

## ENTERTAINMENT

# Curtain rising for Chay Yew

Trilogy speaks volumes about acclaimed playwright

By Janet Weeks  
Daily News Staff Writer

Playwright Chay Yew's first work — an AIDS drama — was summarily banned in his native Singapore by government conservatives offended by its positive portrayal of a strong, handsome, hard-working gay man.

The bruising rejection might have crushed another playwright. But not Yew.

True to what he calls "the Asian way — just nod and smile," Yew listened to the censors and promptly went back to work, cleverly rewriting "As If He Hears" into a play with the same message in a different package.

"I decided to take out all those words, all the language that made the character sound pontificating," Yew says.

He also added character descriptions that turned the leading man from a regular guy into a lispng, limp-wristed homosexual.

"I had him glide into the room, arms akimbo with a Bette Davis smile."

The result was a smash success. Yew not only fooled censors, but ended up with a play that forced the audience to look beyond silly stereotypes.

"When the character came out — this big raging queen — the audience laughed at the character. Halfway through, they laughed with the character. And at the end, they empathized with the character so much that they felt uncomfortable. I had people tell me 'I never realized gay people had feelings like I do.' And some actually volunteered to help an AIDS service in Singapore."

"As If He Hears" also launched Yew's career as one of the most cutting-edge and critically acclaimed young Asian playwrights of the '90s.

This weekend, a trio of Yew's plays — collectively titled "Whitelands" — premieres at the East West Players in Silver Lake. The plays can be seen separately on weeknights or together in marathon weekend performances.

The three-at-a-time format is rare for 99-seat theaters, and a testament to Yew's rising-star status.

## THE FACTS

■ **The show:** "Whitelands," a trilogy by Chay Yew.  
■ **Where:** East West Players, 4424 Santa Monica Blvd., Los Angeles.  
■ **When:** Through April 21.  
■ **Tickets:** \$20 per show (\$15 for students and seniors) or \$50 for the trilogy (\$40 for students and seniors). Call (213) 660-0366.

"I believe Chay is going to be the next big Asian-American writer," said Tim Dang, artistic director of the East West Players. Dang predicted that Yew is on the brink of achieving the kind of crossover success currently enjoyed by Tony winner David Henry Hwang ("M. Butterfly") and Philip Kan Gotanda ("The Wash").

"They're the two most foremost Asian-American playwrights," said Dang. "I believe Chay is going to be the next who's going to do that."

Yew, 31, was born in Singapore to middle-class parents who encouraged him to read great literature — everything from Shakespeare to Capote — while very young.

