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AIDS Heartbreak in 'Language'

The lasting image of "A Language of Their Own," at the Celebration Theatre, is that of a man holding the body of his ex-lover who is in the final moments of a two-year battle against AIDS. "I want to fly, fly," the dying man murmurs, his arms outstretched toward the sky.

This heartbreaking Pieta—actually one character's deathbed fantasy—forms the climax of Chay Yew's latest work, a promising but ultimately frustrating look at a love affair undone by AIDS and cultural difference.

The play is in fact two one-acts. In the first, "Learning Chinese," Oscar (Dennis Dun) and Ming (Chris Tashima), a gay Chinese American couple, decide to break up after Oscar's recent HIV-positive diagnosis exposes the couple's deeper schisms over Chinese identity and American assimilation.

In the second part, "Broken English," they agonize over the breakup, this time with Ming's new lover Robert (Anthony David) and Oscar's new lover Daniel (Noël Alunit) along for the ride.

Director Tim Dang has flawless timing and a sure visual sense; he can powerfully evoke a Boston flat or a Hollywood bath house with just two high-backed chairs on a black-box stage. And it's hard to imagine another quartet of actors better-suited to Yew's razor-sharp, urbane dialogue. Dun is a special treat as the irrepressible Oscar.

Yet the play itself, which sometimes recalls Robert Chesley's phone-sex play "Jerker," touches too lightly on too many expansive subjects—commitment, sex, death, the relative merits of Boston versus Los Angeles—to really satisfy. One wishes that Yew had chosen to dramatize completely just one issue, rather than trying to depict the death of a relationship in what amounts to speeches and clever one-liners.

Come to think of it, though, those one-liners *are* pretty darn clever.

—S.C.



WAYNE SHIMABUKURO

Noël Alunit, top, Dennis Dun in "A Language of Their Own."

LA Village

VIEW

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The Power Of Language

Chay Yew Explores Gay Themes
Through an Asian Prism

BY NEAL WEAVER

According to Chinese-born Oscar, his handsome lover Ming is a banana: yellow on the outside, white on the inside. But the conflict between racial heritage and cultural assimilation is only one of the problems that plague their relationship. Ming likes to confront problems and talk things out, while Oscar prefers avoidance and discreet silence. Ming is demonstrative and Oscar is shy. Oscar loves Bartók and Ming likes the Pet Shop Boys. And most crucially, Oscar is HIV-positive and Ming is not. Oscar decides to end the relationship out of fairness to Ming. And Ming, hurt and angry, departs.

Time passes, and Ming takes a Caucasian lover, Robert. Oscar takes up with an imperious Amerasian queen named Daniel. But it's not that easy. Both Oscar and Ming are haunted by their past connection and still-smoldering affection. Each regards the other's new lover with jealousy and fine-honed malice. Ming wrestles with his longing for, and fear of, commitment. And as Oscar suffers the growing debility of AIDS, Daniel abandons his frivolous camp veneer to reveal a loyal stoic, offering unstinting love and care even when the delirious Oscar calls him Ming.

In lesser hands, the material could be obvious and overfamiliar. But *A Language of Their Own* offers a fresh take on the situations. Singapore-born writer Chay Yew has a light touch, a sharp comic sense, and a magical way with language. His use of words allows him to move quickly through time and space, change directions on a dime, and touch the emotional quick as well as the funny-bone. He combines text and subtext to show us the chaotic thoughts and feelings that surge beneath mundane surface action. And he does it with sophistication and grace. Even as the theme grows somber, he prefers Mozartean lightness to *Sturm und Drang*.

But there are deeper issues which are never explored. Why does Oscar feel that a relationship with an HIV-infected man is unfair to Ming, but not to Daniel? Is it because he cares less for Daniel that he is willing



Try a little tenderness.

to subject him to the risks and the pangs? Or does he dismiss Ming because he knows instinctively that Ming lacks staying power, and will desert him in the end? And why does Ming so readily accept his dismissal—unless he is looking for an out? The tougher questions are neither asked nor answered.

Director Tim Dang matches the author in elegance, comic finesse, and emotional resonance. And John Lee's minimal set—two stylish black-and-white chairs on a circle of white carpet—provides a handsome arena for the action.

The actors make the most of the author's rapid-fire dialogue and split-second transitions, and capture his delicate blend of pathos and comedy. Dennis Dan (as Oscar) brings reticence and modesty that only highlight the painful vulnerability of a man who wears his heart on his sleeve, and his charm and conviction are enormous. Chris Tashima (as Ming) has found just the right blend of callowness and sensitivity, and discovers the complexities and conflicts behind Ming's confident façade. Noel Alumit, as

Daniel, can camp it up with potent force and lethal glee, but plays the later scenes with austerity and restraint. And Anthony David provides the slick and comely Robert with a nice, unexpected edge of volatility and pugnacious honesty.

**A
Language
of Their
Own**

At The
Celebration
Theatre through
July 10.

For information
call
(213) 660-8587.

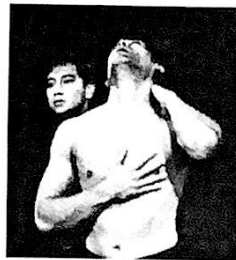
LAWEEKLY

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THEATER PICKS OF THE WEEK

A LANGUAGE OF THEIR OWN

Playwright Chay Yew writes chamber pieces for the stage. Elegantly spare in their settings, there usually are no more than a few stools or chairs onstage. All else is created by movement, gesture, words and sounds. In *Porcelain*, which played on the Burbage boards here last year and later at London's Royal Court Theater, Yew told a story of passion and betrayal in which a young Asian Brit brutally murders the man he loves in a public urinal. Racism and homophobia, both from within and beyond the self, flow through Yew's characters, as if they were the very air they breathe. Here, in these New York Public Theater-bound companion pieces, entitled *Learning Chinese* and *Broken English*, Yew navigates the already choppy waters of gay relationships now made more treacherous by the presence of AIDS. Chinese-born Oscar (Dennis Dun) and American-born Ming (Chris Tashima) recount how happy they were as a couple, despite their cultural differences — that is, until Oscar tested HIV-positive. They split up at Oscar's suggestion, adopting new lives and lovers (Noel Alumit and Anthony David), only to be haunted by each other. What follows is a witty and insightful depiction of love and its tangled weave, and of a community racked with anger and grief while determined to persevere. Occasionally Tim Dang's sensitive and tasteful direction surrenders to sentimentality rather than playing against it, which also mars the text's musicality. Celebration Theater, 7051-B Santa Monica Blvd., Hlywd.; Fri.-Sun., 8 p.m.; thru July 10. (213) 660-TKTS.



WAYNE SHIMABUKURO

—Ellen Krout-Hasegawa

JUNE 10, 1994, VOL. 16, NO. 35

Los Angeles

Reader

The Free Weekly City Magazine



T H E A T E R

Prime Gay Theater — For Everyone

■ **A LANGUAGE OF THEIR OWN.** BY CHAY YEW. DIRECTED BY TIM DANG. SET DESIGN BY JOHN LEE. LIGHTING BY FRANK R. MCKOWN. CELEBRATION THEATRE, 7051 SANTA MONICA BLVD., HOLLYWOOD. (213) 660-TKTS. FRI.-SUN. AT 8 P.M. CLOSES JULY 10.



