

DRAMA

Porcelain and A Language of Their Own: Two Plays

by Chay Yew

Grove Press

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Reading plays is like phone sex: you miss the input of some of your senses, but with imagination the experience

Reviews

can still be quite rewarding—particularly when the plays are as stunningly well-written as *Porcelain* and *A Language of Their Own*, both by Chay Yew.

Porcelain begins with media reports of a “homo toilet sex murder” and goes on to tell the story of how John Lee, a Chinese-Englishman, ended up murdering William Hope, the white man he loved. *A Language of Their Own* explores the relationship of Oscar and Ming and how it changes when Oscar turns out to be HIV-positive.

Both plays are spare, simply written, with small casts. In *Porcelain*, four voices play everyone in John Lee’s world, from his father to his therapist to the media to anonymous bigots. Sometimes the voices form a modern Greek chorus that both advances the action and comments on it. In both plays, Yew’s writing is so economical that many, if not most, speeches are only a line or two, yet so powerful that all the talk in the world couldn’t say more. The plays resemble musical pieces, quintets or quartets, where each instrument has different themes and qualities and the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

Yew’s themes are universal ones, but they are discussed in very particular ways. Belonging, trust, love, prejudice, and being “other” fascinate Yew, and he deals with them mainly through the eyes and souls of Asian gay men trying to find and sustain love in a world that doesn’t support and honor them or their feelings. Despite the seriousness of the themes, these are also funny plays, and Yew’s characters often spout a recognizably gay wit. For example, after Ming and Oscar break up, they see each other at a party where Ming finds himself drawn to Oscar but talks himself into resisting: “Think about Robert [his new lover],” he says. “Think about what Mother looks like naked. Think about what Jesus looks like naked.” Here’s Oscar talking about shopping at Ikea: “Instant homes.

Affordable prices. If only relationships came that way.”

A benefit to reading these plays, as opposed to seeing them performed, is taking time to appreciate the language. Yew turns even hatred into poetry. In this scene from *Porcelain*, the four voices are speaking; I’ve separated their speeches by slashes:

“Queer./Chink./Poof./Slit eyes./
Queer./Chink./Cocksucker./Slit eyes./
Queer./Chink./Ugly./Homo./Queer./
Chink./Go away!”

Of course, the vehicle that makes the language and themes of a play mean something is character, and here too Yew excels. His characters are real and poignant, stupid and brave, heartbroken and heartbreaking, brave and familiar. Again, it is astonishing how much Yew accomplishes with few words and how emotionally involving some dialogue on a page can be.

The stage may be the true natural habitat of the play, but when writing is as good as Yew’s, a book is also a wonderful place to appreciate theatre.

—Wendy Caster

The portable Yew

by Chad Jones

Porcelain, A Language of Their Own: Two Plays by Chay Yew; Grove Press, \$12

Chay Yew is contemporary drama's singular gay Asian voice. The 31-year-old playwright has written two eloquent, insightful dramas, *Porcelain* and *A Language of Their Own*. Both works have received excellent San Francisco productions in the past few years. Theatre Rhinoceros' *Porcelain* ranks among the best serious plays that company has ever mounted, and the Asian American Theatre Company's staging of *Language* demonstrated just how masterful Yew can be in crafting the poetry of conversation. Both plays are now available in a single volume.

Porcelain, an impressionistic account of a gay "toilet sex" murder in London involving a Chinese youth and a white male, is full of the rhythms and speedy zingers that typify Yew's style. Of the cast of five men, only John, the young murderer, is named. The other characters are "voices": the police, the criminal psychologists, the murder victim, television newsmen and, most touchingly, members of John's family.

Skipping around in time, from before the murder to after, Yew is able to keep the focus on John, a lonely outsider who is triply burdened — as an Asian, a homosexual, and now a murderer. Themes of exclusion and acceptance course passionately through the play: Racism, homophobia, and "cbotting," or sex in public lavatories, are the hot-button issues, and though Yew has chosen a sensational plot, his rendering is lyrical and achingly sad.

A Language of Their Own finds a more mature writer dealing with the sticky subject of personal relationships, specifically those between men of different races — a white man and an Asian man — or two men of the same race but worlds apart — an Asian-American and a native-born Asian. Originally two one-acts, the plays were combined in 1993 to create a complete four-character play, *A Language of Their Own*, which was premiered in Los Angeles at the Mark Taper Forum.

