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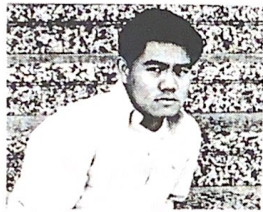
Chay Yew and "Porcelain"

by Charles Whaley

After successful runs at three mainstream theaters—in London (where it took Fringe Awards for best play/best playwright), Los Angeles and Dallas—Chay Yew's "voice play," *Porcelain*, will have its first gay/lesbian theater showing when it opens Theatre Rhinoceros' 16th season on Sept. 11.

On a visit to San Francisco from Los Angeles, where the 28-year-old Singapore-born playwright currently lives, Chay explained how he came to write *Porcelain*, which mixes lyricism and shock effect as it unravels a mystifying "toilet-sex" crime of passion.

While he was in graduate school at Boston University (after earning an earlier broadcast management degree from Malibu's Pepperdine University) the newspapers were full of stories



"Porcelain" author Chay Yew.

about toilet-sex arrests on his campus and at M.I.T. and Harvard. Chay decided to use the topic for his thesis, so he wrote a screenplay with a campus setting.

But when he tried to get people involved in a student production, he couldn't find any willing actors. "They were frightened by the dialogue,"

he said.

Soon after getting his degree, Chay moved to London, where he had been offered a job as playwright-in-residence by the Mu-Lan (Chinese for "spring blossom") Theatre Company, and the artistic director was an old friend from Singapore.

There he was told to write anything he wanted. That's how his screenplay became *Porcelain* and the toilet sex became "cottaging"—the British term for having sex in lavatories—at a Bethnal Green men's room.

Porcelain is played by five voices, with four of them doing myriad characters and the fifth being John Lee, the 19-year-old Chinese man who, at the play's beginning, is said to have been found in the East London lido cradling and weeping over the 26-year-old Caucasian man he has shot six times.

John Lee is unlike most of the others who frequent public lavatories, Chay says. They want anonymous sex with no emotional attachment, but John Lee wants more—"He wonders if someone wants to speak to him...he wants to be touched."

When Will Hope, the man Lee kills, asks him out for a drink after their initial toilet-sex en-

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counter, Lee is thrilled. But he brings to the short-lived affair too many expectations that Hope kills. "Lee is a double outsider—a gay man and an Asian," Chay says. "People are rejecting him, and he is rejecting himself. He kills for fear of losing himself, not for fear of losing the person he kills."

Hope's death, Lee says in the play, means "he'll never be gone now. Now I have him where I want him. I've finally got Will all to myself now."

In the play John Lee uses porcelain as a metaphor for his relationships and his social out-cast status. "The fascinating thing about porcelain," he says, "is the process. Coarse stone powders and clay fused by intense temperatures to create something so delicate, fragile and beautiful. Two extremes, two opposites thrown together only to produce beauty."

"Writing the play helped me explore parts of my life that will never be realized," Chay says.

"Writing is an extension of me, but I never write about my life. Being Asian, my personal life is sacred to me. I don't want the world to pass judgment on me.

"As for anonymous sex, I entertain the idea all the time. But I could never do it. I'm exploring my dark side in the play, but I could never act on it."

Adele Prandini, artistic director of Theatre Rhinoceros, will direct *Porcelain* and Chay hopes she (the first woman to direct the play) will take a lot of directorial license. He likes group efforts and doesn't think a playwright "should ever be too lofty to think it's his play only."

The affable young writer, whose sunny disposition makes his having a dark side seem most

unlikely, finds that his current job in film development for a major company helps him sharpen his tools through his reading of scripts. He hates being categorized as a gay playwright or an Asian playwright and says he plans to write a children's play for both adults and children as well as to adapt a classic play.

Chay's first play, *As If He Hears*, was commissioned by TheatreWorks in Singapore but banned by the government because, according to Chay, "the gay character was very positive and a role model." At first Chay refused to rewrite it for approval but gave in because he felt its AIDS awareness message should be heard. His changes made us of innuendo and humor via the gay character, a social worker.

Later he wrote the docudrama *Someone I Used to Know*, an AIDS education program broadcast throughout Singapore and used in high schools and junior colleges.

His two-part play *Learning Chinese*, written partly from a desire to offset what he feared was a negative portrayal of gay Asians in *Porcelain*, will be directed by Oskar Eustis next April in Los Angeles. *Porcelain* is slated next for an October opening at the Woolly Mammoth Theatre in Washington, D.C.

Philip Begin will portray John Lee in the Theatre Rhinoceros production. The other four voices will be Dean Rehman (who does the voice of Will Hope), Spencer Aste, Mikael Duden and John J. Gardiner.

Porcelain previews Sept. 9 and 10 and runs Sept. 11 through Oct. 16, Wednesday-Sunday at 8 pm, Saturday at 5 pm (Sept. 18, 25, Oct. 2, 9), Sunday at 3 pm (Sept. 19, 26, Oct. 3). A special Sept. 8 performance benefits the Asian AIDS Project of San Francisco. Call (415) 861-5079. ★