



# PORCELAIN

American Premiere

A Voice Play by Chay Yew

Directed by Ivan Spiegel  
Produced by Andy Griggs  
and Ivan Spiegel

Arne Andersen • Keith Burns  
Mark Hattan • Lee Ryan  
Garrett Richard Wang

January 8 - February 27  
7:30 pm

Burbage Theatre

2330 Sawtelle Boulevard  
West Los Angeles

(310) 478-0897

"A most remarkable achievement" *The Times*

"Vivid voice play ... a touching exploration of sexual and cultural alienation" *The Guardian*

"Crude and tender, it moves and it shocks" *Independent*

"This play is an object lesson in how to take big dramatic risks" *What's On*

"Excellence on the small stage...tell(s) you a great deal about modern theatre" *Financial Times*

"Intense and absorbing drama, full of variation" *Sunday Telegraph*

"Superlative" *Independent on Sunday*

"Fiercely erotic..compulsory viewing" *City Limits*

"Assured, explicit and challenging and extremely well served" *Arts and Entertainment*

"Skillfully crafted...compelling gay theatre" *Time Out*

"Intense...a language of fantasy and passion" *Kaleidoscope*

"An exhilarating theatrical experience" *East West*

"Powerful, provocative, fascinating...it's stunning" *Ham and High*

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- *Bay Area Reporter*

### "Exquisite

... Theatre Rhinoceros is off  
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- *San Jose Mercury News*

### "Porcelain

will leave you with plenty to  
think and talk about"

- *Sentinel*

theatre rhinoceros presents



by CHAY YEW

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## **PORCELAIN**

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**chay yew**

directed by  
**van riley**

with  
**richard dorton**  
**david fendig**  
**david jackson**  
**tom mallan**  
**christopher wilson**

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"...a provocative evening of theatre. The playwright and production aim high and they hit their mark squarely."  
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# THE TIMES

WEDNESDAY JUNE 3 1992

## THEATRE

### Inside the outsiders

IN BOTH these plays, the hero is an outsider. In *The Man Outside*, he is a German corporal shattered by his survival on the Russian front, in *Porcelain*, a Chinese boy found weeping beside his murdered lover in a public lavatory at Bethnal Green.

Chay Yew's play, *Porcelain*, is a most remarkable achievement: strongly constructed, sensitively directed, and acted with alert precision by its five actors, whose contribution to the production the programme acknowledges. They sit facing the audience on a row of chairs for almost the full 90 minutes, speaking directly at us, even when engaged in a question and answer dialogue between themselves. The rear wall and floor gleam with the whiteness of a urinal, four of the actors play white Londoners and wear identical black suits, framing the fifth (Daniel York), the Chinese boy, wearing white. Around his feet lie hundreds of the *origami* cranes he compulsively

folds from crimson paper during his interrogation. They spatter the floor like blood.

A bitter tale of alienation emerges as the four white Londoners alternate between the role of chorus, neutral, condemning or comprehending, and the characters of prison psychiatrist, the boy's father, a television fact-finder and the dead lover. The boy gradually allows himself to voice the sense of isolation of a gay Chinese, feeling himself to belong nowhere, longing for friendship and finding a semblance of it in any-

**The Man Outside/  
Porcelain**  
Chelsea Centre/  
Etcetera, Camden

mous sexual encounters. A sordid *crime passionel* becomes a drama of racial grief, generating the urgency of a thriller and the power of an archetype. The two directors, Glen Goei and Stephen Knight, judge the pace and unsentimental tone to perfection, breaking the tension when an actor suddenly grins, intensifying it by flooding the stage in crimson light. The performances by York, David Tysall, Adam Matalon, Julien Ball and Michael Parkinson are terrific.

*The Man Outside* was the only play

written by Wolfgang Borchert, who died at the age of 26, the day before its 1947 Hamburg premiere. The theme of a soldier's homecoming inspired Expressionist writers in the 1920s and Borchert employs the same curt style, though the mood is less enraged than despairing. Corporal Beckmann returns to Hamburg ravaged by guilt for the deaths of men in his platoon, and as he limps through the city towards the Elbe, he is haunted by one particular corpse.

Andy Lavender's direction works well. David Battcock finds a thin, mockingly reasonable voice for Beckmann's alter-ego, but his role in the drama is unclear.

As a clue to the mood of Germany immediately after the war, the play has its interest, but this production is weakened at the centre by an unexciting performance from Will Barton.

JEREMY KINGSTON

02-25-1992

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The Sunday Telegraph

# REVIEW

AUGUST 9, 1992

*Porcelain*, at the Royal Court's Theatre Upstairs, lies quite at the other end of the austerity spectrum. No music or dancing, no costumes or scenery. Just five actors looking gimlet-eyed into the audience and doing the old-fashioned thing: telling a story. The story concerns a *crime passionnel*. John Lee is 19 and about to go to Cambridge — until the day he shoots his lover dead. The lover is male, and the shooting takes place in a men's public lavatory in Bethnal Green.

It may sound sordid, but it makes an intense and absorbing drama, full of variation. The actors buzz with the radio headlines from the morning of the crime, while a Channel 4 reporter interviews people about the social phenomenon of "cottageing". In prison, John Lee tells a criminal psychologist that he haunted public lavatories because he was looking for someone to love. He thought he had found that person in the man he murdered.

Lee's sense of isolation is aggravated, he tells the psychologist, by being Chinese as well as gay. His father came from Hong Kong to give his children a better life, and there is a moving moment when the old man says he feels sure all the customers in his Gerrard Street restaurant know what John has done.

