

Volume 10 Number 33 March 22-28, 1996

Los Angeles

VIEW

PREVIEW

Featuring Complete
Film and Music Listings
and Our Critics' Picks

Bite The Ballot

Initiatives Guide,
Plus the DA's Race

Shooting Stars

Our Fearless Oscar
Predictions

That's The Spirit

Independent Features
Project West Makes
Its Mark

Goodnight, George

Charles Marowitz
Remembers the
Ultimate Straight Man

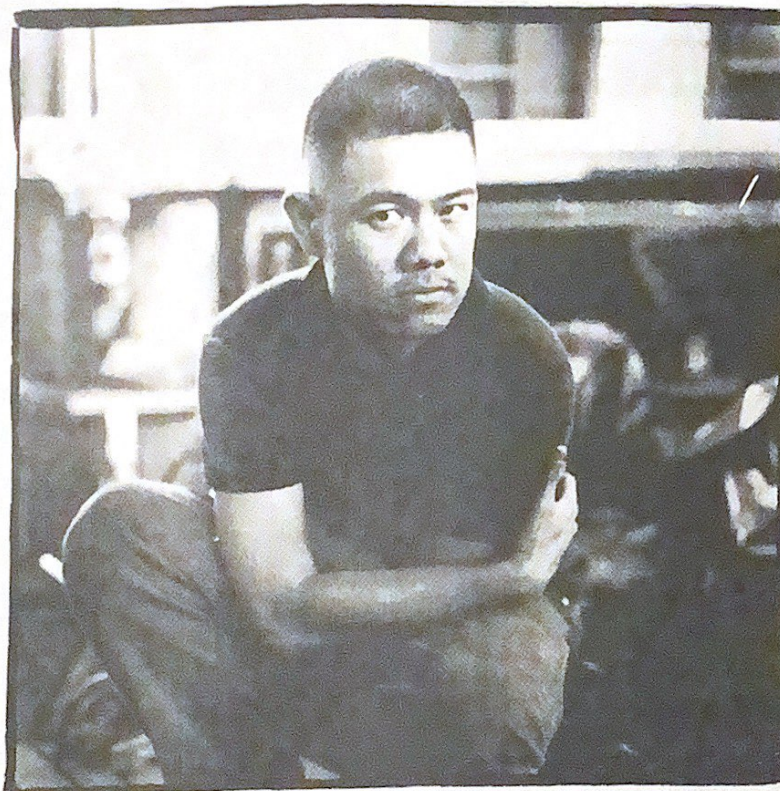


A Language Of His Own

Playwright Chay Yew
Searches for the
American Dream

By DEBORAH KLUGMAN

Howard Rubin/VEA



Perhaps it was the dismal prospect of performing in *The King and I* for the rest of his life that launched playwright Chay Yew on his singular path. Yew was a drama major at Pepperdine and auditioning like crazy when he realized that the Hollywood dream to which he aspired just might not be his for the taking.

He'd arrived here from Singapore brimming with confidence, hoping for a career on the stage and in film. For Yew, Southern California was a foreign place, but American culture was an old friend. As a kid, he'd watched plenty of television.

But things didn't turn out as he expected. His readings at university auditions never landed him any roles. "Chay," a friend said to him one day, "the play you're reading for is English. The family is an English family, and they live in the Midlands. Somehow you just don't look the part."

Suddenly, Chay realized the obvious: he would need to leave Pepperdine; to make his mark, he would need to forge his own way.

That was eleven years ago, and much has transpired since then. The young drama student who couldn't land a part has emerged as a compelling playwright. *Whitelands*, a trilogy of his plays, opened March 14 at East West Players in Silverlake.

Rehearsals are still in progress as Yew lounges across an old upholstered chair in an office at the theater. It's a rainy afternoon, and Yew is discussing everything from his beginnings as an artist to new directions in

Asian-American theater. Yew loves to talk about his work; it's part of the passion with which he pursues his craft.

"I always think, when I'm writing, can I reach the audience, can I not reach them? What makes them tick? What makes them move?"

A Majority Of One

Caught Between Two Worlds, Asian-American Playwright Chay Yew Endeavors to Find Universal Themes in His Uncommon Experience

By Deborah Klugman

Yew keeps busy days, shuttling back and forth between East West and the Mark Taper Forum, where he serves as a resident artist and director of the Asian-American workshop. Various labels—gay, Asian, and Asian-American, Yew's work—which has been acclaimed from Singapore to London—defies easy categorization. A singular voice, he writes searching dramas which eclipse the very political themes upon which his works touch. Appealing to non-Asians as well as Asians, women as well as men, straights as well as gays, Yew's plays deal with universal themes: love, loss, and the need to belong.

