

the
*D*ramatists Guild
*Q*uarterly

Conversations with
Maria Irene Fornes and
Chay Yew

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Original Cast by
Craig Lucas

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The Unkindest Cut

Winter 1995

Chay Yew On a New Asian-American Theater

Chay Yew is the author of A Language of One's Own, a four-character play about the dark side of intense love. Set to open at the Joseph Papp Public Theater in April, it will be the first play by the Singapore-born playwright to be produced in New York. Yew's plays have been produced in Singapore, England, and the United States, and he currently divides his time between New York and Los Angeles. Here is the text of an interview with Yew, conducted this fall by Gerard Raymond.

Q: Why was your first play, *As If He Hears*, banned in Singapore?

YEW: It was a commissioned work, and, incidentally, also the first AIDS play in Singapore. At the time, producing a play there entailed having to submit the script to the censorship board. Upon reading the script, the board felt the play was decidedly sympathetic to the gay character and endorsed a "deviant" lifestyle—you see, homosexuality wasn't considered to be "true to Singapore values." Basically a Chinese society, Singapore's attitude towards homosexuality and all other things taboo was, "Hey, we know your lisp isn't a dental deformity and your limp wrists an exercise in orthopedics, but don't talk about it because we don't want to hear about it." So some of the best things are better left unsaid.

After it was banned I didn't want to do the play anymore and promptly left for Boston. But the theater company that was producing it asked me to rewrite it as there was a big AIDS explosion in Asia at the time. Out of responsibility (it's an Asian thing) I did, although I dislike the idea that theater should be instructional or educational. Nevertheless I rewrote the play so that the character didn't say anything that indicated he was gay. Instead I put certain twists and puns into the subtext. The censorship board was only interested in the dialogue and didn't bother to read the stage directions like, for example, "He minces across the stage, arms akimbo." When the character came on everybody knew he was a flaming homosexual.

Q: How did the British production of *Porcelain*, your next play, come about?

YEW: I wrote *Porcelain* as a resident playwright for Mu-Lan Theatre, a London-based Asian theater company. It was originally intended as a film script for my graduate thesis at Boston University; I finally shelved it because no actor wanted to audition for this more-than-risque student script. Set in a world of homophobia, racism, and anonymous toilet sex, it's about an Asian boy who falls in love with a Caucasian

man who cannot reciprocate. In the end, out of anger and desperation and loneliness, the boy shoots the man. Mu-Lan said they had a zero budget, and I asked if they could give me five chairs for a set. So that was how *Porcelain* came about—just five chairs and five men talking and enacting the crime of passion. By some chance the play transferred to the Royal Court Theatre and won the Fringe Award for best play in London for 1992. I didn't think I was going to win it because Frank McGuinness's *Someone to Watch Over Me* was also competing that year. It probably was a P.C. gesture, like when they gave an Oscar to deaf Marlee Matlin, but hey, it's an award—I'll take it!

Q: What are the differences between working in Singapore, London and the U.S.?

YEW: When you say you are a writer in Singapore, they look at you as if you have Tourette's syndrome and smile nicely at you. Then they quickly make a beeline to someone who has a degree in testicular surgery. You don't get respect and can't make a living doing theater in a country like Singapore. The government doesn't believe in investing in or supporting the arts, even famous stage actors have day jobs. The whole country has been artistically sterile and business-oriented for many years. Now, all of a sudden, they realize that art can be a profit-making business too, so let's have art. I believe a touring production of *Cats* is running over there now.

In London they pat you on the head like they would a child from the Make-A-Wish Foundation and say, "Oh, how delightful. You are an Asian writer, it's so nice to have you on board. We are not sure about grant money but come aboard anyway, have us a quick feel."

Over here in the States, it is more like, "It's good you are part of this small group of minority artists. We love your culture and Chinese food. You have lots of issues you can write about—safe, familiar, Mickey Mouse issues that are palatable to us, like immigration, *Joy Luck Club* experiences, and Asian women with bound feet being battered by insensitive, sexless Asian men." There are a lot of these P.C. things that we are supposed to be angry about. I guess I was angry when I was younger but I think my anger has kind of died, ever since I discovered the joys of therapy and shopping at Barney's. My feeling is let's get over it and let's all write about different things that continually define us as Asian-Americans.

Q: Do you see this happening among other Asian-American writers?

YEW: There are several different groups of Asian-American writers today. David Henry Hwang, Philip Kan Gotanda, Velina Hasu Houston, and others—who write a lot about being Asian in America—are a generation of playwrights who have posed basic questions like, "Who are we?" "How do we fit in?" and "Why are we different?" They supplied many answers and more questions, some insightful and some searing, and naturally, there is a certain amount of anger and politics involved in their writing. Righteous anger, and racial and sexual politics. It was also characteristically dominated by the Chinese and Japanese, who were the first Asian groups to arrive in America.