*Porcelain* was written by the Singaporean playwright Chay Yew for the Mu-Lan theatre company, which aims to raise the profile of the Chinese and oriental communities in Britain. The cast — Daniel York (as Lee), David Tysall, Adam Matalon, Julien Ball and Mark Aiken — give the work their complete concentration.



Saturday 8 August 1992

## NOTICES

**PROMS / Stephen Johnson**  
BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra  
*Royal Albert Hall & Radio 3*

It's hard to believe that Lutoslawski's *Livre pour orchestre* is 24 years old. Its cultivated modernism — complete with singing string glissandos and spicily adventurous tuning — suggests a composer who has had long opportunity to digest the discoveries of 1960s experimentalism, rather than one who was very much in the thick of it. At the same time, the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra were able to perform it with the kind of understanding and feeling that one would expect only in well-established repertoire.

Listening to this beguiling, at times stirring, performance, strongly shaped by conductor Jerzy Maksymiuk, it wasn't hard to believe that *Livre pour orchestre* is on its way to classic status. From this to Rachmaninov's Piano Concerto No 4 seemed less of a stylistic leap than one would have imagined:

here again were the beguiling, swooning phrases, and the abrupt contrasts between hard-edged brass and percussion and voluptuous strings. Soloist Nikolai Demidenko played brilliantly, warmly and with all the panache the finale demands, and the BBC SSO were near-ideal accompanists. Playing was equally fine in Sibelius's Symphony No 7; if the drama wasn't quite elemental, this had more to do with the way Maksymiuk periodically allowed the momentum to drop than with any qualities of expression or sound-colour.

**THEATRE / Sabine Durrant**  
*Porcelain*  
*Royal Court, Theatre Upstairs*

What does the word "porcelain" suggest to you? Something delicate, willow-patterned perhaps? Or something you point Percy at? Both associations work for Chay Yew's new play, an investigation into the murder by a young

Chinese boy of his male lover in a Bethnal Green toilet. Like the china that fascinates the accused (he's absorbed by the idea of coarse grains creating so fragile an end-product), the writing is both crude and tender; it moves and it shocks.

For the most part, the play is delivered in sound-bites: five men sit in a row conveying the story in relay — chirping out news bulletins, conducting vox-pop interviews, commenting on the case as journalists, protagonists, policemen, members of the public. But, within the babble, are moments of relative stillness — the conversations between the boy (Daniel York) and the criminal psychologist employed to determine his sanity (David Tysall). The acting is excellent throughout, but in these brief exchanges, particularly, a sharp picture of both men's vulnerability, desperation and intelligence is superbly portrayed. Not a crack to be seen.

□ To 22 Aug (071-730 1745)

Theatre/Malcolm Rutherford

# Excellence on the small stage

**T**WO PLAYS in London this month are worth seeing as an illustration of how technically excellent the small stage has become. They are *Seven Doors* by the German writer, Botho Strauss, at The Gate, and *Porcelain* by a Singaporean writer, Chay Yew, at the Royal Court's Theatre Upstairs.

On the face of it, the two pieces could not be more different. *Seven Doors* is very German abstract, with references to Faust, and hops about all over the place, including hell. *Porcelain* is an investigative documentary about a homosexual murder in a public lavatory in Bethnal Green. Technique brings them together.

Both productions use casts where people play more than one part - not particularly for reasons of an economy, but as a deliberate style. In the programme for *Porcelain*, indeed, only one actor is listed against a specific part. That is Daniel York as John Lee, the young Hong Kong Chinese student who commits the murder and plays only himself throughout. All four other actors are named simply as voices and take on whatever role is appropriate: police officer, television interviewer and so on.

The Gate, as so often, is ambitious about the staging, despite having one of the smallest available spaces in London theatre. David Farr's direction of *Seven Doors* has a cast of 10. Sometimes they appear all at once without falling over each other. Moreover, this relatively large cast does not preclude an effective and frequently changing set. The seven doors of the title are not always in the same place, yet there is still no impression of overcrowding. There is also some dramatic use of lighting and colour.

The same goes for Glen Goel's and Stephen Knight's direction of *Porcelain*, which is played almost entirely in black and white. One notably harrowing scene is played in the dark with only the voices heard, and is all the better for such restraint.

There are other similarities. Botho Strauss and Chay Yew

both have a fascination with television. *Seven Doors* picks up a television quiz show and there are frequent scenes of characters being interviewed. Much of *Porcelain* develops as though it were a documentary for Channel 4. I do not find this simply derivative; it is the playwrights' acknowledgement that television is a very powerful influence, whether revealing or distorting.

Quite apart from the technical excellence and the high standing of acting, the two pieces have a high level of seriousness. *Porcelain* is one of the few modern plays that I have seen which does not seek to blame crime on the police. Indeed, the police officer, when interviewed, is studiously neutral and fair. He says that he thought he detected a look of mourning on the face of the presumed killer.

It is also hard to say whether *Porcelain* is more about homosexuality, race or just plain loneliness. This is a compliment. Any play which manages to bring off such a mixture of themes deserves to be praised. In the young Asian it adds a new voice: a clever man who is about to go to Cambridge, but has not adjusted to the society around him. Daniel York's performance is outstanding; so is that of the unnamed Cambridge psychiatrist who talks to him in prison. And whatever you may think of the subject, it is immaculately handled.