By Michael Frym

After weathering earthquakes, riots, and fires, Los Angeles finds itself in the midst of a tidal wave of great gay-themed plays. Along with the previously reviewed *Falsettos* (at the Doolittle), *The Only Thing Worse You Could Have Told Me* (Theatre Geo), *Last Summer at Bluefish Cove* (Tiffany), *Girl Bar* (reopening at the Celebration), and multitudinous pieces at Highways, three more outstanding works have opened in the past week. These aren't simply good "gay theater," but excellent theater for any audience.

Chay Yew's *A Language of Their Own* moves poetically in and out of the inner thoughts of its characters. In the first act, "Learning Chinese," a pair of lovers — Ming (the dashing yet sensitive Chris Tashima) and Oscar (the lovingly vulnerable Dennis Dun) — break up after a highly satisfying relationship. The cause of their parting, Oscar suggests, is his recent HIV-positive diagnosis. Under Tim Dang's masterful direction, the emotions are heightened by the play's tempo and manifest physically as the actors execute Dang's circular blocking in an almost ritualistic manner. Oscar states profoundly that both having AIDS and losing one's lover are like losing a part of yourself that you took for granted.

The second act is a companion piece that picks up two years later: Both men have new lovers, but they nevertheless sorely feel the loss of what they had. Oscar has paired with flip Filipino queen Daniel (played with meticulous hilarity by Noel Alunit), who continually fires off quips like "The only thing gay men have in common is good hair." Meanwhile, Ming hopes that Robert (Anthony David) will prove a suitable substitute for Oscar. Eventually, Ming and Robert become violent with each other, Daniel compassionately cares for Oscar in his final days, and the audience is soberly reminded that the course of true love never runs smooth.

HEARTBREAKING "LANGUAGE" OF LOVERS

A REVIEW BY ROB STEVENS

The miscommunications, the silences, the thoughts never spoken, the affection never shown are all brilliantly delineated in Chay Yew's *A LANGUAGE OF THEIR OWN*. This story of two Chinese lovers, the older, more Chinese Oscar (Steve Park) and the younger, more Americanized Ming (Eric Steinberg), has been given a brilliant production under the sensitive direction of Tim Dang at East West Players. This play is the strongest in Yew's *WHITELANDS* trilogy.

Dang directed the World Premiere at Celebration Theatre in 1994, but his mastery of the material is even stronger today. The tensions, the frustrations, the nervous energy, the re-creations as well as the warmth and nurturing of a loving relationship are keenly shown. Yew's language is poetic in essence, heartbreaking in its reality.

Oscar and Ming have been in a relationship for four years when Oscar tests positive for the HIV virus. Not wanting Ming to see him get sick and die, and not able to cope with Ming's seeking sex elsewhere, Oscar decides it's best for Ming to leave. Ming objects but in a few weeks finds himself in another relationship with a white waiter, Robert (Ben Shepard) who loves him very much. It takes Oscar longer to find another companion, but he finally permits the younger, gayer Daniel (Radmar Agana Jao) to share his life.

Even though years pass and they find themselves in new relationships, Oscar and Ming can't seem to break the ties that bind first lovers. The acting here is great, especially that by Steinberg. His sexual energy, his ferocious appetites for life and sex, his frustrations at not being able to control his urges or to confront his failings are deeply felt.

(*A LANGUAGE OF THEIR OWN* ended its run at East West Players on April 21.)

Radmar Agana Jao and Steve Parks
(photo: Shane Sato)



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A LANGUAGE OF THEIR OWN

at the Celebration

Reviewed by Charles Isherwood

Chay Yew's *A Language of Their Own* explores the unraveling of a relationship between two gay Chinese-American men. On a bare black stage decorated only by a circle of white and two black-and-white chairs, Oscar (**Dennis Dun**) and Ming (**Chris Tashima**) banter and bicker as they try to get at the roots of why their four-year affair has come to an end. A cultural rift that might be surprising to outsiders provides a subtle barrier: Oscar is a first-generation Chinese American who jealously protects his background. He's respectful of traditional manners and has trouble showing his affections. Ming is second-generation, what Oscar jeeringly calls "a banana—yellow on the outside and white on the inside."

Eventually, both begin new relationships, but they still haunt each other's thoughts, despite the presence of Ming's white boyfriend Robert (**Anthony David**) and Oscar's lover, the Filipino diva Daniel (**Noel Alunit**).

Yew's richly patterned language is theatrical but naturalistic. Characters often speak to the audience, finish each other's sentences, and hear each other's thoughts as well as their words. Yew also has a nice gift for comedy. And director **Tim Dang** has done a remarkable job of choreographing the action, keeping the play's quick pace fluid.

The play only disappoints in its ambitions. Despite the novelty of the gay Asian-American angle, this territory feels familiar. The story-of-a-breakup trappings begin to grate after a while, and the play moves forward but doesn't seem to get any deeper. The actors all give sturdy if unremarkable performances. Alunit, as the acerbic Daniel, makes a strong impression—but then, he gets all the best barbs. The lighting design by **Frank R. McKown** is spare and evocative, as is **John Lee's** minimal set.

"A Language of Their Own," presented by and at the Celebration Theater, 7051 Santa Monica Blvd., Hollywood, June 3-July 10 (213) 660-8587

DRAMA-LOGUE[®]

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A Language of Their Own

Produced by Robert Schrock for the Celebration Theatre, 7051 Santa Monica Blvd., Hollywood; (213) 660-TKTS. Opened June 3; plays Thurs.-Sat., 8; Sun., 7; closes July 10.

Chay Yew, author of the award-winning *Porcelain*, writes tellingly of that awkward period when lovers attempt to become friends. This is a hopeless task in both gay and straight circles, as Yew eloquently demonstrates. Love is love, and sexual orientation is irrelevant. The ever-present specter of AIDS is still more peculiar to the gay community, but statistically it seems to be only a question of time before a morbid equality of vulnerability exists throughout this nation. In several African countries, already, more straight people are perishing than gay.

In any case, every single insight into romantic relationships that Yew offers has universal application, and each of his four characters—Oscar, Ming, Daniel and Robert—is well worth meeting. How convincingly the notion of each lover learning "a new language" is presented, on the other hand, is debatable. This theme, supposedly central to the play, seems tacked on and jerry-built. It is better just to enjoy Yew's droll dialogue and expert understanding of how to structure the dynamics of individual scenes, and how to shape a series of scenes for maximum emotional impact.

Tim Dang's shrewd direction easily navigates the play's lyrical as well as comical moments. His handling of actors is about as good as it gets. Dennis Dun makes a delightful Oscar, traveling the arc from inhibited soul to aggressive lover with great skill. Chris Tashima as Ming has a wonderfully mobile range of expressions, and often tells us more when he is listening than when he is speaking. Noel Alumat as Daniel is the invariably outrageous queen—no play about the gay community seems complete without such a figure—and he is given some outrageously witty lines in a play replete with clever dialogue. Alumat takes full advantage of every *bon mot*, and his turn to the serious at curtain is all the more powerful because we have already seen how essentially flippant he wishes to have the world perceive him. Anthony David, the only actor in the cast who is not Asian American, seems the most bland of the four—a nice reversal of the oft seen Occidental stereotyping of Asian Americans as well-mannered

nerds without much personality. Despite the character's limitations, David is a persuasive, winning actor, who says as much with a smile as he does a with a fist.

