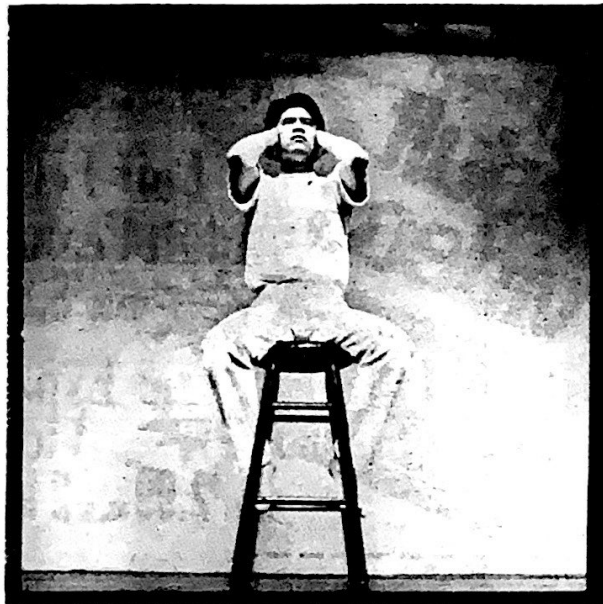


# LAW WEEKLY

FREE



Actor Garrett  
Richard Wang on  
the hot seat

## Killer Love

*The passions of the powerless*

BY JUDITH LEWIS

**C**HAY YEW'S *PORCELAIN* TAKES PLACE IN CONTEMPORARY London, where John Lee, an 18-year-old first-generation Briton whose parents immigrated from Hong Kong, has just begun to acknowledge his homosexuality. Because he can't get anywhere with gay men in the clubs, he turns to "cottaging" — anonymous sex in public bathrooms. ("I know what it is," one man in the play says. "I saw *Prick Up Your Ears*.") One of his lavatory-stall encounters, with a laborer named William Hope, extends first into a drink at a pub, later into a regular sexual liaison. Hungry for affection and acceptance, John idealizes him, builds fantasies around him and falls in love. William has other plans: after a few months of sex and talk, he casually ends the affair by refusing to return John's phone calls. Only when John confronts him, in the same bathroom where they met, does William explain what he's been thinking: "I'm not one of your

kind. I'm not *queer*." John then shoots him dead. The authorities arrive to find John on the bathroom floor with his victim's corpse, mourning the loss.

The early moments of *Porcelain* are filled with rapid-fire gossip about John's predicament, relayed by four actors confined to stools: television reporters grab passers-by on the street to get their opinions; tabloid interviewers corner experts into betraying some real emotion. After nearly everyone else has had a say, the lights come up on John (Garrett Richard Wang), who sits placidly folding red origami cranes. A forensic psychologist named Dr. Worthing (Lee Ryan) interviews him. John responds that he auditioned to play a character named Worthing in his high-school production of *The Importance of Being Earnest*. "They said I didn't look the part."

Dr. Worthing admits his biases off the record: "Where do your sympathies really lie?" one journalist asks. "A queer Chink kills a white man," says the doctor. "Where would your sympathies lie?" But he also does his job, coaxing John with his own personal confessions, pushing past his patient's cynicism with deceptive compassion. What he accomplishes is both brilliant and horrifying: while he inveigles John into digging up every moment of lost love and rejection that led up to the murder, he also sets up the same power relationship John had with William — and he discards it cavalierly.

Except for *Carmen*, nearly all fatal-attraction scenarios feature a woman as the one in pursuit. Men are stalkers; women just take relationships too seriously. Every fatal attraction needs an outsider, and since women automatically have alien status conferred upon them from birth, all you have to do is throw in a few incidental factors (abusive father, childhood trauma), and you have someone conceivably unhinged enough to kill for love.

*Carmen*'s Don José, however, did feel ostracized by the Gypsies. Strains of *Carmen*, as well as the more tired metaphor of *Madame Butterfly*, waft through *Porcelain* — William was an opera fan. When Don José kills Carmen, it's not murder so much as justifiable homicide — the consequences of a woman's infidelity made manifest. When the genders are reversed, as in *Fatal Attraction*, the woman's needy insanity, not the man's faithlessness, is to blame for disaster. Because *Porcelain* is stripped of gender politics, a crime of passion can be understood for what it is: the final controlling act of a powerless out-

sider, moved to act by an anger that peaked long before an ill-fated romance set it off. Whether John is victim or villain, whether he's sympathetic or deserving of hatred, depends on where you sit — to extend the *Carmen* metaphor, it depends on whether you align yourself with the dominant culture or the Gypsies. To the Gypsies, Don José was a monster. To the dominant culture, so is John Lee.

Most of the people who see the Burbage's staging of *Porcelain* will sympathize with John whether they're in the Gypsy camp or not, partly because the play investigates his motives in a way that virtually absolves him. But there's also another reason: most people sitting thoughtfully in a theater tend to be more forgiving and considerate toward fictitious characters on stage than they are toward criminals in true stories on the TV news. (Try as they might — and they do try — news reports about Damacio Ybarra

## THEATER

Torres can hardly afford to be so understanding; the doctors he's been accused of shooting are all too real to us.) John has been denied love at every turn: besieged by racism and bigotry all his life, cast out by white British society for his foreignness and by his own Asian community for his sexuality, viewed by most other gay men as an objectified curiosity or undesirable. He struggles to do everything right: he excels in high school, plans to head for Cambridge, works dutifully in his father's restaurant, yet his anger has to go somewhere. But we love him in spite of his crime the way we could love no real-life murderer.

**G**ARRETT RICHARD WANG'S FAULTLESS RENDERING of John Lee contributes to our sympathy. Stony and sullen one minute, babyfaced, sad and vulnerable the next, Wang captures a young man seething with rage at the same time that he's heartbroken at his own inability to live up to his best intentions and his father's dreams. Joining him are four actors who, without anything to define their various characters but their own expression, increase exponentially the number of perspectives Yew's script can offer. Arne Andersen fires off questions in accusatory BBC-speak; Mark Hattan plays everyone from a hilariously emotional "cottager" to John's wounded and bewildered father — the only character affected by John's deeds whom you feel for. Lee Ryan never condescends to a character who could have come off simply cold and bigoted; Keith Burns never reduces William Hope to a homophobic cliché. Ivan Spiegel directs them into a tightly paced, vigorous ensemble whose exact and economical delivery allows Yew's meaning to come through unburdened by mannerism or mugging. **A**

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### PORCELAIN

By  
CHAY YEW  
At the  
BURBAGE THEATER  
2330 Sawtelle Blvd.  
West Los Angeles  
Through  
February 27