two of the actors is entertainment in itself.

And far beyond stereotype is Lee's doomed lover, Will (Walsh), a burly working-class Brit who lets Lee live with him despite being "absolutely not gay!"

Will is a thoroughly three-dimensional foil to his naive young Asian plaything.

Eschewing an intermission, and managing an odd combination of pace and calm, director Valerie Curtis-Newton has coaxed from these five actors 90 minutes of vivid, memorable theater.

You might argue, perhaps, with the sheer raucousness of some scenes, which detract from the one brutal scene (not the murder) that demands such emotional volume.

But the deft switching between characters, and between the "back story" and John in his cell, carry things forward convincingly. The scenic design by Craig B. Wollam focuses the mind wonderfully: A black U-shaped ramp surrounds a black-tiled pit that is both John's cell and a darkly comic negative image of the murder scene.

This isn't for all tastes. Potential viewers should be warned that, despite its moments of humor, "Porcelain" is a harrowing story, with extremely strong language, sexual explicitness and violence.

Porcelain locks in the senses and doesn't let go until the end, and maybe not even then

by Rajkhet Dirzhud-Rashid
 Staff Writer

Porcelain
 directed by Valerie Curtis
 Newton
 starring Ray Tagavilla,
 Gavin Cummins, Brandon
 Whitehead, Conor Duffy, P.
 Adam Walsh
 Northwest Asian American
 Theatre
 June 8-July 1

Chay Yew's newest play to be produced in Seattle is a four de force and emotional slam dunk all in one. And believe me, *Porcelain* will have you on the edge of your seat, much the way those PBS mysteries have had me biting my nails until the end, when everything is revealed.

A murder has been committed, but the motives and exactly what happened in a toilet stall in a seedy London neighborhood, is yet to be determined. The facts emerge slowly through a series of flashbacks and through multiple voices, including that of the murderer, John Lee, a young Asian Gay man. What



is under the surface, just under the surface, mind you, are the issues of homophobia, racism and sexual violence in the context of relationships between Gay/Bisexual people. In this case, between Lee and his somewhat amoral lover, William Hope.

As Lee's psychiatrist tries to

get to the bottom of the mystery, thus exposing his own darker notions about race and sexuality, a multi-faceted story reveals itself. And when the truth is brought forward in a climax as riveting as that of the trial scene in *Mulvey on the Bounty*, it hits us on a visceral level unexpected at the beginning of this delicately woven play.

Marvelously clever and full of insights that are still difficult for much of the Gay/Lesbian/Bisexual/Transgender communities to face and deal with.

It is also an interesting note that the play crosses not only into the territory of white privilege in the Gay male community, but also homophobia which still exists in the Asian-Pacific Island communities. One hopes this play will get those communities thinking, particularly in this time before pride week, when we're all supposed to be marching together for a common cause. ▼

Seattle Gay News (A&E)
 June 15, 2001 - Vol 29, Is 24

SEATTLE WEEKLY

PORCELAIN

Northwest Asian American Theatre,
409 Seventh S., 325-6500 \$12
7:30 p.m. Thurs. - Sat.; 4 p.m. Sun.
ends Sun., July 1

WRITTEN BY NWAAT's new artistic director Chay Yew, *Porcelain* tells the story of John Lee (Ray Tagavilla), a young Asian man who murders his white lover in a public washroom in London. The production relies strictly on a black-clad chorus of four actors (Gavin Cummins, Brandon Whitehead, Conor Duffy, and P Adam Walsh) to create the multi-faceted and -accented strata of British laborers, policemen, and professionals who comment on the crime.

The four-man tag team has quite a challenge, which director Valerie Curtis Newton has assured is met with passionate restraint. Cummins gets stuck with a bunk role as the stereotypical psychologist assigned to the case—he's given hoary dramatic clinkers like "I want the truth!"—but he's quite convincing as other London denizens, as are the rest of the chameleonic ensemble (Whitehead even pulls off a difficult turn as Lee's father, and Walsh is dynamic as Lee's brutish beloved).