*Seven Doors* is about loneliness, too: more particularly, the difference between supposed extraordinary and ordinary people. There is a splendid scene when the inventor of a video machine that records dreams has committed suicide and arrived on the "other side". Hell turns out to be exceedingly boring. Among all the excellent playing, I would single out Barry Wallman who plays a Mephistophelean figure called simply The Void. The whole piece is haunting. Between them the two plays tell you a great deal about modern theatre.

*Seven Doors*, The Gate until August 22. (071) 229 0706. *Porcelain*, Royal Court Theatre Upstairs. (071) 730 1745

FINANCIAL TIMES

THE INDEPENDENT ON SUNDAY

9 AUGUST 1992

THEATRE



IRVING WARDLE

Transferred from the Etcetera Theatre, Chay Yew's *Porcelain* concerns a young Chinese who murders his male lover in a public lavatory. For all its sexual realism, the play's main impact is one of grief and loss. In Glen Goei's production five seated actors move in and out of character, and between present and flashback. It is a form that enables you to contemplate the material without being overwhelmed. The performances are superlative. Look out for Adam Matalon's transition from cocky rent boy to grieving father.

# Time Out

## GAY

### Clubs & Events

Clubs, bars, entertainment, events, news and anything of interest to gay men and lesbians. Written contributions to *Time Out*, including details of venues, dates, times, nearest tubes, prices and telephone numbers for enquires. Information deadline is Monday nine days before publication.

**Note:** Information concerning regular club nights and weekly meetings will be included in the listings for three consecutive issues and then dropped unless written confirmation is received.

#### IN VIEW

#### 'Porcelain'

#### THEATRE UPSTAIRS

Chay Yew's 'Porcelain' was first seen in a short season at the Etcetera Theatre in May and now returns for a well-deserved second viewing at the Royal Court. The play is based around a deadly crime passionel involving a Chinese teenager and his white lover victim in a cottage in East London. It explores and juxtaposes the twin issues of being ethnic in a white world and being gay in a straight one, how the reality falls short of the ideal and how the crime is committed in the struggle to escape loneliness and alienation. The piece is a series of verbal tableaux skilfully crafted through a blend of Oriental and Western images which take us on a whirlwind tour of seedy toilet-sex, bigoted media folk, the need to pigeon-hole and the fragile passion of the 'Madame Butterfly' figure. The actors face the audience throughout, the lack of interaction reflecting the theme of isolation. The play is constantly engaging with a refreshing economy of words and movement effectively performed by the five-strong cast, with the simple and unembellished direction of Glen Goer and Stephen Knight. Porcelain is the creation of delicate beauty from coarse materials and that holds true for this refined production. Mu-Lan Theatre Company seeks to promote Oriental culture and isn't afraid to highlight the shady and desperate. It all makes for compelling gay theatre. *Chris Durham*  
For further details see Theatre preview and listings, page 107

# The Guardian

## Down and out in Bethnal Green

### Letter from the fringe

Claire Armitstead

ONE OF the most useful functions of the Royal Court's Theatre Upstairs is as a snapper-up of under-considered trifles — those little gems that the fringe from time to time throws up, which deserve a longer life than the average pub venue

or regional studio theatre can afford them. *Porcelain* is such a show — a vivid voice play by the promising Singaporean writer Chay Yew, which proved an unexpected hit at Etcetera in Camden Town.

Through the bleak story of a murder in some urinals in Bethnal Green, Yew makes a touching exploration of sexual and cultural alienation. The killer is a Chinese youth, who shot his Irish lover six times and was found cradling the body in his arms.

In its prurient zeal to

uncover the motives for the murder, society (a boorish psychologist, a panting newshound, and sundry men-on-the-street) overlooks the possibility that this is an old-fashioned crime of passion committed by an abandoned lover.

The fact that the killing happened in a public toilet is a reflection of desolation rather than degeneracy, since cottaging is the only way that John, doubly isolated by race and sexuality, can find the closeness he craves.

The show, a second for the

Anglo-Chinese company Mu-Lan, is a curious mixture of passion and packaging. The glossy programme (quite alien to Court culture) includes the makings of a scarlet origami bird, like the dozens that are littered on the floor of an otherwise bare stage.

The five actors — all but one of them white — speak the play from a row of seats, which they leave only at moments of extreme intensity, and then with an impassivity of face and body that directly contradicts the drama they are enacting.

Yew makes some mistakes with the balance of his characterisation. In his attempts to anatomise prejudice, he overlooks the well-meaning liberal who is surely the most deadly and interesting problem the gay immigrant has to contend with.

He also falls into the fashionable cliché with the over-emphasis of the sagger-beaver newsmen. But Glen Goel and Stephen Knight's stylish direction offers an excellent cast offers a fascinating glimpse at a community — and a theatre aesthetic — that is quite unfamiliar to me.

Less compelling, sadly, is the third and final show of the *Man in the Moon*'s

*Woman in the Moon* season — although that is a reflection not so much of form as of content. Cheryl Robson, to her credit, is a writer capable of thinking big — *The Taking of Liberty* (*Man in the Moon*, in repertory until September 18) is an epic piece about women and the French revolution, staged by Jennie Darnell with a cast of 12.

But its counterposition of feminism and revolution is profoundly reactionary, while its attempts to generalise the women's experience through the device of ghostly apparitions or earnest choric recitations smacks of the sort of work Monstrous Regiment were doing in the seventies.

