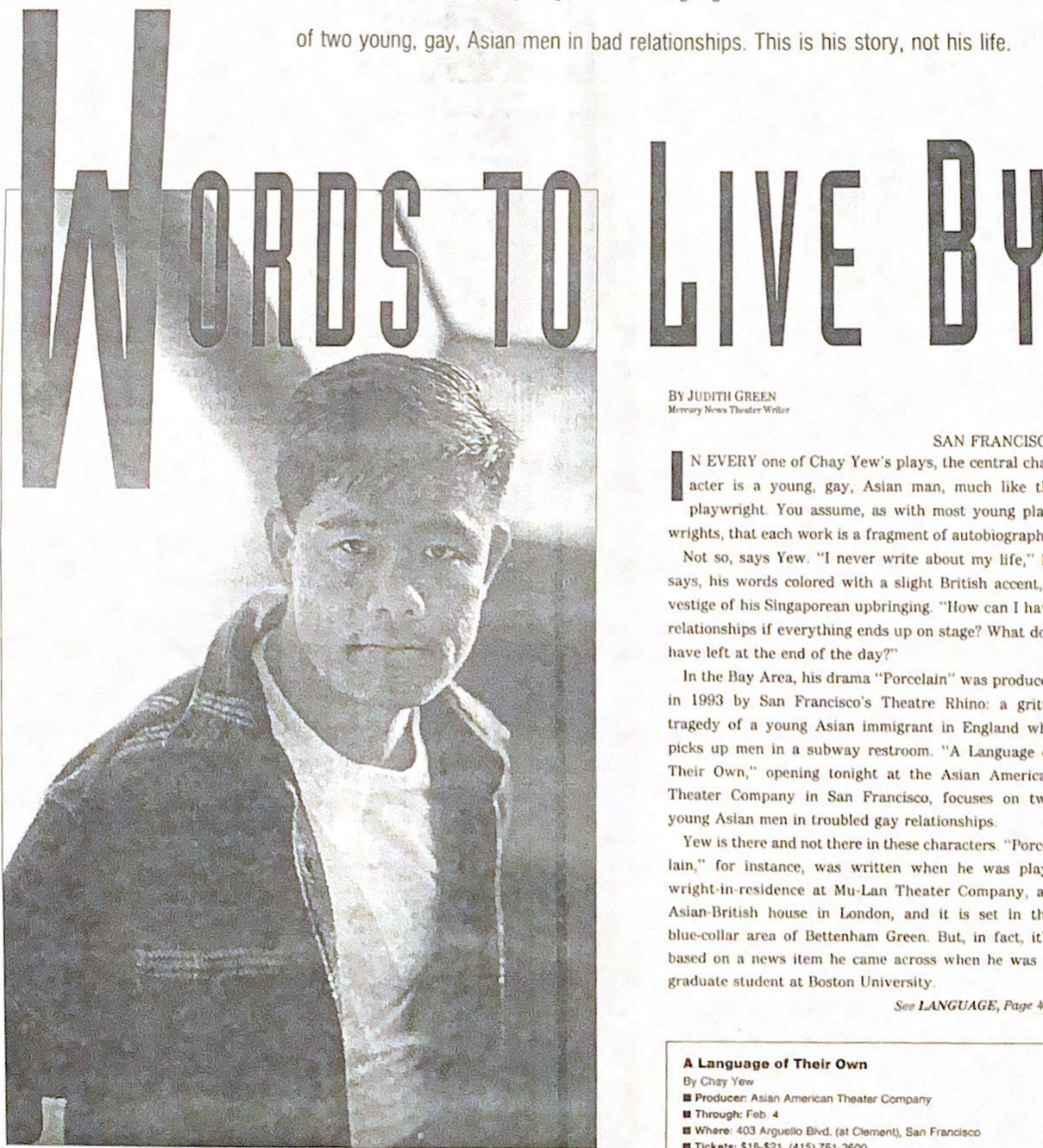


A young, gay, Asian playwright uses 'Language' to chronicle the troubles of two young, gay, Asian men in bad relationships. This is his story, not his life.



# WORDS TO LIVE BY

BY JUDITH GREEN  
Mercury News Theater Writer

SAN FRANCISCO

**I**N EVERY one of Chay Yew's plays, the central character is a young, gay, Asian man, much like the playwright. You assume, as with most young playwrights, that each work is a fragment of autobiography.

Not so, says Yew. "I never write about my life," he says, his words colored with a slight British accent, a vestige of his Singaporean upbringing. "How can I have relationships if everything ends up on stage? What do I have left at the end of the day?"

In the Bay Area, his drama "Porcelain" was produced in 1993 by San Francisco's Theatre Rhino: a gritty tragedy of a young Asian immigrant in England who picks up men in a subway restroom. "A Language of Their Own," opening tonight at the Asian American Theater Company in San Francisco, focuses on two young Asian men in troubled gay relationships.

Yew is there and not there in these characters. "Porcelain," for instance, was written when he was playwright-in-residence at Mu-Lan Theater Company, an Asian-British house in London, and it is set in the blue-collar area of Bettenham Green. But, in fact, it's based on a news item he came across when he was a graduate student at Boston University.