Though the inherent racial issues aren't explored with enough subtlety (there's a clunky dependence on the word "chink"), Yew is devastatingly accurate with the slippery hatred and hypocrisy found in any public discussion of gay sexuality. The play has a crisp intelligence that never becomes aloof, furthered here by Newton's elegant compassion and the anchor of Tagavilla's performance. He's very good, steely and smirking yet still able to communicate the ache for intimacy that Lee's lavatory prowlings (the "marriage of dirt and desire") illustrate with such raw tenderness. He spends the play surrounded by squares of red paper that he is methodically folding into origami swans. By evening's end, it seems as though he's making something memorable out of blood—a graceful, brutal task that Yew's play, and this fine production, also accomplishes. *Steve Wiecking*

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

Chay Yew's "Porcelain" premieres at NWAAT

By Gayle Gupit Mayor
For the NW Asian Weekly

Critically acclaimed Asian American playwright and director Chay Yew is not new to controversy. The censorship board in his native land, Singapore, initially banned his first play in 1989 because the gay character acted "too sympathetic and too straight-looking." In other words, he was too realistic.

When Yew wrote the movie script "Porcelain" for his graduate thesis at Boston University, no one on campus wanted to audition for the project because of its gay theme.

After spending all his money "clubbing and partying," "Porcelain" resurfaced when Yew wrote and readapted it for five chairs during his time as resident playwright at a London-based Asian theater company. It became a hit and the play won the prestigious London Fringe Award for Best Play.

"Porcelain" is a powerful and



Ray Tagavilla plays John Lee, a 19-year-old gay Chinese man who confesses to shooting his lover, in "Porcelain."

provocative play with an arresting combination of artistry and controversy. It will play June 8 to July 1 at the Northwest

Asian American Theatre in Chinatown/International District. Portrayed by Ray Tagavilla, John Lee.

a 19-year-old gay Chinese man who confesses to shooting his lover in a public lavatory in London. The play deals with the way matters of the heart conflict with race and sexuality, and dissects the crime through a prism of conflicting voices. The voices — also known as Actors 1 through 4 — are portrayed by Gavin Cummins, Brandon Whitehead, Conor Duffy and P. Adam Walsh.

"Porcelain" is directed by Valerie Curtis-Newton, faculty member of the University of Washington School of Drama and former artistic director of Seattle's Ethnic Cultural Theatre.

Interestingly, Yew says he feels uncomfortable revisiting the play that he wrote back in his youth. "I guess I still see the vestiges of an awkward, alienated Asian gay teenager who wrote the play," he confesses.

Stabbing thoughts still run rampant in his mind: "Am I still that Asian guy who is standing all alone at the backwalls of the world?" "How far have I come?" "Am I still that same person?" "Am I still that lonely?" "Am I cool with being a realized Asian American?" "Why does that character still make me sad?" "Why is the pain still so fresh?"

He has a simple way of dealing with these questions: "I try not to see the play," said Yew.

However, he finds it "heartening" when people who have seen or read the play tell him how profoundly it affected them. "For me, I am glad that at least 'Porcelain' may have given these people a feeling that they were not alone in their feelings as I was when I was younger," Yew said.

Still, Yew's complicated and true-to-life themes sometimes make people feel uncomfortable. He has discovered that Asian Americans are most critical of his work.

"I write with a brutal sense of honesty and that portrait is never easy, never tidy."

But to his surprise, "the support and encouragement from all corners of the Asian American community in this country has been forthcoming. I am secretly pleased that most Asian American audiences have embraced the work that I have done as a playwright, director and producer.

"We need our voices heard and our stories told," he continued. "They are not told by mainstream theaters that purportedly call themselves 'American.' We also need the support from the Asian American community in the theater, no matter how truthful and painful and celebratory the play or performance is. After all, it's our lives, isn't it?"

Born of Chinese parents and raised in Singapore, Yew, who grew up with American pop culture, decided at age 16 to attend Pepperdine University in Southern California after his father suggested that he study abroad. "I thought, get killed or lead a beach life, so I went to Los Angeles," Yew joked.