Although the Celebration Theatre is one of the smaller theatres in town (55 seats), it is most comfortable. Below-the-line credits at this venue are invariably taken very seriously. John Lee's set design is simple, clean and spacious. Frank McKown's lighting design makes a particularly strong contribution.

A Language of Their Own has a good deal to say about love, prejudice and the nature of loss in a persistently dangerous world. It reinforces the fact that although people are parting company in ever-increasing numbers and for a variety of reasons, the pain of that parting is as devastating today as it has ever been.

—Bruce Feld



Chris Tashima, Dennis Dun, Noel Alumat and Anthony David in a scene from 'A Language of Their Own' now playing at the Celebration Theatre

WAYNE SHIMABUKURO

Gay & Lesbian TIMES

7.7.94 Issue #341

Southern California's Weekly

'Language of Their Own' Speaks Directly to Gays

review by KEN DICKMANN

You may not have noticed it, but the men and women of the Asian gay community are really coming out of the closet lately, both socially and culturally. That emergence is currently being seen in Chay Yew's new play *A Language of Their Own* at the Celebration Theatre in Hollywood through July 10. The Singapore-born Yew made Los Angeles theater spin with his award-winning play *Porchland* that dealt with an Asian killing his white lover who frequented public toilets in London. With his latest, Yew still is in the process of exploring the life of Asian gays not only to us, but to Asian's themselves in their process of self-acceptance.

In the first act called "Learning Chinese," a couple has been living in Boston together for four years. Oscar (Dennis Dun), upon discovering he is HIV positive, decides that it is best he and Ming (Chris Tashima) split up. This creates a rift between the two of them as Oscar is sacrificing his relationship so Ming can go on with his life, while Ming wants to keep the relationship going.

Designed by John Lee, the simple set in black with a white circular carpet and two black and white chairs becomes the playing area as the couple reviews their relationship and cultural differences. Oscar was China-born and still carries the emotional detachment of the Chinese. American born Ming, in his desire to assimilate into Western culture, is considered a "banana" — yellow outside, white inside. Though their love is real and deep, they split. This opening act works well with the fluidity of Yew's dialogue. The excellent lighting of Frank McKinnon creates time, place and mood.

In the second act, "Broken English," both have taken on new lovers though Ming has moved to Venice, California, with his Caucasian friend Robert (Anthony David). In the meantime, Oscar has been befriended by Daniel (Noel Alumit), a pretentious Harvard



Noel Alumit (top) comforts Dennis Dun in a touching scene from *A Language of Their Own*.

remarks to Ming and then with Daniel's trendy and "fret" everything approach to life. Daniel feels that Sweden's best imports are Ikea, where he shops every other weekend, ABBA, and euthanasia. "The only good thing gay men have in common," he quips, "is good hair."

As with the rest of Celebration's excellent season this year, *A Language of*

Onstage L.A.

Their Own continues this compoega of gay adventures in other cultures. The professional cast is impeccable in reasons why trouble often visits these relationships, for example the lack of commitment on

Ming's part and the lack of emotional freedom on Oscar's that turns into obsession with Daniel.

Although the drama of Oscar's illness is played out on stage, *Language of Their Own* is not an AIDS play. The disease is merely a catalyst for examining the characters' relationship. Yew sprinkles it with an abundance of gay and Asian sharp humor, first with Oscar's caustic

business student and Filipino queen from a wealthy family. Though the lives of Oscar and Ming have gone on, they are still haunted by their first love relationship.

Yew not only shows the cultural differences between the various sub-groups of Asians, but also the lack of confidence that most gays have in their interpersonal love relationships and the

bringing out all aspects of Yew's script with nods toward a wonderful and caring Dun as Oscar and especially Alumit as the bitch queen Daniel. Director Tim Dang finds all the emotional facets of the gay *menage a quatre*, as well as subtly infusing us of their cultural definitions and differences.

Through this exploration of gay relationships, in the end each character's true colors come out. Oscar emerges from his emotional shell. Daniel becomes a caring and compassionate companion. Robert moves on to a truer life and Ming is more self-centered and detached than any of them.

There's a lot to be learned here about other gays, as well as ourselves. Yew's insight into gays and his use of counterpoint dialogue is wonderful and witty as we get to know Oscar and Ming. By the end, we've been on a journey with four gay men who personally out our fears and desires and hopefully we will realize it's the love for each other that will get us through any difficult times.

(Celebration Theatre, 7051 Santa Monica Blvd., 11 blocks east of La Brea), Hollywood. Fridays-Sundays at 8pm. Tickets: \$15-\$20. Box office or at 213-666-1115.



(l-r) Chris Tashima and Dennis Dun star in *A Language of Their Own*, playing through July 10 of the Celebration Theatre.

BEST BET



WAYNE SHIMABUKURO

A Language of Their Own

*Celebration Theater, Hollywood
Through July 10; (213) 660-TKTS*

This world premiere production is Celebration's most accomplished work yet—stunning in its simplicity and powerful in its verbal images. Playwright Chay Yew uses language that is nearly poetic to delineate the troubled relationship between two Asian men, Oscar and Ming. Oscar is the more traditional of the two, while Ming is very Americanized and more volatile; the fact that they never had a fight in their four years together is one of the things that draws them apart. In the first act, "Learning Chinese," these characters, played by the remarkable Dennis Dun and

Chris Tashima, share their thoughts and feelings with us. The second act introduces their new lovers: Ming's Robert, a white waiter; and Oscar's Daniel, a Filipino queen with an Ikea fixation. Anthony David delivers a strong performance as Robert while Noel Alunit dishes up the camp as Daniel. Tim Dang's direction is flawless; the minimal action (on a raked stage designed by John Lee with lighting by Frank R. McKown) has you on the edge of your seat at times. The combination of Yew's dialogue and the skill of this talented quartet of actors is magical.

—Rob Stevens

\$6.15

JULY 1994

LOS ANGELES THEATRE

M A G A Z I N E

A LANGUAGE OF THEIR OWN Chay Yew's celebration of language makes for a refreshing theatre experience in a time when the leading playwrights minimize text and graduate school pros predict the demise of the writer altogether in favor of improvised gesture and ritual.

Yew's language is often well-wrought poetry which serves as counterpoint to the choppy story. "The Ronde" is a familiar pattern but here it is "boy meets boy, boy loses boy, boy finds another boy, loses."

The actors are superb, especially Noel Alunit who must walk a very tight line between parody and truth and does it with what seems perfect ease. Dennis Dun is entirely lovable as the Chinese-born lover struggling to maintain his dignity in spite of life's inequities. Chris Tashima illuminates the problems of what might have turned into a cliché character with force and style. Anthony David is highly believable as he goes through changes at a quick pace. This is a sometimes funny, sometimes sad, sometimes graphic love story, beautifully written, and ably performed under the direction of Tim Dang, the Artistic Director of East West Players. *Celebration Theatre, 7051-B Santa Monica Blvd, Hollywood, thru July 10*
Thurs-Sun 8 p.m.
213/660-TKTS
(Joan Eyles Johnson)

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Stage

When Words Fail

A Language of Their Own depicts four gay men's struggle to express love, devotion, and passion
By Mari Coates

We seem to be emerging from the days of strictly topical drama: gay polemics in which coming out or coping with AIDS is the dramatic focus, or countercultural pieces that take as their sole theme the difficulties faced by immigrants in America. *A Language of Their Own*, the second play in a trilogy by Chay Yew, attempts to use both subjects as a jumping-off place to explore a third: the role of language in theater and, by extension, in intimate relationships. As directed by Tim Dang, Yew's four-character play overcomes a talky, monotonous beginning to develop into a drama of genuine power.