# LONDON'S GU' CITY LIMITS MAGAZINE

## **PORCELAIN**

by Chay Yew, directed by Glen Goei,  
presented by Mu-Lan (Royal Court  
Theatre Upstairs)

Ten minutes into this crime-of-passion  
drama, one of the four actors

comprising the chorus tells us he  
knows all about what goes on in public  
toilets: 'Well, I've seen *Prick Up Your  
Ears*, haven't I?' While *Porcelain*  
certainly puts Orton's favourite  
preoccupation centre-stage, Yew's  
bold handling of his subject couldn't  
be further from Stephen Frears' coy  
depiction of London's cottage trade.  
John Lee (Daniel York) is a young  
British-born Chinese man charged with  
shooting his lover dead in a toilet in  
Bethnal Green. Interrogated by a  
criminal psychologist, Lee gradually  
discloses the details of his first  
cubicle encounter and subsequent  
affair with Will Hope, a straight-  
identified man who rejects Lee when  
he realises that people might be  
beginning to think he's queer. While  
Yew provides the opportunity for a fair  
bit of consciousness-raising, for the  
most part he avoids sermonising,  
leaving the tight script and closely-  
observed performances to speak for  
themselves. Compulsory viewing for  
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## **CITY LIMITS RECOMMENDS**

### **MASTERPIECES** (Etcetera)

Still searing

### **PORCELAIN** (Royal Court)

A loo lulu (I know we've said that before,  
but I like it)

### **SEVEN DOORS** (Gate)

Farr out

### **SHADES** (Albery)

Love, sex, intelligence from Sharman

### **SIX DEGREES OF SEPARATION** (Comedy)

*Magna cum laude*

# ARTS AND ENTERTAINMENT

## Porcelain (Etcetera Theatre, Camden)

The boy sits quietly in chair, head bowed forward, hands carefully creasing the folds of a thin red square of paper, transforming it into the delicate fan-tail, strong wings, proud chest and sharp beak of a crane. The metamorphosis complete, the bird drops, silently, onto the floor to join the colony that grows around his feet. Chinese folklore dictates that a thousand such creations must be made if a wish is to be granted. The one thing the boy has is time. He is facing a life sentence.

The psychologist is becoming increasingly frustrated. The court require him to ascertain the accused's state of mind. There is no question that the boy committed the crime. He admits he went into the toilet and fired the gun. But any attempt to establish a motive for the murder smet with steely resistance.

Comparisons with *Equus* are inevitable at this stage in terms of the plot, central characters and narrative style, but the similarity ends with the themes explored. Chay Yew's play deals

explicitly with racism, homophobia and cottaging. His writing is assured, explicit and challenging and extremely well-served in this production by The Mu Lan Theatre Company who artfully combine realism with more expressionistic techniques.

The underlying themes of alienation and isolation are physically manifested by the starkness of the set and costumes, in tandem with a style of playing that juxtaposes economy of movement with vocal gymnastics. This is exemplified in the rape scene, where the actors' verbal power is heightened by having the action played in complete darkness, the visual deprivation helping to create a moment of compelling terror.

In the central role, Daniel York creates a convincing portrayal of a lonely young man, estranged from his family and culture, sexually rejected in gay clubs, and reduced to addressing his emotional needs in places where only sexual appetites are catered for. He is ably supported by a strong cast, whose dexterous ensemble work carry the production along with an impressive display of power and pace.

Mark Walder



Daniel York and friends in *Porcelaine*.

CAPITAL GAY



LONDON'S GU'

CITY

LIMITS

MAGAZINE

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*by Chay Yew, directed by Glen Goei,  
presented by Mu-Lan (Royal Court  
Theatre Upstairs)*

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### **CITY LIMITS RECOMMENDS**

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*Magna cum laude*

# Ham & High

FRIDAY, MAY 22, 1992

132nd year

## REVIEW THEATRE

# Can life be sweet in a cottage?

### PORCELAIN Etcetera

THIS is what fringe theatre — or any theatre for that matter should be — powerful, provocative, fascinating.

Some achievement for Mu-Lan's riveting production of Chay Yew's voice play, it has just five actors and five chairs. But what actors and what writing.

Opening with the sound of six gun shots in a Bethnal Green public toilet and, we are told, a young man cradling the head of another in a pool of blood, we are given a tension-filled whodunnit more than a whodunnit as the predicament of the imprisoned young oriental John is teased out by a probing psychiatrist.

Along the way Yew's piece, substantially reduced and rewritten from the original draft by the company itself, brings out media homophobia, public attitudes to homosexuality and sex in public places, police harassment, as well as wider themes of isolation and belonging.

An allegory illustrating John's loneliness as a Chinese man in Britain and as a gay man within the Chinese community (it is this that has reduced him to cottaging and leads to his subsequent relationship with the "straight" builder Will) is reminiscent of a Willow pattern plate, one of the many levels on which the title is understood.

It is an extraordinarily well constructed play which makes acute observations on gay mores and public perceptions while covering a lot of ground with great clarity. And this is not a play which pulls its punches — there are scenes which may shock.

Direction by Glen Goei and Stephen Knight is flawless, as is their design of stark black and white with splashes of red to represent blood, the ink blot tests to which John is subjected and the Origami cranes he folds in captivity.

Much praise, too, to the actors who portray the many voices heard and supply all sound effects — David Tysall, Adam Matalon, Daniel York, Julien Ball and Michael Parkinson — from whom it would be invidious to pick any out individually, so superbly do they work as an ensemble.