Nowadays, "home" is both Seattle and Los Angeles. But, according to him, "the one place I always feel at home is in the theater."

Yew, 35, is the artistic director at NWAAT, as well as director of Mark Taper Forum's Asian Theatre Workshop in Los Angeles. He has written several plays, including "A Language of Their Own," "Red," "Wonderland" and "A Beautiful Country." Yew has directed plays all over the U.S. and Singapore, where he is currently directing "Red."

Northwest Asian Weekly

Serving the community for more than 19 years

READER

Friday, August 5, 1994 Volume 23, No. 44

CHICAGO'S FREE WEEKLY

Theater



Porcelain

Porcelain, Eclipse Theatre Company. Everything in Chay Yew's *Porcelain* works to isolate murder suspect John Lee, a gay Asian teen from London's East End who endures all the invisibility of minority men in a xenophobic land. Accordingly, the crime scene is a Bethnal Green lavatory where gays, bisexuals, and closet cases engage in risky "cottaging"—sharing anonymous sex with imperfect strangers.

For Lee it's an active kind of invisibility.

Yew is too wise to analyze the murder of the closeted gay man Lee believed loved him. Instead he surrounds Lee with an insidious racism, the sort that drove *Native Son's* Bigger Thomas to kill (the title refers to the coldness of Caucasians as well as to urinals). Exploiting the crime O.J.-style are closet-case cops, a slimebucket TV reporter, and a lawyer who sells his client's confidences. Actually confronting the crime are Lee's anguished father and a prison psychiatrist helping Lee to recall the crime. One graphic scene of promiscuity in particular, which is played in the dark, is bitter proof that Lee will never be one of the pretty white boys he so envies.

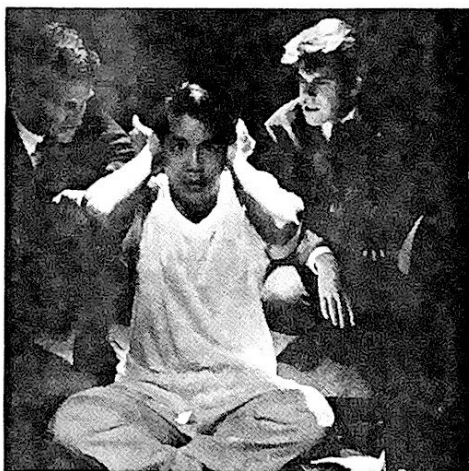
Taut and troubling, this extraordinary "voice play" by Asian British playwright Yew—an off-night production in Eclipse Theatre Company's Satellite Series—is stunningly staged by Jay Paul Skelton. For 90 minutes the four voices, playing many characters, register like a heartbeat every bitter irony, trenchant indictment, and cold cruelty in Yew's hammered-down crime of culture. James Sie as Lee, folding red paper into origami cranes (forlorn symbols of hope), fuses battered love with an anger that's more affecting for being muted. His triumph crowns a staging that can nail you to your seat.

—Lawrence Bommer

AUGUST 4, 1994 • NEW CITY

►★**PORCELAIN** Jay Paul Skelton's production of Chay Yew's one-act, "Porcelain," comes so tantalizing close to excellence you can almost taste it. Yet there is something in this intriguing play, about an Asian immigrant to Britain who may or may not have killed his (male) lover, that prevents it from becoming absolutely first rate. The problem does not lie in the acting—everyone in the five-member cast acts their hearts out. Lifeline Theatre's James Sie is excellent as the lonely, unstable John Lee. Nor is the problem in Yew's script. With a nod to Citizen Kane, the story is unfolded in fragments delivered by such unreliable sources as the homophobic psychiatrist, the humiliated traditional father, the various men who have sexual encounters in public restrooms but insist they are straight. Still there is something a bit ponderous, lethargic and flat about Skelton's production, as if the director had all his ideas and images worked out, but never quite figured out how to make them work. Even the central image of the play, Lee's obsessive folding of red origami cranes seems disappointingly obvious and unworthy of all the time spent by Sie folding them (in real time). The directing may fall short, but the performances and script are still remarkable (Jack Helbig). Mon & Tue 7:30pm. \$5. Through Aug 30. Eclipse Theatre Co., 2074 N. Leavitt St., 477-8701.