Now we see a new wave of Asian playwrights who have come from different ethnic minorities and sexualities, with fascinating artistic styles and a whole new agenda.

Alice Tuan, for example, writes in a startling, unabashed Generation X point of view in her family drama *Last of the Suns*, combining Chinese myths and history. It's a trip. Also, the Korean-American playwright Sung Rno, writes in a very modern, poetic, magic realism. Let's not forget Denise Uvehara and Han Ong, who explore issues of sexuality and the concerns of young Asian-Americans in their plays.

There are several Vietnamese, Hawaiian, and Filipino writers coming up as well and I urge Asian-American theater companies to mine and encourage these writers. These same theater companies should also stop producing boring, tedious plays about internment camps and family generational dramas. That's why Asian-American theater has been so stagnant and undynamic. It's the same with minority theater all around. Look, we have issues—great, we speak to our people—great, but if you keep hitting people with the same message over and over again and they know what to expect when they walk in, why should they bother coming to the theater?

Q: What should minority playwrights be writing about?

Yew: Minority theater's mission is to broadcast its messages to people who otherwise wouldn't hear it—white, middle class, straight people in who live anywhere between New York and L.A. So they see, so they understand, and, hopefully, so they can change. In any case, I don't think today's theater can do a lot to challenge people's perceptions. It would be great and lofty to say that, but I guess you have the *Ricki Lake Show* and *Roseanne* for that. At the moment Asian-American theater is slowly giving birth to more groups of new people who have different things to say and I hope this continues. It's the same thing with gay theater. I mean after AIDS what are you going to talk about? But let's raise the stakes. Let's push the boundaries. Let's go beyond. Beyond the same stereotypes the majority has categorized us in. I mean, I hate to sound juvenile, but isn't that what theater is all about? Conversely, I hope more mainstream regional theaters consider including more cutting-edge minority plays in their seasons, and encourage new minority voices in the theater to be heard via workshopping, readings, productions, or commissions.

Q: Your work so far has focused on both Asian-American and gay experience.

Yew: Yes, but this is only a small part of my work. With time I intend to write and explore many different things. My next play, *Half Lives*, is the last of the trilogy of plays which began with *Porcelain* and *Language* and centers on the Asian gay experience. At the moment, there are plans to have the three plays produced together as one evening of theater.

Eventually I'd like to write children's plays, plays about Asian women, an adaptation or two, and, hopefully, a full-length play that centers on straight Caucasians, just to prove to myself I can do it. That doesn't mean I'll not go back to Asian and gay themes, because that's where I came from and that's where my sensibilities are. But I think if you are a writer you should write about anything you want to.

Women Playwrights: Unfinished Business

By Cindy Nemser

Although women playwrights are seeing their plays produced in larger numbers than ever before, many feel that the battle for equal opportunity is by no means won. Many also believe that they are not free to tackle any subject they consider significant and that their authentic voices are being muffled. Is this situation due to sex discrimination on the part of producers and artistic directors? Is antagonism among white women, women of color, and lesbian women part of the problem? Have some feminists marginalized themselves by becoming too steeped in separatist anti-male ideology and by relying too much on partisan supporters? It is essential to explore all these factors candidly if women playwrights are to fully come into their own.

There is still a huge disparity between the number of plays by men produced at major venues throughout the country versus the number of plays by women. A count of plays listed in *American Theatre's* 1993-94 preview issue reveals that only twenty percent of the plays slated for production in the not-for-profit regional theaters are by women (this figure is not truly representative since many of these theaters produce the same play as it travels from region to region). Moreover, many of these productions are not presented on the main stage but in smaller, less prestigious secondary stages. The situation is no better in New York's primary venues, both commercial and not-for-profit. In my tally of plays in the 1993 edition of *New York Theater Critics Review*, only eight percent of the plays listed were written by women.

Yet as most women playwrights already know without having to quote statistics, an enormous number of women are writing plays today. Julia Miles, the artistic director of the Women's Project and Productions, says she receives six hundred scripts a year, while Martha Boesing of *At the Foot of the Mountain*, an all-women's theater in Minneapolis, quoted an annual figure of approximately one thousand. And over two thousand women playwrights are members of the Dramatists Guild.

When confronted with this unconscionable inequity, most of the commercial and not-for-profit producers and artistic directors I queried did not feel the disparity could be attributed to sexism. And not surprisingly, all those who were willing to acknowledge that sexism exists avowed that they never rejected playwrights on the basis of gender. Carol Ostrow, the co-producer of the long running Off Broadway hit *Beau Jest*, did candidly observe that the commercial theater is still a man's world, and doing a women's play is considered especially risky. And according to playwright Cheryl West, "even though women make up most of the audience everywhere, when it's a woman's work, the presumption is the play will be too 'narrow,' or too much involved with women's concerns, to attract a wide audience."