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Image from the Singapore premiere of *A Language Of Their Own* (2006) by Chay Yew, starring Koey Foo, Phin Wong, Peter Sau and Mark Waite. PHOTO: CHECKPOINT THEATRE



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Play: A Language Of Their Own (first staged in the United States in 1994, first staged in Singapore in 2006)

Playwright: Chay Yew

What it is about: Two men, Oscar and Ming, struggle to deal with their crumbling relationship after Oscar discovers that he is HIV-positive. As they break up and turn to other partners, Daniel and Robert, the four men grapple with cultural differences, discrimination, sexual politics and, ultimately, the meaning of love.

It was a crisp spring night in New York in April 1995. Chay Yew was standing on the street with Ong Keng Sen, the director of a production that had, in many ways, altered the course of Chay's life.

The play was A Language Of Their Own and it had scored a run in one of the most prestigious theatres in the city.

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“I remember standing outside the Public Theater on opening night,” Chay says over the telephone, “and I said, look – two Singaporean Anglo-Chinese School boys have made it to New York City, in front of the Public Theatre”.

Chay, 49, is now artistic director of the Victory Gardens Theater in Chicago, one of the most recognised platforms for new American playwriting.

But back then, as a young playwright, he was just beginning to get a taste of the warm reception that the United States and United Kingdom would give his plays – the same plays that, due to censorship, made it to the Singapore stage only years later.

A Language Of Their Own grew out of Chay’s epiphany about the power of theatre.

As a student, he had watched American playwright Larry Kramer’s deeply emotional play about Aids, *The Normal Heart*, at the Public Theatre in the 1980s. The play had lashed out at society’s indifference to Aids in the early days of the epidemic, the rampant homophobia and the lack of government funding in the fight against the disease.

Chay says: “When I came out of the play, my life changed and the way I saw things changed. The play spoke to me about what theatre was. It basically politicised me. Aids politicised a lot of people because it was a great injustice. People were dying. And if you were in the theatre, people were dying constantly. We lost generations of people... and the theatre that I had to do was one that was hopefully eliciting change.”

Back in Singapore, the co-founder of TheatreWorks, Lim Siau Chong, gave Chay (who was doing national service then) his first opportunity to write a play, for \$500. *As If He Hears* (1988), which dealt with the relationship between a volunteer in an Aids organisation and an Aids patient, emphasised that “straight” people could get Aids too.

“I think, to some extent, if Lim had said no, I might probably have never gone into playwriting,” Chay says. “But he let me express myself in writing in a very wonderful way.”

The play was banned and it was given the go-ahead only several months later after it was reworked.

Similarly, *A Language Of Their Own* got its Singapore premiere only in 2006, presented by Checkpoint Theatre, more than a decade after it had been written.

Language had its origins in a deeply personal event. In the early 1990s, Chay went through a break-up.

He says: “Somehow, to exorcise those feelings and figure out what they really meant, I basically ran into this place about what relationships are. So there was some truth, but a lot of invention as well.”

He held on to that first act of *Language* for a while, which details the brunt of Ming and Oscar’s separation, while another play, *Porcelain* (1992), about a gay man who commits a brutal crime of passion, started getting rave reviews in Los Angeles.

Theatre companies began to nudge him for another play and the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles decided to do a reading of Language.

Chay recalls: “I remember very clearly people starting to laugh in the first minute of the play... and I was dying. It was like, ‘Oh my god, why are they laughing, it’s supposed to be a tragedy.’ I was so humiliated and embarrassed.

“Then I realised that at some point, the play had turned when I wanted it to and people were being emotional. I didn’t realise its humour.”

The first act was very well-received and Los Angeles’ Celebration Theatre approached him after, saying it wanted to stage the play. He decided to finish the work and write a second act.

In the meantime, friends who had been tracking his work in New York connected him with the Public Theatre, which decided to give the play a reading.

On the evening of the reading, Chay was told that the artistic director would stay only until the intermission and then leave to open another play.

Chay, already content with how far his tiny play had come, was not ruffled. But he was puzzled when the intermission seemed to stretch on and on.

It turned out that the legendary playwright and director George C. Wolfe, the Public Theatre’s artistic director, was so taken with the play that he told his staff to hold the curtain so he could see the second act. The rest, as they say, is history. Wolfe called Chay up to say the theatre wanted to stage his play.

That production starred B.D. Wong, who premiered the leading role of exotic opera diva Song Liling in *M. Butterfly*, Francis Jue, Alec Mapa and David Drake, all prominent actors. It won the George and Elizabeth Marton Playwriting Award and the GlAAD Media Award for Best Play in 1996.

Wolfe later wrote the foreword to the plays *Porcelain* and *A Language Of Their Own* when they were published in 1997: “*A Language Of Their Own* possesses a muscularity of language and a command of storytelling which allows the vulnerability and deep humanity of the characters to fully explode.”

Ong, 52, who directed the work for the Public Theatre, called it one of the “small shows that become little miracles”. He gave the drama a stripped-down, restrained staging, complete with an erhu musician on stage.

He adds that while the play did not face censorship in the US, “even at the time, it was fairly unusual in New York to have all characters be gay and sensitively dealt with. It was new for audiences and new for critics – here comes an original voice, a very emotive voice, coming from a minority race, no less”.

The Singapore staging did not get government funding, but was performed as part of the Esplanade’s Studios season. It bagged nominations for Production of the Year, Best Original Script and Best Actor (Koey Foo as Oscar) at the 2007 Life! Theatre Awards.

Casey Lim, 52, now executive director of Centre 42, who directed the production, which was given an R18 rating, says: “There’s something very deep in the condition of yearning, of loneliness, the pain and the struggle to find salvation for one’s self internally... Although there are some very specific things about sexual needs and emotional needs, the play really transcends those.”

An excerpt of Language will be presented as a reading at the Esplanade’s upcoming Studios season, in a session that puts local queer writing in the spotlight.

Chay says he was thrilled to see a diverse group of audience members connecting with his play.

“To me, I think that’s what plays do and should do. It talks about one specific group of people but, hopefully, it enlightens you to the fact that they are also your experiences as well.”

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