Eschewing the bloody violence of *Porcelain*, Yew chooses to explore the hurt people do to each other mentally and verbally. It is the great irony of *Language* that for all the emotionally charged dialogue, the play is really about what goes unsaid between lovers — the charged silence brought about by the potential of love and abuse.

Romantic, heartbreaking, and insightful, *A Language of Their Own* provides an illuminating contrast to *Porcelain*. Reading both works in a single volume is the next best thing to experiencing their power on stage. ▼



Playwright Chay Yew.

Two by Yew

PORCELAIN & A LANGUAGE OF THEIR OWN

by Chay Yew
Grove Press, 1997

Reviewed by David Hsieh

From one of American theater's most eloquent and promising Asian playwrights comes two moving, controversial and provocative plays, *Porcelain* and *A Language of Their Own*. Though both plays feature gay Asian characters at the forefront, the major strength and appeal of these two poetic and powerful works lie in Chay Yew's masterful presentation of universal themes. Themes of love and desire speak to all of us and transcend barriers of race and

AS YEW PEELS BACK THE LAYERS OF THIS UNUSUAL CASE, WE SEE WITH CLEARER VISION HOW THE TRUE VICTIMS OF SOCIETY ARE CREATED BY RACISM, DENIAL, AND HOMOPHOBIA.

sexuality.

Porcelain which originally made its debut in London in 1992, is a disturbing piece consisting of 29 short scenes, one main character and a chorus of four voices which make up the other characters and contrib-

ute sound effects. Through this myriad of stimulating and poetic scenes, we learn of John Lee and his unusual crime of passion. In a stall of a public lavatory frequented by men for casual sex, Lee was found embracing his murdered lover who he had shot six times.

Obviously, *Porcelain* deals with very adult themes, situations and language, and it may not be appropriate reading (or viewing) for some. Nevertheless, this thought-provoking drama is a fascinating exploration, not only of the persons involved and the incidents leading up to a shocking murder, but also of the media, the public reaction, family relations and the revealing work of a prison psychologist. As Yew peels back the layers of this unusual case, we see with clearer vision how the true victims of society are created by racism, denial, and homophobia.

The collection's second and equally rewarding piece, *A Language of Their Own*, focuses on the relationship of two gay Chinese Americans, Oscar and Ming, as their relationship ends and they drift apart to other lovers. First presented in its current

form in 1995, this play recently enjoyed straight-forward staging at Seattle's Group Theatre and has won several playwrighting awards.

The play begins as Ming and Oscar relive their breakup. As the subsequent interconnected scenes, monologues and flashbacks present themselves, we journey with Oscar and Ming through their life experiences. Oscar is HIV positive and meets Daniel, a young Asian student who stays with him to the end. Ming begins a relationship with a Caucasian waiter named Robert, but that also ends in grief. Inspired by a conversation he once overheard of two people breaking up, Yew gives his characters remarkable depth that is easy to relate to. Who can't understand the excitement of new love, or the sadness that loss can bring. The presentational style of the piece helps bring this depth and understanding to the surface.

The text is lyrical and simple, yet the subtext and range of human emotions that lies beneath the words on paper are vast and profound, making this play about gay relationships, the Asian American experience and AIDS greater than the sum of its parts.

Eastern exposure

Porcelain and A Language of Their Own; *Two Plays by Chay Yew* (Grove, \$12)

Reviewed by Cathay Che

When Singapore-born, Los Angeles-bred playwright Chay Yew staged his play *A Language of Their Own* at the Public Theater in New York in 1995, B.D. Wong and Francis Jue played soul mates and lovers torn apart after one discovers he is HIV-positive. This is a familiar dilemma within the gay community. But Yew is the first and only playwright to present specifically Asian-American characters in this scenario.

In *Language* and his first play, *Porcelain*, both included in this initial collection of his work, Yew brings a powerful gay presence to a world that has too often been distorted. "We are mythicized by you," says the hero of *Porcelain*—a 19-year-old Asian man who con-

fesses to shooting his lover in the public lavatory where they first met. "We are your interesting geisha girls, bespectacled accountants, and dentists...."

As resident artist and director of the Asian Theatre Workshop

at the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles, Yew is out to change all that. Like his characters, Yew is savvy

with regard to the stereotypes of race and sexual identity, but he refuses to play into or against them. Instead Yew is committed to nuanced individuals who face unexpected, extreme situations. His work continues to pose challenges to gay, straight, and Asian audiences alike, and on each front he is uncompromising. ■



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