

The Point

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Writing on the Wall

Playwright Chay Yew: 'Politics can come into the play, but the important thing is the character.'

by Brian T. Carney

It's clear that Chay Yew's plays aren't for everybody. One of his plays was banned in Singapore, while another drew harsh criticism in Boston.

But Yew was able to roll with the punches. "I like being banned," he says now. "It's very noxious."

One of those plays was *Porcelain*, a provocative drama which looks at public sex, racism, homophobia, passion, and murder. It is currently being produced in D.C. by Consenting Adults Theatre Company as part of the Odd Evening Series at Woolly Mammoth Theatre.

Yew says he started writing to fight off boredom when he was serving his compulsory military time in his native Singapore. The theater company he was involved with wanted to produce a play about the AIDS epidemic, but had no one to write it. Yew volunteered.

Yew wrote *As If He Hears*, a play about a flamboyantly gay social worker's encounter with a successful, intelligent, married man dying of AIDS. Yew submitted it to government censors, who opposed his portrayal of a positive gay character.

"The government was none too happy with it," he remembers. "The play ended up being banned, so I said fine, chuck it, forget it."

But the theater company insisted on presenting the play because of the rapid spread of AIDS in Asia. So they asked Yew to make a few changes to appease the censors.

"As much as I hate theater being informational or educational, I thought, 'Why not just change it a little bit here or there?' I changed a couple of things so that you couldn't read anything into it."

But Yew wasn't finished with the play — or the censors — just yet.

"Since the government was only looking at the dialogue, I added a lot of stage directions. You know, 'the character glided across the stage' or 'the character mimed off stage.' I even started making his language a little more flamboyant, but in a way that could be read both ways. They didn't see little things like

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that. They were only looking for 'harmful' words."

Yew says when it was finally mounted, *As If He Hears* was a great success.

"The censors said, 'The character is clean, put the play on.' But when the character came on stage, he was even more flamboyant than I had written him initially. The audience started laughing at him, but by the end they were laughing with him. They identified with him. For many people, it was their first step towards understanding gay life in Singapore."

When Yew returned to graduate school at Boston University, he remembers becoming interested in a local scandal.

"I was taking typically boring grad courses," Yew says. "My friend and I used to read things instead of listening to lectures. There were arrests being made in public bathrooms, and I found it really interesting. I realized the things I read on bathroom walls on college campuses were true."

Yew turned his interest in public sex into a screenplay. He planned to film it for a class, but ran into a roadblock.

"The professors really liked it, but the students refused to participate in it. They were young and impressionable and didn't want to do it, so I shelved it."

Luckily, a friend at the Mui-Lan Theatre Company, an Anglo-Asian troupe in London, came to the rescue. He invited Yew to become the theater's playwright-in-residence. Yew accepted, and while he was in London he turned his screenplay into a stage play.

The result is *Porcelain*. The play tells the story of John Lee, a second-generation Chinese man. Torn between Asian and Anglo culture, uncomfortable with his homosexuality, and desperate for any sign of affection, he goes to public toilets to find sexual partners. While "cotaing" one night, he meets a man who invites him out for a drink. Lee quickly falls in love, but the man cannot admit that he is gay and stops seeing Lee. Duvraight, Lee follows him back to the toilet where they met and shoots him.

Yew presents his story in a bold theatrical style using only five actors and minimal scenery and staging. The play's style, however, is partly rooted in a very practical concern.

"The theater company had a very small budget," he recalls. "When I asked how much money they had for sets, they said none. So I came up with a device where I can have lots of different scenes, but no sets. I came up with five chairs and that's it."

Porcelain's visual style is also rooted in Yew's aesthetic sense. "This economic decision really worked for the entire play," he says. "I wanted to show a society based in isolation. It was also an exercise to get the audience actively involved in the play. I wanted to let the audience make up their minds."