STAGE



James Sie is at the center of the mystery and magic in "Porcelain."

**'PORCELAIN'
IS FINELY CRAFTED**

People are fascinated with scandal. They'll shell out dollar after dollar for supermarket tabloids and sit glued by the hour to TV coverage of the O.J. Simpson hearings.

There's a compelling need to know the whys and hows behind the headlines that fuels the public's interest. But in the end, no matter how thorough the inquiry or examination, only those people directly involved in an event can know the whole and absolute truth.

As a young Asian man sits in a London jail, accused of murdering his white lover in a public washroom, the media and the courts try to uncover the truth and the motive behind the crime. But the man refuses to reveal his thoughts or the facts. When his court-appointed psychiatrist chastises him for "not making this easy," he counters with, "Why should I?"

Chay Yew's "Porcelain" is a beautifully written "voice play" that relies on the imagery of its words to create a visual impression in our minds. Chay Yew's script explores issues of race relations, journalistic and professional corruption, and the precarious nature of trust with remarkable candor and potency.

Jay Skelton's intelligent and faultless direction guides an exceptional five-member ensemble, and together they turn "Porcelain" into a riveting 90 minutes of theatre. At the core is the passionate and striking performance by James Sie as the accused man, John Lee.

John Neisler and Johnathan F. McClain offer unpredictable and intriguing work as Lee's doctor and a TV talk show host, and Jeff Buelterman and Tom Dwight give strong support as the murder victim and Lee's father. In addition, the four men are also impressive in their portrayals of an array of secondary characters.

"Porcelain" is graphic in its language and stark in its presentation, I urge you not to pass it by. Performances are on Mondays and Tuesdays only with limited seating. Don't delay or you'll miss an exceptional experience.

*"Porcelain" is at the Eclipse Theatre,
2074 N. Leavitt, through August 30th.*

*Jeff Rossen is Gay Chicago Magazine's
theatre editor*

DALLAS Observer

July 25, 1993

News: At Dallas'
biggest Black Tie Dinner,
popularity trumps charity

Volume 6, Issue 3, Page 1

Stage



Handle with care

Kitchen Dog Theatre
treats *Porcelain* roughly,
but doesn't drop it

By Jimmy Fowler

The program for Kitchen Dog Theatre's latest production, the racial-sexual drama *Porcelain*, contains some astute notes by director David Irving, who is the newest member of Kitchen Dog. His essay reads:

"Shocking plays always seem to raise a question of validity in people's minds, as though the plays want to be shocking more than anything else. Often the response is a shake of the head, perhaps a sigh, and some employment of the phrase, 'done for shock value.' I note this because *Porcelain* is such a play: murder, public sex, crimes of passion are the stuff of controversy here. Of course, they are also the stuff of your average news broadcast these days, but for some reason, news has been granted more permission to shock than the arts have."

That last line, in particular, is a startling defense from a live-performance artist, a welcome acknowledgement that there is a big wide world beyond the footlights, and an implied proposal for how theater might re-establish its connection to that world. For years now, the most cultish defenders of American theater have worn that institution's dwindling audiences as a perverse symbol of pride. The live stage is an exclusive haven for the imagination, they insist, impervious to the crude influence that movies, TV, and other mass media have wrought on larger society. More often than not, this has been a clumsy rhetorical shell game to obscure the fact that breadwinners like Andrew Lloyd Webber depend on the extra-media dabbings of well-heeled ticket buyers to provide their shows a box-office hook.

When you turn to successful anti-commercial playwrights such as Suzan-Lori Parks, Erik Ehn, or Mac Wellman, the defense becomes more catholic, but essentially the same: We Are An Exclusive Club

Comprised of People Who Like Us. All three of these writers have created remarkable individual works, but their brazen return to primitive theatrical devices has sent supporters scurrying for excuses—to present to outsiders who equate small audiences with failure. Can theater—performance art notwithstanding—survive without acknowledging (and co-opting) more populist, Information Age methods? Should it?