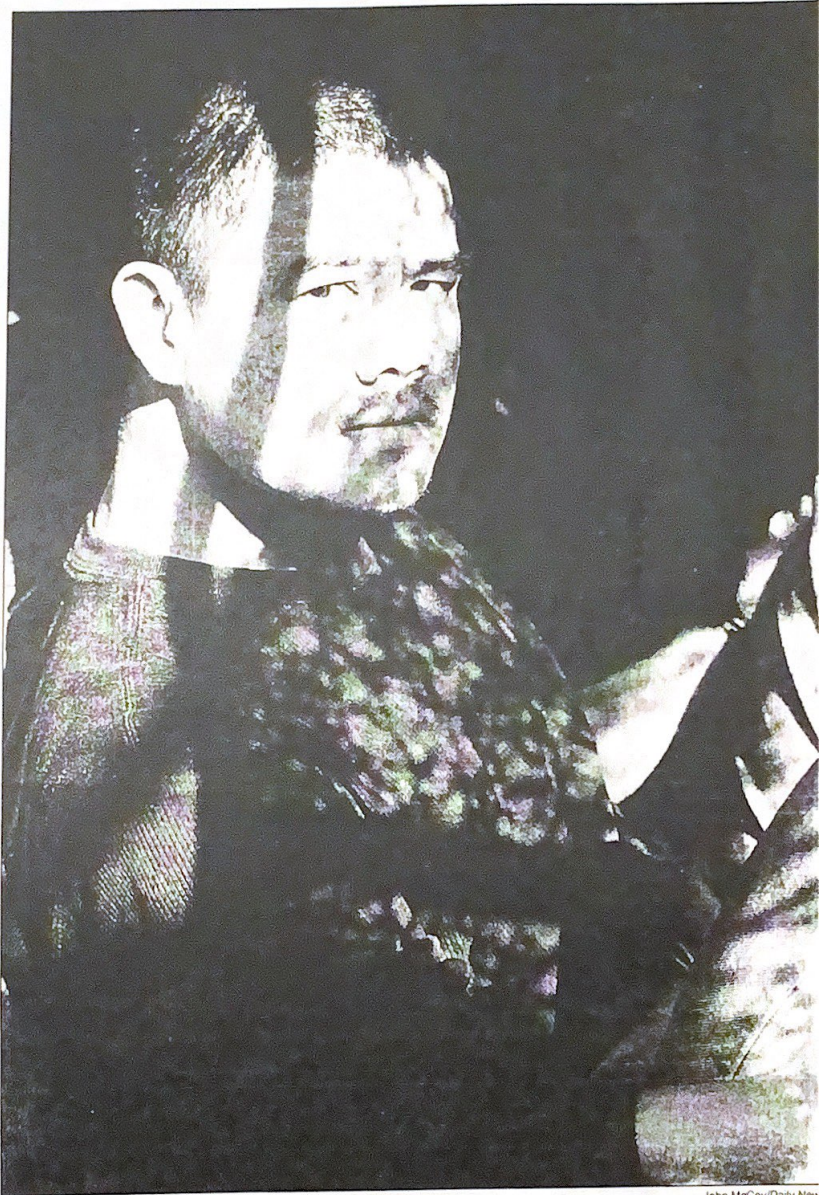
He also developed an early understanding of theater, thanks to his grandmother's love of Chinese street opera, a cultural tradition that involves plays staged on sidewalks for free at night.

"I remember being a kid and wearing pajamas and eating and watching Chinese opera in the streets of Singapore."

After graduating from high school, Yew came to California to attend Pepperdine University. In 1992, he wrote his second play, "Porcelain," while serving a playwright-in-residency at London's Mu-Lan Theatre Company. The play, which won London's 1993 Fringe Award (the equivalent of an Obie), is about a gay Asian teen-ager who kills his lover in an East London restroom.

At the time of "Porcelain's" West Coast premiere in 1993 at Los Angeles' Burbage Theatre, Daily Variety called it "a gripping, gritty, graphic voice poem ... an impressive and stimulating theater experience."

"Porcelain" is the first third of the "Whitelands" trilogy. The other plays are "A Language of Their Own" and "Half Lives."



John McCoy/Daily News

"The problem with L.A. theater is that it tries too hard to be New York," says playwright Chay Yew.

Yew says the plays are thematically linked by a fable about a crow. In the tale, a crow is happy until he sees sparrows flying overhead. He longs to join the elegant birds and does — only to be rejected as clumsy. He eventually gains acceptance, even though he never truly fits in.

When the crow decides to go home, he finds he no longer fits in with crows, either. So he leaves for a tree where he lives alone.

"My plays take chunks of the fable," says Yew. "In 'Porcelain,' a young boy living in England wants to be accepted in their society. 'Language' is about when the crow is with the sparrows and learning how to live together and at what

cost.

"'Half Lives' is when the crow wants to go home and cannot go home. The only place he finds a sense of home is within himself."

Although he has lived all over the world, Yew chooses to make Los Angeles his home. He is dedicated to improving the theater scene here both through his writing and as director of the Asian Theatre Workshop at the Mark Taper Forum.

"The problem with L.A. theater is that it tries too hard to be New York," he says. "It should create a voice that is unique to itself. We need to promote that. We need to tell playwrights, 'Stop doing those plays about England or New York.

You're in L.A. Write about L.A.'"

Yew also sees himself writing for larger audiences — perhaps through television — down the road.

"I love TV to death," he says, an uncommon statement for a theater person. "I feel TV is today's theater."

But for now, he feels more at home writing for the stage, which allows for more controversy and anger than television. Indeed, he even finds the stage to be too tame a medium.

"I wish that theater was more challenging," he says with a sigh. "I wish theater artists and directors would take a leap. Don't be afraid to be ugly."