Even the programme deserves the highest accolades. Without giving anything away, you can be sure of being the richer for having it, and for having seen the play. Go see — it's stunning.

Mark Cook



● Daniel York in Mu-Lan Theatre Company's excellent Porcelain.

# Reader

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**THEATER**



PHOTO BY ANNE GARDNER

Porcelain

## Tales of Two Outcasts

■ **PORCELAIN.** BY CHAY YEW. DIRECTED BY IVAN SPIEGEL. LIGHTING BY SPIEGEL. BURBAGE THEATRE ENSEMBLE, 2330 SAWTELLE BLVD., WEST L.A. (310) 478-0897. FRIS-SATS AT 7:30. CLOSES FEBRUARY 27.  
■ **DIARY OF A MADMAN.** BY NIKOLAI GOGOL. TRANSLATED BY MARIE SNYDER. ADAPTED BY RUSH PEARSON. DIRECTED BY JEFF MURRAY. THEATRE/THEATRE, 1713 CARLENGA BLVD., HOLLYWOOD. (213) 469-9689. TUES-WEDS AT 8, THURS AT 8 AND 10. CLOSES FEBRUARY 25.

By Clifford Gallo

Alienation is often the reward society bestows upon those who don't fall within its narrow boundaries of approval. Two works being staged at local theaters — the American premiere of *Porcelain* at the Burbage Theatre Ensemble, and an adaptation of Gogol's *Diary of a Madman* at Theatre/Theatre — measure the crushing consequences of social ostracism on characters whose identities conflict with their deep-seated longing for acceptance.

**T**he better of the two is *Porcelain*, Chay Yew's ninety-minute stunner about Cambridge-bound, gay Chinese student John Lee (Garrett Richard Wang), who cruises East London's public lavatories — a practice known as "cottaging" in Britain. When John is discovered in the loo, cradling the bullet-ridden body of a white English laborer who was his sometime lover, he soon finds himself in police custody and at the center of a media circus, as everyone tries to speculate what led the nineteen-year-old to murder.

Brought in to help unravel the mystery is Dr. Worthing, a foul-mouthed criminal psychologist noted as much for his unprofessional manner as he is for his unscrupulous tactics. When a BBC reporter, "fishing for sound bites," asks the doctor an off-the-record question about the crime, Worthing blusters, "A queer chink who kills a white man? Where would your sympathies lie?" But, gradually and almost inexplicitly, the initial animosity between John and Dr. Worthing abates as the circumstances surrounding the murder slowly come into focus.

Yew has constructed *Porcelain*, which is based on an actual incident, as a "voice play," in which the five-mem-

ber cast faces the audience while sitting on wooden stools arranged in a row. On their perches, the actors skillfully evoke their various characters, from Dr. Worthing and John's traditional Chinese father to the slain lover, William Hope, and an assortment of gay men and scandal-loving print and television journalists.

Crisply directed by Ivan Spiegel, who uncovers the myriad emotions locked in the shrewdly devised script, *Porcelain* grabs our attention even before it begins. Upon entering the theater, Garrett Richard Wang's John methodically constructs bow-tie-shaped cranes out of blood-red paper, adding them to the sea of crimson shapes surrounding the periphery of his centrally positioned stool. (We later learn that John plans to make one thousand of them, which, according to a Japanese custom, guarantees that one of his wishes will come true.)

*Porcelain* calls to mind Quebecois playwright Rene-Daniel Dubois's *Being at Home With Claude*, which is also about an investigation of a young gay man accused of murdering his lover. (The play had an electrifying production at Stages in Hollywood last spring.)

But Yew's play resonates most clearly with themes raised in Puccini's opera *Madame Butterfly* and Henry David Hwang's musical *M. Butterfly*, another take on the age-old clash between East and West. (John's late lover's favorite operas were *Madame Butterfly*, which he played when they were together, and Bizet's *Carmen*.)

Playwright Yew uses John's prison sessions with Dr. Worthing to articulate how the young man learned to hate his race and idealize the white skin of the men who attracted him. "Soft, blond, with skin like porcelain," John says at one point. (*Porcelain* also symbolizes the union between white and yellow skin: "Two extremes, two opposites, thrown together to produce beauty. Like Beauty and the Beast.") Faced with rejection in gay pubs and even in pornography that celebrates the virtues of white skin, John found a "marriage of dirt and desire" as a cottaging regular. And, as the story unfolds, we discover how John's romance with the closeted William Hope eventually created a dynamic that mirrored Pinkerton's abandonment of Butterfly in Puccini's opera. But John, like the savvy Butterfly in Hwang's musical, is not about to quietly commit suicide.

Yew's richly imagined, vividly written script also manages a fair share of satire, lampooning the media's salacious sensationalism, particularly in regard to homosexuality, while framing the play in a reporting style that scores didactic points without sounding preachy. Yew also intercuts a fable about crows and sparrows that (most of the time) gracefully underscores the dominant theme about the difficulty of finding acceptance in an uncaring world.

Although their British accents falter occasionally, the cast members — namely Arne Anderson, Mark Hattan, Lee Ryan, Keith Burns, and Garrett Richard Wang — are outstanding. This impressive ensemble makes *Porcelain* an elegant and exquisitely realized evening of top-drawer theater.