The playwright owes an enormous debt to Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*. (I doubt it's mere coincidence that *A Language of Their Own* had its world premiere at the New York Shakespeare Festival under Producing Director George C. Wolfe, who directed *Angels* on Broadway.) What Yew gained from careful observation of Kushner is an appreciation for the complications of human interaction rather than the possibilities for formulaic solutions.

Two lovers — Oscar (Merv Maruyama) and Ming (Art Desuyo) — decide in the friendliest and most civil of ways to split up after learning that Oscar's HIV test is positive. Four years of happiness, it seems, is no stopgap, and AIDS has loomed as an impossible obstacle. Ming no longer feels attracted to Oscar. Rather than risk further rejection, Oscar quickly acts to end the relationship.

In parallel monologues addressed to the audience, more details emerge: In addition to Oscar's HIV status, Ming is upset at Oscar's rigid adherence to his Chinese heritage, which manifests itself as a crippling inability to express feelings. Oscar fears showing affection, especially in public, and, in what will become a touching recurrent image, allows Ming to hold only his finger instead of his hand. Ming, we learn, is a fully assimilated Chinese-American who has forgotten his native language and no longer experiences a connection to his roots.

Both men are adrift in the American culture: Ming, disowned by his family for the

highly American act of coming out. Oscar, uncomfortable with the necessity of remaining closeted, they agree to part and start divvying up their collection of CDs. The classical are Oscar's, the Pet Shop Boys are Ming's. They are as casual as if they were nothing more than college roommates.

Ming gets involved right away with Robert (Eric Newton), an Anglo dreamboat who has no problem showing emotion. Oscar finally allows Daniel (Alan S. Quismorio) into his life, a young, proactive Asian queer with a passion for IKEA, the Swedish prefab furniture store. Between playwright Yew and director Dang, the dramatic line in which Ming and Oscar remain bound by a love neither can live with or without is well drawn if highly predictable.

What is surprising is the way in which the passion of these two lovers is developed. Instead of taking the expected (simplistic) romantic turn in which their limitations prevent intimacy either with each other or with anyone else, they learn skills from their new partners that might have allowed them to stay together.

The emphasis shifts from talking to taking action, from intellectualizing to feeling. What Ming and Oscar do dramatically is to use language to avoid contact. They speak more easily to the audience than they do to one another. Language — and that includes the rhetoric of gay politics as well as American

unfortunate that the rhetoric aspires to heights greater than it achieves — it wants to sing and soar but only does so intermittently.

As Oscar, Merv Maruyama's constraint is nearly absolute, while he displays a moving degree of pathos in the end, his performance

The play's emphasis shifts from talking to taking action, from intellectualizing to feeling.

in the first act borders on the monotonous. Art Desuyo's Ming is more immediately attractive and compelling. However, he, too, seems so quick to relinquish a four-year relationship his part of the conflict is nearly buried.

But a fascinating thing takes place early in the second act. Just when I, for one, was sure I could see the outcome and the nature of the play as it was developing — a reasonably compelling but all too predictable tale of love gone wrong — it took off in another direction. What happens is that Robert and Daniel arrive. As played by Eric Newton and Alan S. Quismorio, respectively, they bring to the play and to each of the estranged lovers the bracing air of clarity as well as the liberating

PHOTO BY MERV MARUYAMA



Faithful Tenacity: Merv Maruyama (reclining) and Alan S. Quismorio in *A Language of Their Own*.

English and Chinese — is almost another character; it serves as a buffer, allowing them to deflect intimacy at the outset. But as the play develops and mere words are revealed as inadequate, language becomes an obstacle to be circumvented.

This is dramatically risky. The playwright is taking a gamble that his writing is powerful enough and that his actors will be able to maintain a high level of interest even as the characters grow increasingly distant. In the initial telling of their story, Ming and Oscar use poetic rhythms and repetition, devices requiring absolute confidence of delivery, which on opening night was shaky. It is also

nightmare is inspiring and heroic. It also gives Oscar the constancy he has needed, finally freeing him to allow his feelings to show.

After what feels like a long poetic preamble, the play stops functioning as a mere exercise in language and becomes a fluent expression of love, devotion, and passion in the face of horrific illness and cultural repression. Its dynamic — initially a flat two-character interchange — deepens in the end to a rich, three-dimensional lesson in humanity.

A Language of Their Own runs through Feb. 4 at the Asian American Theatre Center in S.F.; call 751-2600.

A Language of Their Own Twisted Tongues

PAGE 38—BAY AREA REPORTER—January 11, 1996

by Chad Jones

By dissecting the unique language lovers use to express their love, pronounce their hatred and avoid communication altogether, playwright Chay Yew turns the standard relationship clichés into beautifully crafted, emotionally charged theatrical poetry. His new play, *A Language of Their Own*, opened last week to kick off of the Asian American Theater Company's 23rd season.

A familiar tale simply, but artfully told, this *Language* is spoken primarily by Oscar and Ming, lovers of four years at the precipice of their imminent breakup. Oscar, an emotionally restrained Chinese man, has just tested HIV-positive and initiates the end of his relationship with Ming, a more expressive American-born Chinese man. The issues the lovers are forced to deal with as their relationship crumbles come into sharp focus as the play quickly cross cuts thoughts and scenes from their four years together with the silence-laden conclusion of their love affair.

First, there are the HIV issues: Oscar feels that his illness will cheat Ming of his own life and vitality. Ming disagrees and wants to stay to care for Oscar. Then there are the Asian issues. Oscar holds his feelings in just as his Chinese family did while Ming wants to make out in public, or at



Merv Maruyama, left, and Alan Quismorio.

Photo: Freddie Niern

least wants to hear the words "I love you" spoken aloud. The lovers cannot reconcile their differences and part with strained amicability.

They move on to other relationships. Ming moves to California with Robert, a white waiter, while Oscar more reluctantly takes up with Daniel, a flamboyantly queer Harvard business student. As Ming and Oscar begin their new relationships, the former lovers still find themselves speaking the words of the language they created for each other amidst the relationship that will probably be

the most important either will have in his lifetime.

The most powerful element in *A Language of Their Own* is the aching familiarity that instantly draws in anyone who has ever suffered the loss of an important relationship. Yew's language is natural and filled with the sitcom and movie-screen rhythms that people tend to affect when dealing with the complicated language of relationships. Yew wisely interjects as much humor into the heartbreak as possible, but the overwhelming impression the play leaves is one

Continued on page 38

Language

Continued from page 34

of staunch ineptitude whenever two humans try to communicate their emotions.

Under the unpretentious guidance of director Tim Dang, Merv Maruyama and Art Desuyo as Oscar and Ming strongly convey the push and pull of the lovers' dance.

As the new lovers of the second act, Eric Newton as Robert the waiter and Alan Quismorio as Daniel the business student are appealing, but don't have a great deal to do. As the second act explores the new relationships, the play becomes less interesting than the frenetic duet of the first act, though these new lovers do have some fine moments. The heart of the play never ceases to be the connection between Oscar and Ming.

