

A tale of two cities

New-York based, Singapore-born scriptwriter Chay Yew, delves into Marco Polo's history and life for his upcoming play, reports **CHEAH UI-HOON**

THE Italians in Marco Polo's day had a vivid idea of what China was like, thanks to the 13th century merchant's descriptions of the Far East when he returned with a ship full of jade, porcelain, silk, ivory and other riches. But search for the mention of Marco Polo in Chinese history or literature, or of Italy, and you'll find scant information. That's what New-York based, Singapore-born scriptwriter Chay Yew found out, when he delved into Marco Polo's history and life for his upcoming play, *Visible Cities*.

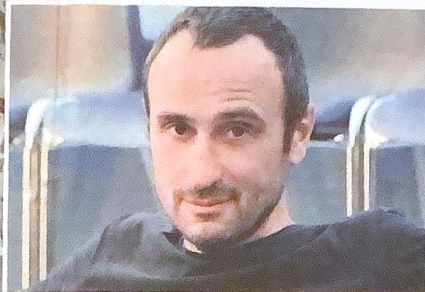
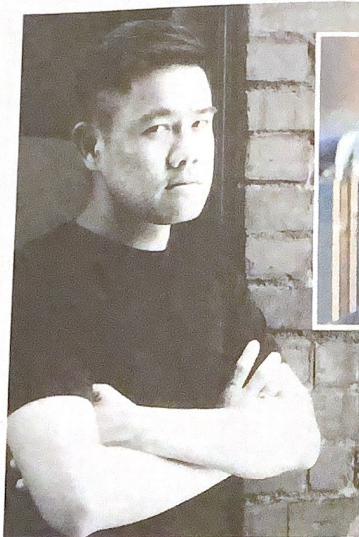
The Italian merchant who opened the eyes of the West to the exotic glories of the East was a logical topic for this Singapore-Italian co-production, as *Visible Cities* was jointly commissioned by the Singapore Arts Festival and the Napoli Teatro Festival Italia. It will have its world premiere here before it is presented in Italy.

Veteran theatre director Giorgio Barberio Corsetti of Italy's Fattore K company will be directing the play. He's noted for the use of different mediums to express the story, such as video and stage machinery.

"Marco Polo defined the 'Orient' to the West, as abundant and exotic," Chay points out, adding that centuries later, Christopher Columbus was so inspired by Polo's accounts that he had originally sailed off looking for Japan.

"It's this view that the West has of the East, and vice versa that is intriguing to me - how we view one another," he says.

So taking his inspiration from Italian writer Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities* which described conversations on real and imagined cities between Marco Polo and Kublai Khan, Chay's *Visible Cities* looks at present day cultural viewpoints and exchanges, the historical influences and the common ground which is still relevant today - trade.



ACHILLE LE PERA

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tion being banded about, that counterfeit profits are 20,000 per cent profit, as compared to the 500 per cent profit in cocaine dealing, he relates.

So what will be the moral or ethical responses about the continued unequal perceptions and trade (im)balances? *Visible Cities* should throw up some provoking thoughts.

About the fact that this production is also a co-commission by the Singapore Arts Festival, Chay says that a commission like this indicates the seriousness that Singapore is viewing its position as a leading arts festival. "A commission is a dialogue that Singapore puts forward to other different arts festivals. And it's good that it's initiating conversations," he says.

Just like trade, arts shouldn't be just a one-way flow, where festivals in Asia just present what the West wants to purvey.

Visible Cities plays on May 22 and 23, 8pm, at the Drama Centre Theatre. Tickets from \$20 to \$50 are available from Sistic



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