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CHAY YEW

## Porcelain

### EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

CHAY YEW BEGAN his playwriting career in his native Singapore. His earliest play, *As If He Hears*, was first banned by the Singapore government and then, after some revision, produced in 1989. Yew then moved to Boston, where he worked in television production and writing, including the New England cult success *Night-shift*. *Porcelain*, the first play in Chay Yew's trilogy of chamber plays about the gay Asian experience, was commissioned by the Mu-Lan Theatre Company in London in 1992 and was successful enough to be transferred to the Royal Court Theatre. It earned its playwright the London Fringe Award for Best Playwright in 1993. Since then it has been produced all over the United States. The second play in the trilogy, *A Language of Their Own*, received its premiere at the New York Public Theater in April 1995. *Half Lives*, the third play, has been commissioned by East West Players in Los Angeles, which plans to mount the entire trilogy. Yew now resides in Los Angeles.

It is ironic that the best-known play about a gay Asian male, David Henry Hwang's *M. Butterfly*, was written by a heterosexual and used a male-male relationship to comment on white men's attitude toward Asians in general and Asian women in particular. Like *M. Butterfly*, *Porcelain* focuses on a romantic obsession that is passionate and destructive enough to be equated with opera. But this is only the beginning of the daring of Chay Yew's daring, deceptively simple play, which looks at the dilemma of being gay and Asian in contemporary London.

*Porcelain* challenges its audience to understand what made nineteen-year-old, Cambridge University-bound John Lee seek sex and, more surprisingly, companionship in an East London public men's room and what drove him to shoot William Hope (an equally apt name) six times in that same "cottage." Yew starts from an issue that is as controversial for many gay men as it is for heterosexuals—sex in public toilets. Recently on one of the gay networks on E-mail there was a lengthy, emotional "string" on toilet sex. The passionate expressions of the young men on the "net" for the most part echoed the revulsion of conservative, "straight"

society. Why would an out, proud man need to have sex with strangers in a men's room—behavior that seems to be a vestige of the closet? One answer, which Yew's play suggests, is that such a man would if there were no other out, proud men showing any interest. John Lee's feelings are more complex than that, however:

To be honest with you, I hate the toilets. I really do—but there's this trembling in me when I'm there—I don't know what it is, but I like it—I enjoy it. And—there's people there who want me. Even for a moment. And the idiot that I am—thinking I really belong—thinking perhaps all these moments will amount to something—someone who will—like me, love me—isn't that the silliest thing you've heard?

Born, appropriately, with the name of Lone, which he anglicized to John, Lee feels he will never fit in. As a gay man, he is alienated from the culture and family into which he was born. As an Asian in London, he feels ignored, rejected. In the gay bars and clubs he is invisible. Occasionally, for a moment, sex in the toilet gives him a sense of belonging, even love. For a few weeks William Hope offers Lee what he has always wanted, but for Hope the toilets are a place to get sex without having to admit to himself or anyone else that he is gay. Yet, uncharacteristically, after their encounter, Hope invites John Lee out for a drink, to his home and bed, and, briefly, into a relationship. When the relationship starts to become more than physical, to move toward the love John Lee seeks, Hope panics, tries brutally to move the relationship back to a merely physical one, and, when that isn't possible, leaves John and returns to furtive, safe encounters in the toilet. John's anger and desperation at Hope's rejection take him beyond rational behavior into the realm of operatic passion. In his desperation, Lee moves from identification with Puccini's *Madama Butterfly*, the feminine Asian martyr, to identification with Bizet's *Don José*, the obsessed, rejected, European, masculine avenger. Like Don José, Lee is discovered cradling the body of the lover he killed.

We might ask why John Lee does not find other Asian gay men. We might wonder if his isolation is not self-induced. But Yew has caught that sense many young gay men have of being alone, of being singular freaks, and Yew evokes the self-destructive behavior that can ensue from those feelings of isolation and self-hatred. What is most tragic about the play is not John's plight but the sense that things haven't changed much for some people since gay liberation. The closet is still a potent force, and many young gay men still feel despair.

Yew chronicles the brief, tragic intersection of Lee and Hope and its aftermath in what he calls "a voice play." On a bare stage, decorated only by the red origami cranes John Lee folds during his imprisonment, *Porcelain* takes place totally through language. Four actors surrounding John Lee create all the sounds and voices of his world: William Hope, John's cynical court-appointed psychologist. John's father, and the racist, homophobic voices that isolate John. The voices also tell the story John learned from his father, of the crow who tried to become a sparrow, which becomes a parable of John's isolation. Although the audience sees only four seated actors, the fascination of John Lee's character and the power of Chay Yew's writing make *Porcelain* an intense dramatic experience. Like a beautiful piece of Chinese porcelain, Yew's play is an effective, paradoxical combination of economy and complexity.