As an exploration of gay Asian relationships, *A Language of Their Own* is fascinating and involving. But it's when the play enters the realm of the universal, touching the core of relationships — gay, straight, Asian, non-Asian — that the words of this *Language* really connect. ▼

A Language of Their Own continues at the Asian American Theater through February 4. Call 751-3074 for information.

and (Apollo Dukakis) are goaded on by Marianne's sassy, unperu- and Donne, played dead-on by Miller

the roles are well-cast, giving solid are Anne-Gee Byrd, Michael and Abigail Dillen. But the leads ally crafty handling by Edmonds e. Their entrapment scene is a ample of outright hilarity border- clapsack, a Moliere specialty done uation by these two. or Ari Manke has done it again, a classic to life with a fine cast, the clean set designs of Thomas e. authentic and terrific-looking s by Angela Balogh Calin, and design by Paula J. Dinkel. A Noise only presents the classics, and they at them. Any casual or serious et would do well to watch this company's schedule. What you addition to an education in clas- is classic entertainment.

presented by and at A Noise Within, 234 Blvd., Glendale Jan. 3-Feb 3 (818) 546-

OF THE D PARTY Celebration



by Rob Kendt Ranberg's End of the World Party rapidly proliferating genre—the gay dramedy—with the kind of humanity that breeds warmth, not . It's a great, felicitously crafted ment, and in director Robert glutening, inimate production, it at helplessly gaping with joy, as its laugh lines as for its deeply sense of communion with its

limbably simple premise has six mer in a Fire Island beach house, "husband maternal," swapping s and scooping the babes. Of e any vacationing family, they island getaway to be more a cru- ear anxieties and tensions than a m them. Their ranks have dwm- at least one of them, Travis (Doug is still smarting from a recent land's young, tentative newcom- oor replacements for the brave, spirits the group has lost

seems. Among the play's joys is gh Ranberg is clearly telling his eration's story—he allows his characters to romanucize the ambigiously—he is tenderly ding of the younger, wamer, less ed specimens, typified by a wide- onal California boy (Ric Coy) mingly heartsick airhead (Todd)

pleasant surprise is that the characters turn out to be thought-



Once on fire island: Michael Latimer and Richard Hochberg in "End of the World Party."

ful, searching, even sage: the wisecracking house ringmaster (Bruce Dent) and a pret- ty, white-bread model cowed by middle age (Michael Latimer). An unrepentant heartbreaker (Kevin Spurtas) and a child- like neurotic (Richard Hochberg) are more pat lesson learners, while the mourning Travis undergoes the play's most hearten- ing and unprogrammatic transformation. By play's end, he's lighter—both in terms of gravity and of emotional color. So are we.

The cast is flawless and uncloyingly lov- able, and Schrock's direction is remarkably nuanced and sensitive without losing Ranberg's comic momentum. Jimmy Cuomo's simple set proves surprisingly versatile. It's a small space, but the play's spirit is boundless.

"End of the World Party," presented by and at the Celebration Theatre, 7051 Santa Monica Blvd., Hollywood, Oct 5-Jan 28. (213) 660-8587

A LANGUAGE OF THEIR OWN at the Asian American Theater Company



Reviewed by Matthew Surrence Chay Yew's A Language of Their Own is an affecting, bittersweet chamber drama that tells, with uncommon grace and sensitivity, an all-too-common story: love and death in the age of AIDS. On a small thrust stage, bare but for two black chairs, upshot Oscar (Merv Maruyama) and promiscu- ous Ming (Art Desuyo) detail their Boston yuppie courtship, relationship, and breakup—the latter instigated by Oscar, who is HIV-positive and fears being a bur- den to his adored Ming.

If Yew's stereotypical characters and well-worn observations get the two-hour, two-act play off to a mundane start, it gradually accumulates power as Ming falls for sweet-spirited Robert (Eric Newton), and a devastated Oscar rebounds with bit- chy/prissy Daniel (Alan S. Quismonio). In director Tim Dang's incisively staged Act Two scenes of interwoven dialogue, deliv- ered in crisp, staccato counterpoint by the four men, we feel acutely the public and private common language—verbal and otherwise—that lovers develop, a lan- guage that defines and maintains their identity to themselves, their partners, and the world. And we especially feel the help- less groping of lovers who have lost their fullest form of expression when they've lost their partner, whether to death or to

sexual restlessness. Initially workshopped at the Mark Taper Forum in 1993, A Language of Their Own played the Public Theater in New York and the Celebration Theatre in L.A. in 1994. The play is well-served here by John Lee's utterly spare scenic design and by Dang's fine cast. Subtle sensitivity beams from Maruyama's sunny-sad face, while Desuyo is properly pretty, charming, and opaque. As Robert, Newton displays a seductive intelligence, and although the tiny, Aztec-faced Quismonio tends to gar- ble some of his lines, he gives a compas- sionate dimension to the ever-quipping Daniel.

"A Language of Their Own," presented by and at the Asian American Theater Company, 403 Arguello Blvd., San Francisco Jan 5-Feb 4. (415) 751-2600

THE PRICE at the Bagley Wright Theatre



Reviewed by John Longenbaugh Arthur Miller's The Price, written in 1968, is a play to which time has been exceptionally kind. Its emotional intensity is comparable to the best of Miller's early work, while the compactness of form looks forward to the later style of The Last Yankee or Broken Glass. The Seattle Rep's new production carries all the weight of a classic with none of the portentousness; it's as bright as a polished Eisenhower dollar.

Victor (Bill Smitrovich) is a middle-aged policeman who has finally decided to sell off the furnishings of his long-deceased father, whom he had supported after the old man had been wiped out in the Crash of 1929. He's hoping for a simple transac- tion, his wife (played with pinched deter- mination by Barbara Dickinson) wants him to haggle for a good price. But the 89-year- old Jewish furniture dealer Gregory Solomon (in a grandiose performance by Larry Keith) doesn't make simple transac- tions, his pitch dominates the first act, cov- ering everything from the ethics of the dis-posable culture to the ethics of belief. Just as they finally decide on a price, Vic's brother Walter (James Sutorius), not seen for 16 years, walks in.

The remainder of the play is dominated by the brothers, as each tries to reckon the price they've paid in their lives. Walter, now a successful surgeon, realizes that his career was at the expense of his brother, but believes Victor's self-sacrifice to care

the evening in question Nellies, it's worth it. The four-person gay comedy to York which takes its name up brat on TV's Little Hou demonstrate a talent for forming comedy sketches seen since the early seas Night Live. And while the sexual offerings might not its choices at least educat a sr

The talented foursome Peg Healey, Tony Markker Michael—have compiled; 20 slots, none of which Michael seems to be the tributing to half the piece Burns is the anchor on t side, appearing in the majc getting the most laughs). T the evening is the bac "Menorah" and "Malibu house." The first has Bur turn as Menorah, the Je playing a bar mitzvah, Healey, alone on stage, giv ly funny portrait of Bart right down to the inum arms and legs.

Other standout sketch "Step in Motion," which step program with an aere of laughs: "Dog Days," a u at a family whose behavio dogs a bit too far, and "With Salt 'n' Pepa," in v and Michael execute s funny parodies of the rap Also worth mentioning Klein perfume com ("Paradox," "Trick," a "Nellie"), as well as Bu amusing additions to s "Lesbian Signer."

If this show is any in this troupe can do, let's Olsons plan to make L their shows.