Porcelain opened at London's Electra Theatre in May 1992, and subsequently transferred to the Royal Court Theatre. This was an unprecedented move by the Royal Court, which usually does not pick up plays that have already been produced elsewhere.

"We had a very successful run," Yew

recalls. "In the end it was nominated for some awards and won a couple, and that was even better."

What Yew fails to mention is that the play was awarded the London Fringe Awards (equivalent to off-Broadway's Obies) for "Best Play" and "Best Production."

Porcelain subsequently ran for over four months at Burbage Theatre in Los Angeles and is currently running at Theatre Rhinoceros in San Francisco.

"In *Porcelain*, there is no specific

media sensationalism in a sensitive and thoughtful manner.

Yew is well served by Van Riley's clean and effective staging, as well as the technical work of Howard Vincent Kurtz (costume and sets) and Lee Mikaela Gardner (light). Worthy of special note are David Maddox's multi-layered sound design and Jennifer Merdell's work as dialect coach.

The talented production team also smooths over the two weaknesses in Yew's script. The re-enactment of the murder is rather obviously presented in counterpoint to the finale of Bluz's *Carmen*, and the ending of the play

goes on too long. Still, this is a provocative evening of theater. The playwright and the production aim high, and they hit their mark squarely.

—Brian Carney

Consenting Adults Theatre Company's production of Chay Yew's *Porcelain* plays at Woolly Mammoth Theatre, 1401 Church St., NW. Performances are Sunday through Tuesday at 8:00 p.m. and Friday at 11:00 p.m. through November 28. Tickets are \$12. For more information, call (202) 526-1011.

point of view. It's like a Chinese painting. There's no perspective, everything seems to be equidistant, but you see the whole picture. I want to talk about the society in which we live. I want the audience to go home thinking, 'How does this relate to me?'"

Theatergoers in D.C. now have the chance to see Yew's fascinating play and to think about how it relates to them. Luckily for them, Yew has stuck with his craft. ▀

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'I realized the things on bathroom walls were true'

Porcelain: a gallery of distinctive voices

The central image of Chay Yew's *Porcelain* is a powerful one — a man cradles his dying lover in a public restroom, red blood spilling over the white tiles.

What makes *Porcelain* remarkable is that Yew explores not only the personal and political dimensions of that tableau, but explains the unexpected poetic elements as well. It's also interesting that the scene is never literally staged, but only described by various witnesses and a chorus of voices. But Yew provides yet another twist: the man has just murdered his lover.

Consenting Adults Theatre Company does an excellent job with this unusual drama. Richard Dorton is outstanding as John Lee, a quadriple outsider Chinese man living in London, homosexual, rejected lover, murderer. Lee initially hides inside an emotional shell, but gradually his passions emerge, culminating in a re-enactment of his crime and an explosion of pain and frustration. Dorton captures these complex emotions well, skillfully etching Lee's loneliness, joy, despair, and desire for acceptance.

Dorton is backed by four actors who play various characters and serve as a chorus. They function smoothly as an ensemble, moving easily from well-defined individuals to cries within Dorton's head and generic bystanders. Lee's head and psychic bystanders, David Jackson is fine as Dr. Worthing, the back court psychiatrist who lies to Lee to draw out his story and then sells the tale to the media. Jackson finds the conflicted core of the character, making him understandable if not entirely sympathetic.

Christopher Wilson plays Will Hope, Lee's reluctant lover. Hope's not unwilling to have sex with Lee — he's simply unwilling to admit that he's gay, and terrified that the neighbors will find out. Wilson adeptly captures Hope's mood swings. Tom Malkin is strong as an overhearing television reporter, and David Fendig shines in a variety of roles, including an outstanding turn as Lee's anguished father.

Yew's writing is vivid, he creates a gallery of distinctive characters and voices and unaffectionately strives for poetic language. The story moves along quickly and compellingly, keeping the audience interested in what will happen next. And Yew explores the complicated issues of racism, homophobia, and

media sensationalism in a sensitive and thoughtful manner.

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