## THEATER PICK OF THE WEEK

### PORCELAIN

Few plays can tackle complex issues and still retain a simple but elegant theatricality. Chay Yew's choreo-poem is one of them. It's a sort of *Equus* meets *Bouncers*, but without the frenzy. By psychologically delving into the heart and mind of a Cambridge-bound British Chinese who shoots his male lover in a public London urinal, Yew shows the racism, sexual repression and homophobia rampant in English society. He also



ANDY GRIGGS

examines the ways in which internalized self-hate surfaces and poisons all that it touches. The stage is bare, save for five stools and the red origami cranes that litter the floor. As you enter, you see a young Asian (Garrett Richard Wang) perched on a stool, busy folding cranes. Soon he is joined by Voices (as the program calls them) that mimic the bells of Big Ben and the busy street sounds below, as well as the airwaves that are brimming with news of the murder. These choral voices — a seedy psychiatrist (Lee Ryan), a Geraldo-type investigative reporter (Arne Anderson), the slain bisexual lover (Keith Burns) and the boy's Chinese father (Mark Hattan) — become characters who help tell the story. Although not unflawed, the piece gently but firmly articulates the problems of those who fall into the netherworld between two cultures. Burbage Theater, 2330 Sawtelle Blvd., W.L.A.; Fri.-Sat., 7:30 p.m.; thru Feb. 27. (310) 478-0897.

—Ellen Krout-Hasegawa

# FREE

## STAGE REVIEW

# 'Porcelain': Crime of Passion at the Burbage

The opening image of four white men in suits surrounding a young Asian man in T-shirt and pants is perhaps unavoidably loaded, but then Chay Yew's ensemble play at the Burbage Theatre, "Porcelain," is about fundamental conflicts—between races, between heterosexual and homosexual men, between differing emotional needs.

Yew has said that his play isn't really about any of these subjects, but about "loving and relationships." Actually, it's about all of them, for it's a big enough play to handle all manner of ideas.

The catalyst is the alleged murder in a public toilet of a white Londoner by his Asian lover, John Lee (Garrett Richard Wang).

Lee is interrogated not by detectives but by a psychologist (Lee Ryan) with his own share of flaws, including a nasty homophobic streak. In the tradition of advocacy drama, the patient's nimble mind gets the better of the doctor's, but they still find a way of getting through to each other.

And yet this doesn't really indicate the nature of Yew's achievement, which is to send the basic elements through a narrative prism, fracturing the bits and pieces across time and space, and spoken by Lee and four "voices" (Ryan, Mark Hattan, Arne Andersen, Keith Burns).

It's why "Porcelain," which ironically began as a film script, would make a fine radio play: The

## 'PORCELAIN'

Continued from F5

voices shift from a flurry of news sound bites, to metaphorical fables, to interviews with men-on-the-street. The breadth of Yew's coverage suggests that everyone is involved in this crime, while never letting Lee off the hook.

With Ivan Spiegel's staging, though, Yew doesn't have the ensemble his play demands. It's a disciplined unit only part of the time, very shaky in the dialect department, with Ryan especially prone to telegraphing the doctor's own problems.

Wang telegraphs nothing, allowing Lee's passions and fears to slowly come to form like one of the many origami cranes he creates during the performance. He is a strong center of gravity in a production that could use strength across the board.

—ROBERT KOEHLER

■ "Porcelain," Burbage Theatre, 2330 Sawtelle Blvd., West Los Angeles. Fridays-Saturdays, 7:30 p.m. Ends Feb. 27. \$15; (310) 478-0897. Running time: 1 hour, 40 minutes.

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# REVIEW



Passion on trial. Pictured (l-r) are Arne Andersen, Mark Hattan, Garrett Richard Wang, Lee Ryan, and Keith Burns.

## PORCELAIN WILL KNOCK YOU OUT

The question is raised almost immediately. In the case of a queer Chink who kills a white man, where is your sympathy? This is only one of the moral challenges posed in *Porcelain*, a new play based on a true story by Chay Yew at the Burbage Theatre in West Los Angeles, extended to April 24.

Nineteen-year-old John Lee is sitting on a stool folding origami red cranes that are scattered across the floor, tossed randomly as he finishes each one. Enter the four white men who also sit on stools. They represent a variety of roles from the homophobic psychologist, a screaming queen, a television reporter who sensationalizes everything, and a hunky bisexual construction worker William Hope.

What are they questioning? Seems that Lee shot Hope six times in a public toilet where he met him and the site of "cottaging," the British term for bathroom sex. Why he did it and his reasons for shooting the man so many times are at the root of this compelling play. As with any unraveling of the facts, other truths are extrapolated, namely people's attitudes towards gays in Britain, especially gay Asians.