"A Fufull of Nellies," pr Highway 1651 18th St., San (713) 660-8587

ANGRY HOUSEW at the Long Beach P

Reviewed by Kristina M Though the wacky p Housewives may not nec all tastes, it's hard to laughter when four mid unhappy with their ordi to form their own punl despite a relatively slow- knit plot, A.M. Collins' collaboration cranks ou beat humor in its sa teenage rebellion, yupp (dis)harmony.

Clearly enjoying the and musical numbers, Playhouse cast fills the Theatre with energ

Pam / Susie - Backstage West Review 1/11/96

The shadows left when love moves on

Yew's spare poetry frames complexities of the heart

BY JUDITH GREEN
Mercury News Theater Writer

SAN FRANCISCO

I DON'T think we should see each other anymore." The words are so simple, yet they tear you apart.

Like a medieval cantus firmus, they ground the intertwined stories of Chay

THEATER REVIEW

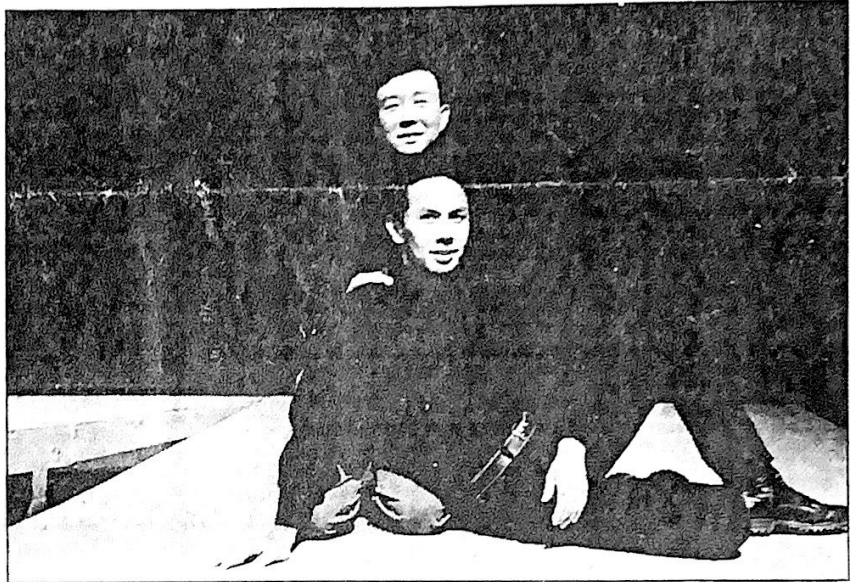
Yew's 1995 dramatic quartet "A Language of Their Own" (at the Asian American Theater Company through Feb.

4). Whenever the plot takes a twist or a character embarks on a digression, the refrain of that exquisitely simple sentence brings you back to the here and now.

Oscar and Ming are the central couple of "Language": Chinese-American gay men who live together in Boston and come apart over Oscar's discovery that he is HIV-positive. Despite their names, Oscar (Merv Maruyama) is the more Chinese and reserved of the two, Ming (Art Desuyo) the assimilated Chinese-American. The entire first act, called "Learning Chinese," is spent learning their differences, and coming to terms with the truth that they can't live with or without each other.

In the second act, "Broken English," Oscar becomes involved with a much younger Filipino-American, Dan (Alan S. Quismorio), who is as open and delighted to be gay as Oscar is closed and closeted about it. Ming falls in love with Robert (Eric Newton), a non-Asian waiter, and they move to Los Angeles, where things fall apart.

Tim Dang of the East West Players in Los Angeles staged the play with a lack of clutter than matches the language.



FREDDIE NIEM

Merv Maruyama (Oscar) and Art Desuyo (Ming) in "A Language of Their Own."

Yew describes, in clean and open poetry, the ways in which love changes and moves on, yet leaves so much of itself behind.

Considering what Asian American Theater Company can afford to pay, his cast is astonishingly capable. Desuyo and Newton, restless and energetic, are several degrees better than Maruyama, who still hadn't mastered his lines by opening night, and Quismorio, who kept tripping over his own tongue.

The sets, by John Lee, could not be more sparse: a bare raked floor and two chairs for "Learning Chinese," an open expanse of neutral territory cut in two by a dramatic black wedge for "Broken English." Rick Martin's lighting is all the furniture they need. I wish the music had been better: Yew calls for Satie's second "Gymnopédie," which is trite, but the colorless scrapings by Francis Wong for cellist Elliot Humberto Kavee aren't any the better for being not trite.

Yew, 30, has the gift of insight. He describes, in clean and open poetry, the ways in which love changes and moves

on, yet leaves so much of itself behind. Each new relationship is inevitably colored by memories and associations of the past. Oscar and Ming, Dan and Robert are ordinary guys, yet their emotional struggles are as complex and textured as those of the great protagonists of literature: Anna Karenina or Othello, Madame Bovary or Don Quixote.

I don't mean to suggest that the play is the equal of these noble creations, for it has nothing of their social awareness or spiritual introspection or their tapestry of cultural and political associations. But it doesn't pretend to epic scope, either. It sets itself a task, albeit a small and closely defined one, and accomplishes it with deliberate grace.

A Language of Their Own

By Chay Yew

■ **Producer:** Asian American Theater Company

■ **Through:** Feb. 4

■ **Running time:** 2 hours

■ **Where:** 403 Arguello Blvd. (at Clement), San Francisco

■ **Tickets:** \$16-\$21. (415) 751-2600

■ **Parking:** Street

HOKUBEI MAINICHI

NORTH AMERICAN DAILY

北米毎日新聞

Theater Review

Language of Love Conveyed in Original and Poetic Play

By MARK NISHIMURA
Hokubei Mainichi

"Without him, I feel incomplete, empty," says Oscar about his lover, Ming, in Chay Yew's unique and poetic four-character drama, "A Language of Their Own," which is running at the Asian American Theater Company through Sunday, Feb. 4.

The simple statement, appearing early in Act I, perfectly explains their love as the staccato, sometimes hilarious, word-play between Oscar and Ming — magnificently portrayed by Merv Maruyama and Art Desuyo, respectively — brings the two protagonists, as well as the play itself, to life.

With a minimalist set — no sound, a few light changes and a couple of chairs on stage — the first act, featuring just the two men, is a 50-minute suite of love and heartbreak. The sharp dialogue and quick asides on such topics as the arts, racism and sexuality not only intertwine with each other like jazz notes, but reveal the speakers' personalities and bond together.

The thirtyish Oscar is a traditional Asian, being more shy and reserved with his feelings. He hides his homosexuality from his family and is physically and emotionally undemonstrative in public. Ming is the opposite, a pro-



Merv Maruyama (left) and Alan Quismorio in a scene from "A Language of Their Own."

Photo by Freddie Niem

miscuous ABC (American-born Chinese) in his early 20s who refuses to order in his ethnic tongue in a Chinese restaurant.

Their four-year affair hits a snag when Oscar discovers he is HIV-positive. They try to stay together — Oscar stays at home watching "Seinfeld" as Ming, consumed with both guilt and a sense of freedom, goes out with other guys — but the older lover decides that it would be best to break up their relationship.

"He has his whole life ahead of him," Oscar explains, "and mine is numbered."

man's handsome Caucasian boyfriend, Robert (Eric Newton).

But their relationships are just cover-ups for the love the two protagonists still have for each other, and as Ming's affair starts to crumble, Oscar's health begins to worsen.

Unfortunately, the writing in the second part of the piece also falls apart. The rhythmic dialogue is almost missing, replaced with repetitious poems that seem vacant and monologues that are full of clichés and melodrama.