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#### **A Language of Their Own**

By Chay Yew

■ Producer: Asian American Theater Company

■ Through: Feb. 4

■ Where: 403 Arguello Blvd. (at Clement), San Francisco

■ Tickets: \$10-\$21 (415) 751-2600



# 'Language' speaks frankly about troubled relationships

## LANGUAGE

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"I was in a film-and-TV-writing class, and as usual we were bored, as students are," he says, "and I read about a proliferation of arrests for having sex in college restrooms." He makes an airy gesture. "My mind wanders. So I start to think, 'What kind of a person would do that? Have they no shame?' There's my Chinese mentality speaking. And so for my thesis, I offered a telly play about a young man arrested for toilet sex."

Then, when he got to London for his six-month residency, Mullan Theater at once asked him for a piece. "I said, 'How much money do you have?' They said, 'We don't have any.' So I said, 'Do you have five chairs?'"

He stripped the play to its bones, turned many of the scenes into monologues and found the setting by taking the Victoria subway line south into working-class suburbs. When he thought he'd gone far enough, he got off — and there was a park, "a poorly maintained field (that had been) trampled to death by people playing soccer." This was Bettenham Green.

"Porcelain" touched a nerve, it seemed, painting an unsparring picture of lorry drivers and fry cooks who talk tough and homophobic over beer with their mates in the pub, then cheat on their wives with anonymous young men in toilet stalls. It transferred to the prestigious Royal Court Theater and won the London Fringe Award for best play in 1993.

"Language" is much closer to home, yet Yew says it's not his home. "I am a coward," he says. "But I am curious." He explored the undiscovered bourn of relationships as he did with Bettenham Green, wandering in after he overheard a pair of lovers having a dramatic breakup at the next table in a restaurant. "How would I act if I were pushed to that?"

So he started talking to his friends. "It's incredible, when you start asking people questions, what they'll tell you." And everyone has a relationship-gone-West story in their lives.

**Y**EW is 30, compact, casual in denim, hair cropped short in the current convict mode. The British accent is deceptive: "People are always asking me: 'How long are you staying? Are you enjoying your visit?' Actually, I've been in Los Angeles since I was 16."

He was born in Singapore,

where his father dabbles in real estate. ("I don't know what he does. He refuses to tell me.") When Yew graduated from high school, he applied to several American universities and was accepted by Pepperdine. "What can I tell you? I chose the beach."

He had been introduced to theater at the private school for boys he attended in Singapore. (One of his classmates, Keng Sen Ong, went on to become a director and staged the New York premiere of "A Language of Their Own" at the Public Theater last winter.) At Pepperdine, Yew majored in theater while his father paid for a degree in business. The game was up when a transcript of his course work was sent home by mistake, but by that time, it was too late.

"Brought up in Singapore, I was part of the majority," Yew says. So even in the white Chris-

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tian culture of Pepperdine, "I never thought I was Asian. I thought I was one of the characters (Alan) Ayckbourn (playwright of the British middle class) wrote. When I kept not getting cast, I went to my prof and asked: 'You think I'm going to be playing "The King and I" for the rest of my life?' He said: 'You may.'" So Yew left theater and went to graduate school in broadcasting and film.

His first play, "As If He Hears" (1988), was the first drama to portray the emerging gay subculture of Singapore and the growing AIDS crisis in this small, rich, conservative country. It was banned. "The gay character (a male nurse) was portrayed realistically — not a caricature, not there for ridicule. They (the authorities) were frightened of how normal he seemed. They asked, 'Why can't he be a woman?' And the person with AIDS was a straight Singaporean male who had it all."

He altered the play by taking all the "gayness" out of the dialogue and putting it in the stage directions for how the character



Phil Begin and Mikael Duden perform in an earlier Chay Yew play, "Porcelain," staged in 1993 by San Francisco's Theatre Rhino.

was to walk and talk. It passed the censors and was produced, and a later teleplay, "Someone I Used to Know," which drew on some of the same material, has been broadcast on Singaporean television.

"Language" was partly written for his mother, he says with a tinge of mockery, who is proud of her son's notices but asked for "something I can go see." The interlocking relationships in the play — he sketches a double helix in the air — are abusive, even violent, but the play is about love.

The New York production had three M. Butterflies in the cast: B.D. Wong (who originated the role), Alec Mapa (who was in the national touring company that played San Francisco in 1991) and Francis Jue (who played the role for TheatreWorks in 1992). The fourth man was David Drake, whose solo show, "The Night Larry Kramer Kissed Me," played San Francisco in 1993.

Asian American's cast is Merv Maruyama, Art Desuyo and Alan S. Quismoro, with Eric Newton of Theatre Rhino as the non-Asian man. It will be directed by Tim Dang of East West Players in Los Angeles.

"I'm glad it's going to be done at Asian American," says Yew. "I think gay theater can be interesting, but really, gay people are like any other kind of people. Once you preach to the converted, honey, who are you going to preach to?"

**WHAT'S HAPPENING IN SAN JOSE**

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California Association for Bilingual Education  
*Kaleidoscope of Culture* — January 10

California Association for Bilingual Education  
A Symphony of Voices — January 10-13

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*A Little Night Music* — January 12-28

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