

# Chay Yew

The Importance of Being Verbal

By Steven Drukman

Chay Yew, the garrulous author of *A Language of Their Own*, is not one to mince words. "I know it's supposed to be an Asian thing, to be self-effacing and all that. But not me. I'd rather be shopping." Brimming with confidence after his play's much-praised run at New York Shakespeare Festival's Public Theater last season, Yew's language is all his own. Ranging from ambitious orations to camp undercuts, his plays quickly flip from the quip to the quixotic. There's nothing small in Yew's small-talk either: His up-front candor belies the stereotype of obliquity so often attributed to Asians.

Well-versed in identity politics—particularly the issue of "Orientalism" and its uneasy overlaps with dissident sexualities—Yew's deft turn of phrase in conversation matches his wordplay on the page and stage. The 30-year-old Chinese American (whose first play, *As If He Hears*, was banned in his native Singapore because its focus on AIDS and homosexuality was not "true to Singapore values") has turned his attention to the variegated valences of everyday discourse in *A Language of Their Own*. While concerned with both the Asian-American and gay experience, the play really sounds out the ways we speak ourselves into identity, narrate our lives vis-a-vis the "master" language and, therefore, are all (literally) sentenced to reality.

In *A Language of Their Own*, Yew melds pop-culture allusions with gay savvy (one character speaks of feeling as chipper as "June Cleaver on a good hair day"). But Yew doesn't stop there, honing his camp references to encompass the experience of "Asian-ness" in America, as he terms it in

this interview. Thus, the main character speaks of feeling like Audrey Hepburn wearing a Cecil Beaton gown in *My Fair Lady*: a reference chosen for its gay currency and—in Eliza Doolittle's anxiety about correct English elocution—also evoking Asian-



"I don't want any private jargon," argues the garrulous author, who takes on both language and identity politics in the *Whitelands* trilogy.

ness. Furthermore, the language itself is a central theme in *Language*, from terminology like "banana" (an assimilationist Asian, yellow on the outside but white on the inside) to freshly-minted acronyms (ABC=American-born Chinese). The acronym informing Yew's drama the most is AIDS, and *Language* demonstrates how

the plague has inflected the language of love as it has infected the people we love.

*A Language of Their Own* is part of Yew's *Whitelands* trilogy that includes *Porcelain* (winner of the 1993 London Fringe Award for best play) and Yew's recently completed *Half Lives*. *Porcelain* will have its New York premiere this winter with David

Petrarca directing, and the entire *Whitelands* trilogy will be presented in repertory March 14-April 7 by East West Players in Los Angeles. This interview was conducted shortly after Yew was named resident artist and director of the Asian Theatre Workshop at the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles.

**DRUKMAN:** Congratulations on your new appointment. Any ideas what you'll do first?

**YEW:** My problem is I've got too many ideas! One exciting major project, tentatively called *The Square*, is to gather 16 well-known playwrights—8 Asian, 8 non-Asian—to write 10-minute plays about their understanding and dealings with each other. The plays will be set in a fictitious city square that borders New York's Chinatown. Playwrights like Maria Irene Fornes, Ping Chong and David Henry Hwang are interested so far, and Lisa Peterson is to direct. I also want to establish an Asian-American writers lab—for HIV-positive Asians, Asian

teens, the next Hwang or the new Philip Kan Gotanda—just to give space to young Asian writers to express themselves. I also plan to develop new Asian work for the main stage, revisit traditional Asian plays either in their original language or by adapting them, and found an actors' ensemble. The larger idea is to get more Asians

Chay Yew ♦ Jeffrey Lunden & Arthur Perlman

involved in theatre. Many don't go now, because they don't see their life experiences on stage.

**Do white audiences expect a little "Oriental exotica" from you, too?**

Some 60-year-old guy came up to me after seeing *Language* at the Public and said, "I really like your play but I wanted to know about Asian peoples and the Asian continent." I thought, "God, what am I? An Asian almanac or some walking PBS documentary like *The Silk Road*?" Sorry, I get slightly annoyed by stuff like that. But overall, I guess it's probably better in New York than elsewhere. That's why I loved my stay at the Public; with their help, I organized an Asian-American symposium before *Language* opened. With my residency at the Taper, I'm in the process of planning for the first Asian-American theatre conference next year, bringing Asian theatre artists together to discuss where we are as a community. But no dry, academic moderators, please. I'd rather have dishy Oprah types that open up invigorating discussions and provoke stimulating responses from the panels and audiences. Again, it's about language. I don't want any private jargon; I want it to be more involving and inclusive. But academics aren't as bad as many theatre critics....

**I noticed that many reviews were written in a language of their own.**

That's right. One New York reviewer said that the only Caucasian character in *Language* was someone with a passion for "small, soft-skinned young Asian men." I was horrified. I never said that in the play, but somehow that indirect racist and homophobic message was telegraphed to this reviewer. The headline in another New York daily, "Right Play, Wong Time" [referring to actor B.D. Wong] stunned me. I wasn't too crazy about that racial slur either. But what do I do? Stalk the reviewers with my brand new order of jujitsu knives? I've got better things to do. Besides, they were great reviews.