The chemistry in the new loves is also lost, perhaps due to the new partners' lesser time on stage. In fact, I kept hoping for the two original lovers to reunite, which they do in an all-too-brief scene.

Despite these flaws, Yew does take a daring chance and produces a satisfying original work — a study of different sides of a love that is both universally true to the heart and definitely in a language of its own.

Showtimes are at 8 p.m. Thursday through Saturday and at 2 and 7 p.m. Sunday. Tickets are \$16-\$21. For ticket reservations or additional information, call (415) 751-2600.

The Asian American Theater Company is located at 403 Arguello Blvd. at Clement Street in San Francisco's Richmond District.

Tuesday, Jan. 30, 1996

■ A story of two Asian-American men living in Boston, *A Language of Their Own*, involves lovers Oscar and Ming. The couple grapples with HIV, communication, and "the rise and fall of love." Studio Theatre's production has been extended until Nov. 19. Tickets are \$14, and performances are Friday through Sunday at 8:30 p.m. Studio Theatre is at 1333 P St., NW. For performance dates and tickets, call (202) 332-3300.

The Point

A unique voice

Playwright Chay Yew's *'Language'* gracefully treads a well-worn path

by Wayne Scott

A Language of Their Own, the third part of playwright Chay Yew's trilogy currently at the Studio Theater, tells the story of two men who develop a unique set of common words and gestures to navigate their intimate relationship.

The 29-year-old Singaporean playwright expands traditional notions of languages like Chinese and English. He explores ways to communicate that either unite or create barriers between people: polite discourse, body gestures, emotional talk, and even silence. Are our relationships shaped by these constructions — these "boxes, labels, categories" as Ming shouts at Oscar? Or do we rise above them, transcend them through relationships that create new, common languages?

Ming and Oscar are already speaking different languages when they meet. Oscar (Stan Kang) is native-born Chinese, connected to old world traditions and habits of behavior. He hides his emotions and shies

away from physical displays of affection.

Ming (Richard Dorton) is American-born and suffers all the epithets of a multicultural society. Provocative and adolescent, Ming shouts and throttles, cruises bars and uses American slang. He storms at his lover's cool intellect, "Sometimes I think I'm fucking Mr. Spock!"

But in spite of their differences, each of the lovers sees something that he wants in the other. Ming longs for a connection to his homeland. Oscar wants to rebel and break out of culturally prescribed roles.

When Oscar discovers that he is HIV-positive, the couple confronts another language barrier: separate discourses built on assumptions about time, mortality, and the threat of illness. Oscar decides to spare his lover the pain of watching him suffer. He proposes to end the relationship, but hopes Ming will refuse his offer. They resolve to "be friends" and forget the intimate vernacular they shared. Bewildered, Ming embarks on a string

of anonymous affairs, but cannot escape echoes of the past, those sounds that are "native" to him.

A Language of Their Own treads down a well-worn path, and audiences will find resonances to plays like *Jeffrey* and *As Is*. But Chay Yew builds his story on the metaphor of language, and that metaphor deepens the familiar types and clichés of an urban Gay relationship. Yew creates an impressionistic word collage, interweaving past and present, seamlessly juxtaposing the characters' unspoken thoughts with their openly shared sentiments. His rich, multilayered characters invite our empathy.

Director José Carrasquillo deserves praise for his creative staging of this production. The actors move briskly and the audience forgets how small the performance space really is. As Ming, Richard Dorton has an acrobatic command of Studio's intimate attic stage, and his rage and fear are bright and genuine. Stan Kang as Oscar fares less



Stan Kang and Richard Dorton in *A Language of Their Own*

successfully. As illness overtakes his character, his performance moves too quickly from Old World restraint to an unbridled hysteria, and he loses the audience on his emotional

roller-coaster ride ▼

A Language of Their Own is playing at the Studio Theater on Fridays, Saturdays, and Sundays through Oct. 29.

REVIEWS

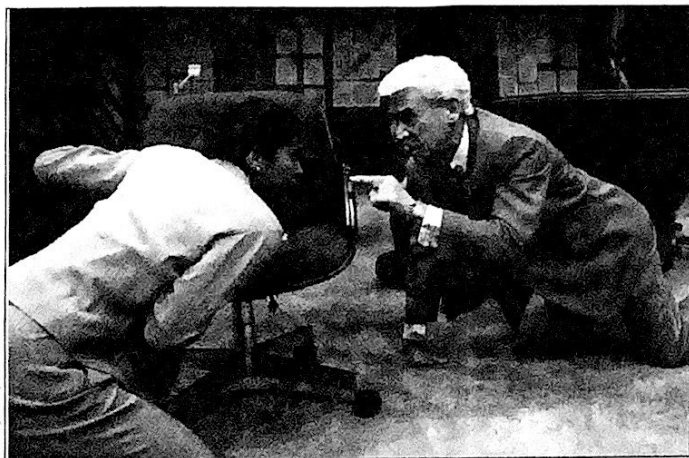


Photo by Henry D'Elia

On the defensive: Susan Patterson and Ron Boussom in "BAFO."

Lyceum Theatre Horton Plaza, San Diego Jan. 31-Feb. 23 (619) 544-1000

A LANGUAGE OF THEIR OWN at the Group Theatre

Reviewed by David-Edward Hughes

The language referred to in the title of Chay Yew's fascinating play *A Language of Their Own* is the language, the private shorthand, which lovers develop in a relationship—and which, once that love is broken or violated, becomes a lost language all too quickly.

Yew has written a play in which stungingly raw emotions and almost Neil Simon-esque one-liners coexist surprisingly well. It is primarily the story of two Chinese-American lovers, Ming and Oscar, whose idyllic four-year relationship is shattered when Oscar finds out he is HIV-positive. Oscar breaks off the relationship and becomes involved with a "radical queer Asian who lives and breathes Sondheim," and Ming moves from Boston to L.A. with a benign Caucasian lover whom he abuses physically and mentally. Neither man is complete without the other, yet reconciliation is impossible except on a spiritual plane.

The Group's new artistic director, Jose Carrasquillo, makes his much-anticipated Seattle directing debut with this production, and it is a fortuitous one. Carrasquillo creates vivid stage images and brings a heightened, choreographic feeling to his staging. In the principal roles, Scott Koh is memorable as the fallible, self-consciously American Ming, who dotes on *Scrimshand* and admits he picked up proper English, fashion sense, and gay sensibility from the movie *My Fair Lady*. Ken Chin as the more formal, old-country Chinese Oscar brings palpable force to his character's dramatic outbursts, together the actors forge a humorous and painfully believable onstage relationship.

Ivan Dihn brings welcome levity and sure comic timing to the role of Oscar's new boyfriend Daniel, while Michael Sharon lends quiet dignity to the awkwardly developed character of Robert. Thad Grossi offers skilled cello accompaniment to the proceedings, though the choice of music might have included some occasional upbeat respite from the brooding and mournful.

The sparse, Chinese temple-influenced setting by Laurel A. Dalhill is beautifully set off by Rex Carleton's limpid lighting plot, and Kathleen Makis' costumes suitably delineated the characters.