More than any of the aforementioned writers (except, perhaps, Parks), the Los Angeles-based Asian-American playwright Chay Yew has forsaken theatrical purity to pirate mass-market influences intelligently. As a prideful newcomer, Yew keeps one foot on the stage and every other appendage flapping in the windy currents of America's information overload. He sees live performance as an opportunity to capture some of the bugs that might otherwise splatter unno-

Chay Yew wrote *Porcelain* as a chorus of voices, and the Kitchen Dog production conjures up a white-noise cacophony of radio and TV announcers whose merciless declarations begin and end the play. A working-class Englishman is murdered in a public toilet by an Asian who, upon his arrest, claims to have been the man's jilted lover. They met because both were frequent cruisers at the same lavatory.

The events leading up to and surrounding the murder are methodically reconstructed in flashback as the accused, John Lee (Ryan Kim), is interviewed by a criminal psychologist (Ray Gestaut) whose heart is clearly with his mates down at the pub. The psychologist, in turn, is interviewed for a TV exclusive by an aggressive reporter who's continually on the hunt for red meat to feed his sensation-starved viewers.

Distorted shadows projected on a screen,

to the occasion. In the pivotal role of John Lee, Ryan Kim peddles plenty of attitude during his discussions with the psychologist, but can't seem to convey the muddied undercurrent of loss and outrage that flows beneath his character. He is convincing as a racial pariah in a world that (contrary to public relations) often shuns difference, but he doesn't parlay his bitterness into a testimonial of genuine depth. As a character screwed by his slanted eyes and same-sex affections, John Lee comes across as little more than a club kid too proud of his outlaw features to fathom the enormity of his rejection.

As the wily, hard-drinking psychologist who finally connects with his subject, Ray Gestaut provides a much trickier interpretation. Close your eyes, and you'll appreciate not only a rich vocal presence—someone who locates the difficult nuances of a mongrel accent (in this case, a Brit who's spent his educational years in America). Watch Gestaut in action, however, and you'll witness a performer who registers each conflict with a stone-faced, squinty-eyed earnestness that bespeaks discomfort with the play's sordid elements.

Director David Irving clearly possesses the energy and enthusiasm to mount a top-drawer, in-your-face melodrama of sexual obsession. As evidenced by the production notes in this play's program, he's fully aware of the delicious tension that exists between so-called "elitist" art forms and public acceptance, which itself suggests he's a budding artist prepared to confront the world at large with its own hypocrisies.

And with the decision to helm Chay Yew's iconoclastic character study, Irving pledges his troth to innovation at the expense of a few hypocrisies long considered sacred by the theater community. That he can interweave such raw elements into a forceful statement that is almost filmic in its intensity testifies to an impressive mastery of techniques. His efforts remind us, in an age of visual overkill, why live theater is still the most brutal and immediate of confessions. He almost succeeds with *Porcelain*, but is continually burdened by the sluggishness of the performers. Considering that some of Dallas' best live actors reside in the Kitchen Dog stable, this is a most unexpected liability. **D**

Porcelain runs through August 4. For more information call 871-ARTS.



There's a lot of dirty stuff that stains *Porcelain*, but its heart is true.

ted on our collective windshield, and scrutinize them under the pitiless glare that only the stage can provide.

Porcelain is his most famous play, and emblematic of his crazy-quilt approach. It's a multicharacter performance piece, actually, that uses the starkest theatrical components to dissect tabloid sensationalism (in this case, the voracious, Fleet Street-inspired reporters of contemporary London) while it illuminates the desperate lives that languish behind headlines.

flashlights in darkness, a quartet of black-clothed "voices" that both comment on and participate in the tragedy—these are the timeless theatrical ingredients employed to tell this story. And yet *Porcelain* is impressive as it uses these ingredients to simulate the heedless rush of images and sounds that speed past everyone who's stalled on the information superhighway—and, in a sense, that's pretty much all of us.

Sadly, given the explosive material in Yew's play, most of the performers don't rise