

# Outside Our Skin

Interview with Chay Yew

By Matthew Graham Smith

**M**atthew Graham Smith: Your new plays are quite different than your earlier collection. You discuss bigger and broader subjects, with a lot less exclusively queer material. What's changing for you?

**Chay Yew:** Well, it's great to be in a ghetto as a gay man and as an Asian man, but after a while you have to start thinking outside the box. I think my first few plays were all about discovering one's self from within. But then the question becomes how do we, as gay people, or as Asian people, relate to the world outside of our skin, outside our ghettos. And I think that becomes an interesting issue for me as a person as I'm growing. I feel like I don't need to explain myself anymore.

**MGS:** Is that because you see gay America changing?

**CY:** Partially. And it's a reaction to seeing too many gay plays that are so banal. There is a kind of Gay Theater that basically says: I'm gay, I'm happy, I'm naked and I'm white. But I'm sick of seeing people having sex. I mean, I love sex. But are we all only thinking about sex? The value in that is for young people coming out. But I want to find out what's new with us. What do we need to think about, to work on? There are all these other plays that need to be done, other gay men that I need to talk about and explore. Older gay men. Gay men in relationships. Gay men and women who have interesting lives in small towns. The gay people we may even ignore, who are HIV-positive and really need money and are begging on the streets as we walk past them to go to a club. I think we need to be less myopic.

**MGS:** We have a limited idea of what's sexy?

**CY:** I think there is a place for *Naked Boys Singing*, *Making Porn*. But I am a little concerned when the equilibrium tilts toward that and what it says about the gay community. For example, I don't think gay audiences are interested in seeing a play about how young gay men in America are deliberately catching HIV. That's a play I don't think gay theaters would dare to do.

**MGS:** What is your new play about?

**CY:** It's called *Malaya*, set in Singapore (1920s British Empire); the second part is eighty years later, the American Empire. There's a gay relationship that fits my gay agenda perhaps but it's not like when he comes into the play you know he's a big old fag. What I'm interested in now is how we deal with the rest of the world and how we have a stake in it. The gay characters are probably treated with more cruelty, more oddity and definitely fully fleshed out. I think there is so much representation of us right now we don't need to write that

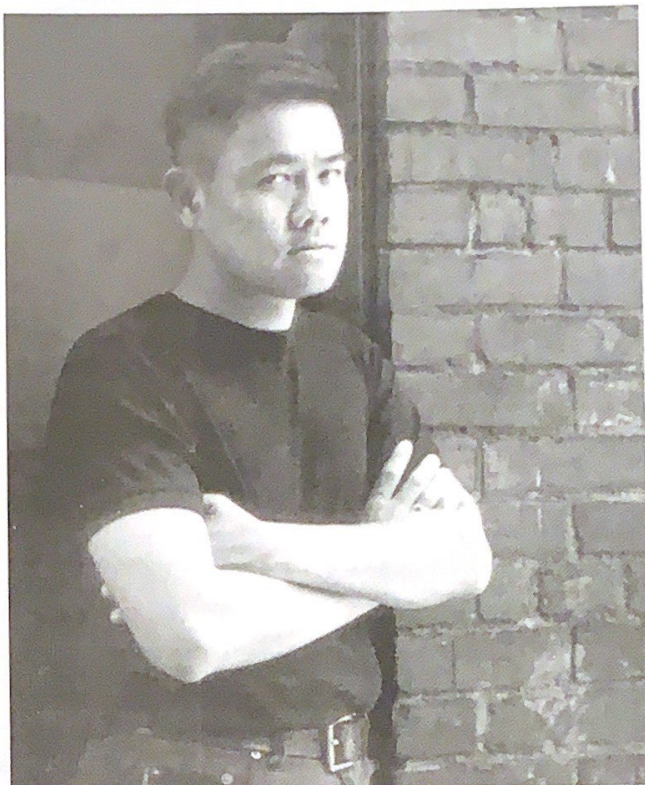


photo courtesy of Chay Yew

really good role-model character.

**MGS:** What are your hopes for the future of the gay community? *Wonderland* seems very bleak.

**CY:** Maybe it's all to do with clubbing. Are you in your clubbing phase or in your post-clubbing phase? I've clubbed and I'm happy I've done it. But then you say to yourself, "after clubbing, what is there?" That's a big question for the gay community because it's not like a village or place where people have some sense of longevity. It's basically clubs, bars, sex establishments and you can only enter at 21 because they serve alcohol and drugs. Is there a correlation between the gay community and addiction? And what is this about wanting acceptance? My lens has changed. It's leaving that little boy who wanted to go to clubs in London for someone who says, "I've done that. Now what am I to do? How am I a part of the world?" It's still a negotiation because it's complicated. There's a whole set of challenges and hurdles. There's so much work to be done. I don't think our work with AIDS is done. I don't think our effort to lower the number of teen suicides is working. I don't think we are still accepting of each other. I used to have this image of the gay community as "Come brother, you are one of us." Kind of Mennonite in that way. But I'm interested in what the future is going to bring aside from the simplicities of gay life that offers us freedom. Great, those drag queens fought for us in '69, so we can be ourselves. But what are we going to give to the people of 2069? That's a big-ass question.

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