"A Language of Their Own" presented by and at the Group Theatre, Seattle Center, Center House, First Level, Seattle, Feb. 5-Mar. 2 (206) 341-1299

BAFO at South Coast Repertory

Reviewed by Kristina Mannion



Decidedly ungentle and chock full of politically incorrect characters and statements, Tom Strellich's new black comedy *BAFO* (for "best and final offer") humorously lays bare a smorgasbord of some of the weighty issues that pervade contemporary American society. Racism, sexism, rampant company downsizing, and violent crime—all are varnished with a liberal coat of biting wit and sarcasm in this tightly written satire about a group of defense company workers who, while puzzling over recent layoffs and their own imminent unemployment, are suddenly confronted by a heavily armed and disgruntled former colleague.

Managing to avoid taking a decisive stance on any one of the issues raised, *BAFO* boldly sets them before us, allowing us to draw our own conclusions, it is perhaps more affecting than any degree of carefully planned subtlety could be. Fueled by this frank treatment, a wonderfully indecate script, and a custom-fit cast, this world premiere production is a refreshing departure from typical social commentary fare.

Commissioned specifically for SCRS family of founding artists, *BAFO* is comfortably at home in the hands of Ron Boussom, Richard Doyle, Art Koustik, Hal Landon Jr., and Don Cook. Given free rein under the skilled direction of Martin Benson, these SCR veterans all display an abundance of comedic acumen with apt characterizations and rapid-fire repartee.

Making the most noteworthy impressions are Ron Boussom and...

A DIVA LIKE ME: REN WOODS IN CONCERT at the Lyceum Theatre



Reviewed by Michael A. Schwartz

Ren Woods is not a household name on the order of Tina Turner, but after seeing her in the world premiere musical, *A Diva Like Me*, it seems that such popularity should not be far off. Half concert, half storytelling session, it's all a showcase for the apparently limitless talents of Woods.

Entering and exiting the first act in an explosion of strobe lights amid her excellent four-piece band, Woods takes control of the stage and never lets go. While such an entrance might be ridiculous and arrogant in another entertainer's hands, Woods matches its explosive power.

The songs scurry from one genre to another—rock 'n' roll to hip-hop to soulful ballad. All are composed by Lisa Harlow Stark, and have tangential relations to the stories that Woods tells between the musical numbers. We hear about the abuse she received as a child star, her refusal to drop her top on the set of *Roots*, and her experiences as Dorothy on the national tour of *The Wiz*. Woods makes each song sound like a hit, constantly exuding energy, charisma, and, most importantly, feeling.

Backup singers Angelic Nicol Willis and Dominique Ashanti-Dubois fabulously attack Javier Velasco's nostalgic choreography; they are joined by rapper Aqeel Rasheed, who also sings a duet, "Soldier of Misfortune," about a friend of Woods' who died just before she left for a singing tour of the French Riviera.

The concluding yarn, about a taxi journey on a rainy New York day, perfectly

Back Stage with



MICHAEL K. MAAG

"A Language of Their Own" at The Group Theatre features Michael Sharon, left, and Scott Koh.

'Language' mulls modern romance

Theater review

"A LANGUAGE OF THEIR OWN" by Chay Yew. Directed by Jose Carrasquillo. Wednesday-Sunday at Group Theatre, Seattle Center. Through March 2. 441-1299.

BY MISHA BERSON
Seattle Times theater critic

Two young people in Boston meet at a party, feel an instant attraction to one another, date, move in together and, after four years of unwedded togetherness, break up.

There are a million stories like this in the naked city, and more than a few plays and films depicting them.

In his recent Off-Broadway drama, "A Language of Their Own," Chay Yew considers this familiar roundelay in present tense. The lovers he follows are two gay men of Chinese ancestry, Oscar and Ming. Oscar has AIDS; Ming doesn't.

Do they un-couple because of the ominous specter of Oscar's illness? Or would they have lasted even if both stayed healthy? And when each man moves on to a new partner, what can be done differently to make this next relationship a better one?

Contrapuntal and choral-like in structure, "A Language of Their Own" comes through in the Group Theatre's production as a tough-minded yet softhearted, chamber-

quartet bulletin from the contemporary romantic front.

What's most intriguing about Yew's script, in director Jose Carrasquillo's spare but fine-tuned staging, is that it can't be easily classified as an AIDS play, or a gay play, a comedy or a drama. The push-pull, come closer-go away, oil-and-water dynamics between the diffident, almost prissy Oscar (Ken Chin) and the effusive but unreliable Ming (Scott Koh) could easily apply to lovers of different ethnicities and genders.

And the cultural signposts Yew alludes to along the way — in scattered wisecrack references to a certain Scandinavian discount-furniture emporium, various TV sitcoms and particular pop megastars — are crossover phenoms exclusive to no one group.

The first and more impressive half of "Language of Their Own" relies less on such name-dropping than on a candid, two-way commentary about the challenges of getting intimate. Speaking mostly to us,

sometimes to one another, Ming and Oscar relive key moments in their life together — starting with the breakup, and shifting fluidly backward and forward from there.

In the second act, with the entry of Ming's rebound lover, Robert (Michael Sharon), and the ailing Oscar's new squeeze, Daniel (Ivan Dinh), the play's ongoing dissection of romantic comings and goings, frictions and attractions starts imploding. Yes, lovers do live in a world, and speak a language, of their own. But unhooked for too long from the larger world, their interactions start resembling a tedious soap-opera plot.

While the dimensions of story, and its conclusion, are too predictable, Yew's fluid, witty dialogue and behavioral insights are evidence of an emerging talent. Carrasquillo's production, on a striking Laurel A. Dahill set carefully lit by Rex Carleton, puts the emphasis on the words and the performers, among whom Koh and Chin are particularly strong.

m w

October
12, 1995

METRO ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT WEEKLY

OUT ON THE TOWN

Week of October 12-18

A Language of their Own, now

at the Studio Secondstage, is a perfect example of how intimate seating and powerful ensemble acting can result in emotional fireworks. The stage is a simple, rectangular room encircled by two rows of folding chairs; save a pair triangular platforms, there isn't much of a set. So the actors are literally in your face (and sometimes sprawled out on the floor by your feet). Crafted by 29-year-old Asian-American playwright Chay Yew, the play follows the ups and downs of a pair of Asian lovers – the American-born Ming (Richard Dorton) and the Chinese-born Oscar (Stan Kang). When Oscar learns he's HIV positive, he ends his relationship with Ming. Both hearts are broken, and they go their separate ways to explore new loves. Oscar finds himself involved with Daniel, a wildly queer Filipino, deftly played with over-the-top hilarity and heartfelt sincerity by Edu. Bernardino, while Ming quickly falls for with Robert (David Fendig), a handsome, level-headed Caucasian who doesn't stand a chance with the volatile Ming. The two new relationships are played opposite sides of the room, but their magnetic passion continually pulls Oscar and Ming together. Dorton delivers a stellar, passion-filled performance, and Kang is lovable as the uptight and emotionally conflicted Oscar. Together they create one of the most realistic and beautiful visions of gay love I have ever seen portrayed in theater. Director Jose Carrasquillo uses the limited space brilliantly as he merges dialogue, monologue, poetry, and stream of consciousness into a seamless evening of theatrical wonder. To October 29. Call (202) 332-3300. — ED COWEN

Studio SecondStage presents

A Language of Their Own, a delicate portrayal of the rise and fall of a gay Asian-American couple, by gay playwright Chay Yew. Starring Stan Kang, Richard Dorton, and David Fendig. Directed by Jose Carrasquillo. To October 29. Call (202) 332-3300.

