

8 Wednesday, April 17, 1996

A true artist and a true writer Chay Yew, director of "Whitelands," uncovers the neglected truth in his work

by Jin Whang

For its explicit and graphic language and mature subject matter, warning signs were posted in visible places at the East West Players theater for the presentations of "Whitelands," at the door, at the box office window and in the brochure as well. And for what some audiences may find offensive, playwright Chay Yew, who sits in the audience with the viewers, regards this three-part stage epic about the realities of an Asian homosexual lifestyle a piece he wrote for himself, and not for "them."

"Them" being the theater critics from the *Los Angeles Times* and *Daily News* who wrote reviews that rather disappointed Yew because he felt they only had limited understanding of what he really wrote about.

"Here I am being judged by a white man again, even in a review," said the 31-year-old playwright, who emigrated from Singapore at the age of 16.

"I'm not saying non-Asians can't write, it's just that I always felt that critics were smarter than that," Yew said.

From his reading of the reviews, Yew claimed that one writer, a white woman, essentially missed the whole point of the play despite having viewed all of it. "They want to judge us in a certain way," Yew said in reference to what he called a shallow understanding of the theme of "Whitelands." "The subject of being 'oriental' is very mythical to them; it's like an illusion."

His impression of the writer's remarks on all three plays was that she only saw the anger in it and not the significance of love, language and the true concept of looking for a home, and where it really is for the minority. "She just totally missed it!" Yew added.

Even in trying to justify his work from reading such reviews, Yew said his main goal is to prove how true one can be to one's own self. "That's what it's all about. We should be proud in uncompromising ways...through a sense of humanity though," said Yew.

"It's not who and what I am but the way I live," he said of his work, in which he writes about the reality of an immigrant's search for liberation and a place to call home in mainstream America.

"There not a lot of honesty in theatre, there is lots of pomp and circumstance, like television, which is too sanitized for middle America," said Yew, who wishes to continue his writing experiences to change the routine trend of every Asian American writer's turmoil of belonging, a theme evident in "Half Lives," part three of "Whitelands."

"I didn't want to write the King and I for the rest of my life. I mean, every Asian actor has played M. Butterfly," said Yew, pointing out the mainstream forces to which Asian American actors, as well as writers have nearly grabbed onto, unfortunately.

"It's like you want to belong so badly, you write for the white or something," said Yew, who studied theater at Pepperdine University, as well as acting, which he never really got into.

"I didn't look the part," Yew said, a line which the character of the son in "Half Lives" says during an audition in which he is denied the main starring role, but is given

a chance to play an Asian immigrant with a heavy accent.

"I said 'Screw this. I got to do something because I want to be given a fair shake,'" which for Yew meant writing as a way to enter into the essence of passion, "and that can never be denied to you."

Even more, as an Asian American writer Yew stresses the imperative need for Asian Americans to be themselves.

"Asian American should be and must be. You should never be censored. All writers are always allowed to write anything under the sun, it's just a matter of what moves you. Asian American writers wear a different hat."

"I'm so thick-skinned. As Asian Americans, you have to be, especially women and artists because being an artist is another sense of being a minority. And never cave in. You can never ever do too much, that seems to be the minority mentality," said

Yew about minorities who struggle with the pressure to succeed on other's terms or the standards set by those who judge them based on their identity.

"You (minorities) are owners of this country, make sure you know," Yew urged.

"We have to be political. I'm so glad to see this new generation of Asian Americans, who seem to be more aggressive and more assertive," said Yew, who mentions being positively influenced by the role of the strong empowered woman.

"I'm very fascinated how those Korean American women, battered by their mothers, are able to fight like dragons. It's real encouraging."

Yew, who currently oversees the Asian American youth theater workshops at the Mark Taper Forum in downtown Los Angeles, is a resident artist about to launch an 'ode to woman' theatrical production of Asian American women artists in June or July. With goals to embark on outreach programs through theater to the Asian American youth, Yew says he wants to allow teen-age Asians to explore and express themselves.

"The new generation of Asian Americans are more vocal and I'm very glad."

Before writing for theater, Yew was at Columbia Pictures reading screenplays, perhaps to follow leads that would result in big writing projects for the silver screen.

"I'm not ready yet for film and I want to wait. I want more developments with theater.... work more on the honesty thing."

Although many of Yew's ideals were most strongly imbedded in the play "Half Lives," almost every critic, including those in the Asian American community, cited a weakness, compared to the first two plays of "Whitelands," "Porcelain" and "A Language of Their Own."

"I know when I write a stinker...I know. Maybe the critic at the *Los Angeles Times* had some personal baggage. I was honest with my writing; the review wasn't accurate and I have to move on."

"You see, if you aren't honest (in your writing), you can tell....I guess critics aren't smart, after all."



Chay Yew

Photo by Lia Chang

Whitelands will be presented at the East West Players until April 24

Ticket prices:

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