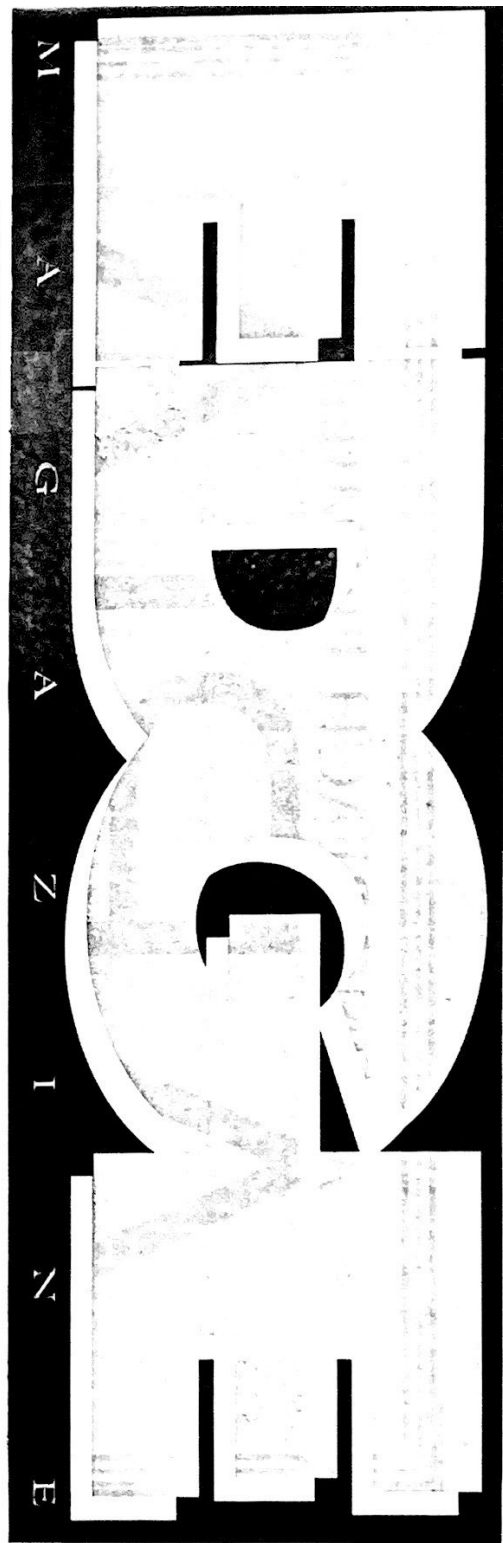
Even though cottaging supposedly "went out with disco," Lee and Hope seem to need it, each one hiding something. Lee finds his being "Oriental" prevents him from belonging to the greater gay white population of London where he isn't even acknowledged in gay clubs. Hope's only sexual acknowledgement lies in the anonymous sex he has in the public johns until he forms a relationship with Lee and becomes abusive. That is where the story turns.

Lee Ryan as the psychologist, Arne Andersen as the TV reporter, Mark Hattan as the mincing queen and Lee's shattered father and Keith Burns as Hope have settled into those specific roles and the others they are called upon to play. But it is Garrett Richard Wang as Lee who has to let the white men's antagonism and prejudice bounce off of him as he tries to maintain his protective disposition. Only when he finally explains why he killed Hope does it break, pouring out all of his pent-up feelings. It is a traumatic experience and Wang handles it beautifully.

Directed by award-winner Ivan Spiegel, *Porcelain* only moves in the storyline. All actors remain seated on the five stools until exit. It is to the credit of the actors that the suspense is kept for the 95 minutes from such immobile positions. Lighting by Spiegel on the blank white walls adds to the seedy atmosphere of the described toilets as well as the other described places of action.

In this day and age of growing racism around the world and the fact that it exists on a large level in the gay community, *Porcelain* shows the effect bigotry has on minorities whose only reaction to it can come in violence. It is our own reaction to that violence that really tells where our sympathies lie.

—Ken Dickmann





## Stage

### 'Porcelain' serves up gripping tale of tragedy

By Debbi K. Swanson

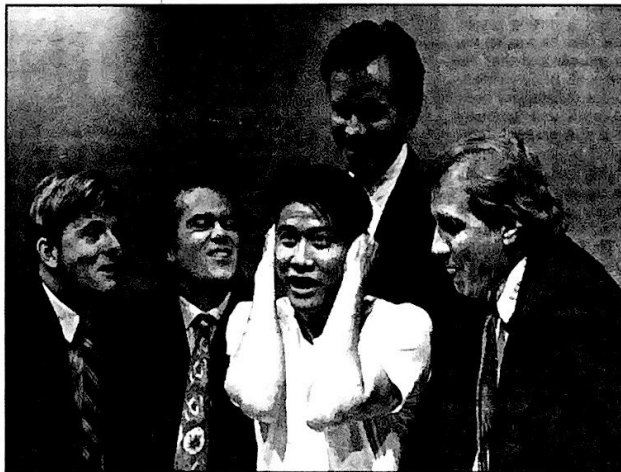
The setting and subject matter in Chay Yew's "Porcelain" at West Los Angeles' Burbage Theater may be difficult for some. But to miss it would be to miss one of the best-written and -acted productions ever staged at the Burbage.

In a poetic, lyrical harmony of voices played by four actors as several characters, the tragic story of a young Chinese gay man in London is revealed.

The story opens as young John Lee, played with eloquence by Garrett Wang — seen recently in "12-1-A" at UCLA — sits dressed in white upon a stool surrounded by the symbolic red origami cranes he continues to make as the play progresses.

The voices — four men in suits also sitting on stools — begin to vividly describe the killing that is the core of the play.

John Lee had been found in a public London lavatory with the body of William Hope, played by Keith Burns, who had been shot six times. There is no doubt Lee did it; the object of the play is to reveal all that contributed to the why of it.



"Porcelain" stars, from left, Arne Andersen, Mark Hattan, Garrett Richard Wang, Lee Ryan and Keith Burns at the Burbage Theater in West L.A.