**You're writing at a time when both Asian-American and gay drama is in a sort of second generation. What are your views on the development of these two genres?**

When you look at Hwang, Gotanda, Jessica Hagedorn, Velina Hasu Houston, Daryl Chin, to some degree they all addressed

the question: "What does it mean to be Asian?" There were a lot of issues in those plays and, implicitly, a lot of anger. In this new generation, there isn't just one type of Asian play, voice or style. There's magic realism, surrealism, absurdism—it's all over the place. Han Ong doesn't write in traditional narrative but instead infuses poetry and satire with gritty urbanism, and Diana Son weaves funny, biting modern-day fairy tales for adults and children alike. There are so many voices, there's no simple definition.

**You're saying that there's more hybridity of genre and experimentation?**

Yes. I think there's a conscious and subconscious rebellion by these writers against theatrical conventions and traditional definitions of the Asian identity. Themes in these new plays are very different as well. No more, thank God, Japanese internment camp dramas, inter-generational family melodrama or Chinese railroad stories. Been there, done that. Instead of letting our history and mythology determine the nature of our plays, we're digging up our own issues and problems. Being Asian then ceases to become a central issue; instead, it's the tone, part of the landscape.

I feel most minority drama has to go through that questioning, anger stage first. My angry play is *Porcelain*, which was originally a short film script I wrote for my thesis at Boston University. Because it was so risqué—very violent and about anonymous sex in the toilets—no college student wanted to audition. When I became a playwright-in-residence at Mu-Lan Theatre in London, I decided to resurrect the piece. Since the theatre company had no money, I stylized the play with five chairs for a set.

**And of course, the character's name is Lone Lee.**

Oh, but that is revealed in the play so fast most people don't notice it. "Lone" is also "dragon" in Chinese, which is the most powerful and revered astrological sign, so there is the additional irony that he is a dragon in his own culture, but merely a shadow lurking in the toilets—totally disconnected and alone—in this other world.

Now *Language* goes one step further

from isolation. It's about the attempt to communicate and to cope with each other. Maybe my generation knows that when you're a minority—no matter what type—you try to learn the language of the majority. In *Language*, there's an attempt to claim that language, to reinvent it, even at the price of miscommunication and excommunication.

**It seems in *Language* you're saying that language is all there is to claim, ultimately.**

I use it metaphorically, though. Language is not just about words. It's also about habits, gestures, actions—the day-to-day stuff human connections are made of. Ultimately, the play isn't really about gay Asians, it's about love and the means by which we seek it and lose it. I'm fascinated by the darker aspects of love that nobody dares to talk about: manipulation, open

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relationships, abandonment, violence in domestic relationships and emotional blackmail. Well, it's all my mother's fault. After reading the London reviews for *Porcelain*, she quietly asked if I would consider writing a less inflammatory and provocative play, like a love story. And this is what I came up with.

**What about the state of gay theatre?**

Oh, don't get me started. Nowadays, the staple of gay theatre is just fluff, flesh and cheap comedy. Kinda like my sex life, really. You have the prerequisite bunch of good-looking white guys playing a strip version of truth or dare, or a group of witty, upwardly mobile white queens vacationing in some beach house with occasional appearances from a token minority dancer flailing his token minority penis, talking like Chita Rivera. (Obviously, I'm referring to Terrence McNally's *Love! Valour! Compassion!*) I'm sure McNally's artistic intentions are noble, but it's not hard to put two and two together when you have a group of articulate, witty white men on one side, and a stereotypical stock minority character on the other. What are you trying to say? I'm interested in gay plays of substance, gay plays that transcend and transform. These playwrights include Craig Lucas, Phyllis Nagy, Larry Kramer, Nicky

# people



Francis Jue, left, and B.D. Wong in *A Language of Their Own* at the New York Shakespeare Festival.

Silver, Edwin Sanchez, Harry Kondoleon and Tony Kushner, whose work, especially *Angels in America*, I love and identify with. They speak to my gay sensibilities. If I want to see naked boys on stage, there's always the Male Jewel Box in Times Square, at least over there, I hear they have better dialogue.

**Speaking of gay playwrights with discernible voices, I noticed allusions to Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* in *Porcelain*.**

Yes. I guess it's a sort of homage to Mr. Wilde. I've always felt that *Earnest* is a play about deception—clever ways of lying to get what and who you need to survive. Wilde's play is very Asian in that respect: Since Asian Americans are the model minority, we must certainly be the best liars, especially to ourselves. We've tried so hard not to rock the boat. Be American. And that's exactly what I'm exploring in my new play, *Half-Lives*. What happens when you suddenly find yourself middle-aged, Asian and gay, and you've worked so hard to live the American dream, have an American family? But you never, ever will really *be* American. You have to be at peace with yourself before you can belong.

This really hit home one evening as I left the theatre, feeling secretly pleased by the standing ovations and bellows of "bravo" for *Language*. I was walking down St. Mark's Place, and a young man looked me straight in the eye and called me a "fucking chink." I don't believe I've ever been called that, but it somberly reminded me that, while sharing a language can make you feel like you belong, it can also be used against you at a moment's notice. I guess it also means I've still got a lot of work cut out for me as a playwright.

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