

the village VOICE

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Theater

Having Their Say

By Gerard Raymond

Something unusual is going on at the Public Theater. Take a look at the actors in the rehearsal room—three out of the four faces are Asian. At one end of the room the playwright and the director sit watching—they're Asian too. Now consider what the play is about: romance, heartbreak, sensuality, and love between Asian and Asian American gay men. We're not at a theater devoted specifically to Asian work, and this ain't that infamous megamusical, either. Did I mention that Tony award-winner B. D. Wong and Obie-winner David Drake are part of the cast? No wonder *A Language of Their Own* by Chay Yew, opening April 20, is creating quite a buzz around

town—its run was extended even before the first preview.

The rehearsal over, the actors join Yew and director Keng-Sen Ong for an informal interview. There's something else unusual about this production: Wong and the other two Asian American members of the cast—Alec Mapa and Francis Jue—have all played the plum role of Son LiLing, the cross-dressing Chinese spy in David Henry Hwang's *M. Butterfly* on Broadway. But when you think about it, it seems only logical that the "three Butterflies" should be in this new play.

"It's not like an Asian truck pulls up and all these plays fall out," says Mapa, decrying the dearth of roles for Asian American actors. There has been a pretty

dry spell during those seven years since *Butterfly*. And now comes *A Language of Their Own*, which offers these actors roles they only dream about. "On other projects, we are invariably the only Asian person," Mapa continues. "This is so incredibly rare," agrees Wong. "We don't ever get to do something like this with one another."

Through a series of theatrically heightened scenes, some in which the actors directly address the audience, *Language* depicts three interlocking gay relationships. An HIV-positive man breaks off with his lover and they both find new boyfriends; one of these relationships is interracial. "What is so refreshing about the play is that gay Asian men do not come across

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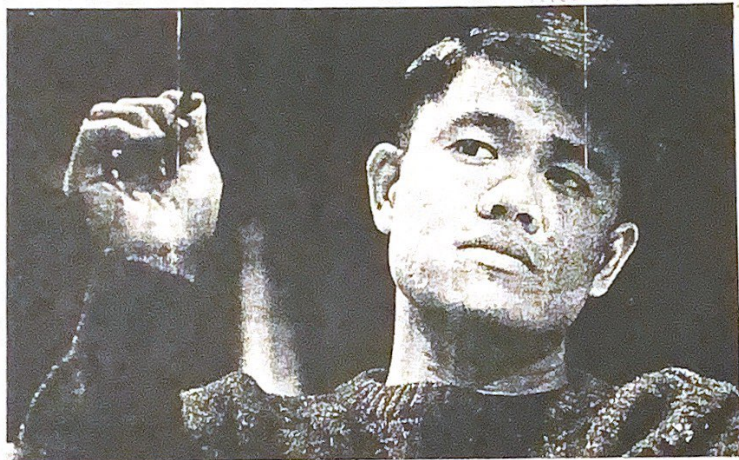
as some homogenous front," remarks Jue. "You see that they are people struggling with themselves and among one another, just like any other group."

The camaraderie amongst the actors is immediately noticeable. They trip over one another's sentences, make jokes at one another's expense, and share a lot of laughs together. Mapa starts to explain the bond between them and is interrupted by Jue singing. "In any play, you first establish trust, getting to know each other..."

Getting to know all about you... The others take turns singing a phrase each from the Rodgers and Hammerstein song.

Communication and shared language are the key topics of *A Language of Their Own*. Appropriately enough, the playwright and the director also have a common history. Both Yew and Ong were born in Singapore and even attended the same school. "But I am younger by two years!" Yew insists. Ong runs Theater Works Singapore, the company that commissioned Yew's first stage work, an AIDS play titled *As If He Hears* that was banned by the country's censor board on account of its sympathetic portrayal of homosexuality. Eventually the ban was lifted and Ong directed the play, but by then Yew had moved to America.

Ong is attempting to describe his task as the director, but he has to contend with a steady commentary from Yew. "I have to make it as seamless as possible because it is a play about words and emotions." Yew jumps in. "Just remember that, the words!" Ong ig-



MICHAEL DANIEL

Chay Yew, author of *A Language of Their Own*: being Asian and being gay

nores him and continues. "I think as a director you have to know when to step back and when to have a strong presence." Then, with eyebrow raised, he gives Yew a look. "And some plays can take it and others can't!"

The actors are used to the Yew and Ong show, a campy sister act that has them in stitches. Wong jokes that the pair will soon be playing in a nontraditional version of *Having Our Say*, the Broadway hit based on the Delany sisters.

"Our childhood together was very good because we were in a progressive school," Ong continues. "It allowed us to be ourselves and that is something we both carry with us. I like to think that this play is a product of that progressiveness as well—these Asian men being in love with each other. The

play is about our roots and at the same time about our new identities. It is about being Asian and being gay, and, in a sense, not belonging to either world."

Back to the actors. No one is timid about expressing opinions, and a playwright and director are not going to steal the spotlight for too long. "This is some of the meatiest stuff I have done, ever," says Wong emphatically. I ask the three Asian American actors if they usually feel marginalized in other productions. "I never know whether it is my paranoia or not," Wong replies. Mapa, who is currently based in Los Angeles and actively pursues television work, describes the obstacles even prior to an audition. "Often they won't see an Asian person for a sitcom role because they don't think of

Asian people as funny. Or they don't want you for a romantic lead because they don't see Asian men as sexy. Sometimes I wonder how much further along I would be in my career if I was white."

Wong continues to muse on the degree to which racism might have affected his career. He has played Ariel in *The Tempest* in New York and both he and Jue have played Peter Pan at regional theaters. "Were we cast because we were just right for the roles, or was there something extra that they got from the fact that we were exotics?" Naturally the question doesn't apply to *Language*. Here the Asian and Asian American men are funny, sexy, and loving—and they're heartless, selfish, and violent as well.

But is David Drake's character

the novelty item in this play? "Yeah, come and see this play, there's a white guy in it!" Mapa chimes in, grinning. The author intervenes. "It is only natural, isn't it? We are talking about relationships between men and we date all types of people. I have known a lot of people who are in interracial relationships, which are very different from those between Asian men, and it would be strange not to talk about it. There is another language going on, and I wanted to explore that."

"I hope there is cultural awareness but not cultural baggage," says Ong. "Or at least not too much baggage that we can't move forward." He acknowledges that when he first met Drake, the character's being Caucasian was uppermost in his mind, but that his ethnicity became incidental once they started rehearsals. "We did talk a bit about rice queens and the Asian-white gay issue at the beginning," says Drake. "There are secrets inside the relationship, but race is not the source of the tension between these men. I find it is a beautiful play about relationships and about the difficulty of letting go."

"Yes, this isn't *Guess Who's Coming to Sushi*," quips Mapa. "I love issue plays, I wrote one!" says Drake shamelessly, flashing his most charming smile. "What is it called again?" asks Yew with mock ingenuousness. Everyone cracks up, but Yew gets the last word. "I never wanted to write an issue play," he says. "There are many issues that are hidden in this play, and audiences who want to receive them or analyze them may do so. But I was just interested in charting these four lives. They are all looking for one thing—love." ■