This is achieved through the interview played by Lee Ryan, the questioning by an unethical, prejudiced psychologist played by an obnoxious newscaster played by Arne

#### REVIEW

**PORCELAIN**, written by Chay Yew, directed by Ivan Spiegel, lighting design by Ivan Spiegel, at the Burbage Theater, 2330 Sawtelle Blvd., West Los Angeles. Performances are at 7:30 p.m. Fri., Sat. through Feb. 27. Tickets: \$15 general, \$12 students/seniors. 478-0897.  
Cast: Lee Ryan, Mark Hattan, Arne Andersen, Keith Burns, Garrett Richard Wang.

Andersen and the reliving of the events leading up to the murder.

Lee's father, played by Mark Hattan, is the old Chinese voice of shame and humiliation over his son's actions.

The quartet of voices weaves through a series of rich metaphors for isolation, loneliness, being an outsider, trying to find beauty and purity in something considered "unclean."

Superb acting, timing, intense lighting and blackouts, Ivan Spiegel's direction and Yew's ruthless and tender writing make "Porcelain" a moving tale about a misguided attempt to find love in a society that makes it hard to be honest about who you are.

■ Debbi K. Swanson is a Palms-based free-lance writer specializing in theater.

## CRYSTAL CLEAR "PORCELAIN" ON DISPLAY

A Review by Rob Stevens

BANG! That's how Chay Yew's PORCELAIN begins. And it ends with a bang also. PORCELAIN is the oldest of the three plays by Yew presented in repertory at East West Players under the umbrella title of WHITELANDS. It has had other productions in Southern California but this was by far the best. Tim Dang's sharp and focused direction and his amazingly talented cast made each word of Yew's script biting clear.

Written in the style of John Godber's BOUNCERS, Yew utilizes the concept to the fullest and his writing is full of poetic riffs. While John Lee, a stunning Alec Mapa, sits in a circle of light slowly and meticulously folding squares of paper into tiny cranes, we learn the story from four actors who play multiple roles. Lee is in prison for the murder of another man in a London cottage, aka public restroom.

While the opportunistic psychologist (Tom Jameson) slowly peels back the layers of John's defenses, we learn the tragic story. The young, gay Chinese student tricked with men in public restrooms in an attempt to find the love he so sorely desired. One trick, the brutish Bill (Thomas Weber), actually talks to him, even takes him home. But Bill denies his gayness and becomes increasingly abusive to John during their three month affair. When Bill refuses to see John again, it sends the youth over the edge with jealousy resulting in gunplay.

Dang's intense direction and the masterful acting of Mapa leaves you breathless as the events unfurl. Phil Oakley as a cynical tv reporter and Tom Donaldson as John's father lend fine support. Akeime Mitterlehner's stark white and red set perfectly contains the action while Lisa Hashimoto's luscious lighting adds to the production's power.

(PORCELAIN ended its run at East West Players on April 21.)



PHOTO BY SHANE SATO



85 CENTS

THURSDAY  
JANUARY 21, 1993

# DAILY VARIETY

## LEGIT REVIEW

### Porcelain

(Burbage Theatre, West L.A.;  
99 seats, \$15 top)

The Burbage Theatre Ensemble presents a play in one act by Chay Yew. Produced by Andy Griggs, Ivan Spiegel; director, Ivan Spiegel; lighting, Spiegel; graphic design, Jeffrey Thrun. Opened Jan. 8, 1993; reviewed Jan. 16. Runs through Feb. 27.

Voice One ..... Lee Ryan  
Voice Two ..... Mark Hattan  
Voice Three ..... Arne Andersen  
Voice Four ..... Keith Burns  
John Lee ..... Garrett Richard Wang

**A** crime of passion sets the stage for a gripping, gritty, graphic voice poem about alienation. Riveting writing and a powerful ensemble cast make the subject of murder and bathroom sex (called "cottaging" in Britain) an impressive and stimulating theatre experience.

"Porcelain" is based on a true-life deadly event involving a Chinese teenager and his white lover, the victim of murder in a public toilet in East London.

Playwright Chay Yew has created a "voice play" in which the five cast members sit on a row of wooden stools facing the audience. Yet every word and every image is as vivid and visual as the audience's imaginations allow—to actually see, feel and experience the actions described.

The play begins with student John Lee (Garrett Richard Wang) describing his experiences cruising East London's public lavatories. When he's found near the bullet-riddled body of his white English laborer lover Will Hope, he becomes the center of a police investigation as well as a media circus.

A despicable, homophobic, criminal psychologist with unscrupulous tactics is brought in to explore Lee's motives and sanity. The men instantly dislike each other.

Slowly, the animosity between the two subsides as the doctor/patient mind games explore how the young man learned to hate his race and idealize the white-skinned men all around him.

To Lee, porcelain symbolizes "two opposites thrown together producing something beautiful," as in the union of white and yellow skin. Feeling alienated in gay pubs and finding pornography that glorifies beautiful white men, he seeks comfort in a "marriage of dirt and desire" as a regular in the public lavatories.

He explains how the lonely painfulness of the inability to find companionship is offset by the trembling excitement of anonymous sex. When one man, Will, asks him to go for a drink, a relationship begins. Will denies the fact that he is "a queer," but rather someone who enjoys occasional encounters.

The ensemble of actors skillfully evokes myriad characters including opportunistic television and print journalists, plus the doctor, Will, and most notably, John's traditional Chinese father, who feels shamed by his son's actions.

Complementing Yew's minimalist vision is the imaginative lighting and direction by Ivan Spiegel, who heightens the visual poetry by simulating the atmosphere of a public bathroom as well as the mood of a sexual interlude.

Overall, "Porcelain" combines artistry and controversy for a thought-provoking evening.

—Arlene Schindler