Yew first captured the attention of Los Angeles audiences with his play *Porcelain*, which ran for four months at the Burbage Theatre in 1993. Prob-

ing and provocative, *Porcelain* tells the story of John Lee, a nineteen-year-old gay Asian man who murders his white lover in a public toilet. Commencing with the dirty deed—Lee is found cradling his dead lover in his arms—the play then recounts their relationship and explores the need that drove its protagonist to commit this desperate act. Premiering at the Etcetera Theatre in London, and then moving to the Royal Court, *Porcelain* won the 1993 London Fringe Award for Best Play (the British equivalent of the Obie) and has since been hailed not only in Los Angeles, but also in San Francisco, Chicago, and Dallas.

continued on next page

Yew

continued from previous page

Yew family was part of the Chinese ethnic majority in straight-laced and politically repressive Singapore. His interest in the arts blossomed early and was inspired, oddly enough, by exposure to modern American culture via television.

"Growing up, like any kid in America, I had the TV, the babysitter. I sat and watched *Rhoda*, *Mary Tyler Moore*, even *Sesame Street*. And I started to get emotionally involved in some of the things they were saying—about love, happiness—I found myself being Americanized in a very strange way and attracted to the idea that storytelling can be so fascinating, so vivid, so interesting. So I think it was quite natural that I went into TV, film, and theater."

Yew began to participate in school plays, much to the consternation of his conservative, business-minded father, who envisioned a more respectable career for his son. But Yew, who knew what he wanted, persevered. "At first, I saw myself as an actor," he recalls with a laugh. "Most people do. You don't want to be the person *behind* the set. You want to be *the* star. But when you're one of the few people in the school doing it, you also direct, do the sets, do everything. It's *Yentl*. It's Barbra Streisand 101. It's a great way to hone your tools."

Not until much later, when he was serving a required stint in the Singaporean military, did Yew happen upon an opportunity to write for the theater. "I was bored," he recalls. "The military is really nothing. I had a nine-to-five job. After that what are you going to do?" Yew says he often read in his spare time and did some acting with a local theater company called TheatreWorks.

When the time came for the company to launch a new season, Yew inquired as to its program. He was told they were planning a new play, one not yet written, that would deal with AIDS and its explosion in Southeast Asia. No one had yet been commissioned to write the new project; Yew volunteered.

The result was Yew's first play, *As If He Hears*, about a gay social worker and his efforts to provide support to a straight heterosexual man who has AIDS. The inclusion of a sympathetic gay character both frightened and embarrassed the Singaporean censors. It disturbed them that the sick man resembled "the typical model Singaporean." Immediately, the play was banned. "The government was just frightened that it might be possible that a gay man or woman could be viewed positively," says Yew. "At the time I didn't want to fight this. Sometimes it's just no-win."

Yew put the incident behind him and left Singapore for graduate work at Boston University. (He had returned to his homeland after leaving Pepperdine.) But he soon got a call from TheatreWorks urging him to rewrite the play. Indifferent at first, the fledgling playwright nonetheless felt a sense of responsibility, toward both the company and his play's subject matter. "They had a point: AIDS in Asia was about to explode."

Yew felt that the censors would likely check the play for any gay lingo, he also knew that they were unlikely to be clever enough to read between the lines. Thus he rewrote his play to omit all homosexual allusions. Instead, he incorporated innuendoes into the stage directions in a way that made the sexual predilection of his gay character absolutely clear. The man spoke with a lisp. He quoted from movies. He glided across the stage.

Yew's ruse was successful; the play was approved for production, and despite its sanitized dialogue, the audience got the point. "When he glided in, the audience laughed. Without one word they knew who he was. But he was still a positive role model."



"I think words are wonderful, but I don't use them to say what the characters want to say. In fact, I want to say what's not said."

As If He Hears enjoyed a long run, and its success proved one of the most gratifying events in Yew's career. "Many people who saw the play decided to support the Singapore AIDS Task Force," Yew recalls with satisfaction. "And a lot of people were more aware of gay characters. For the first time they felt like they could identify with a gay character instead of using him or her just as an object of ridicule."

Yew says the experience taught him to respect the unsaid. "I think words are wonderful, but I don't use them to say what the characters want to say. In fact, I want to say what's not said. In *Porcelain*, and even more in *A Language of Their Own* [Yew's next play], what is *not said* is ultimately the play."

Yew first conceived of *Porcelain* while reading a college-newspaper article about anonymous sex in public lavatories. "Basically, they were arresting these people in Boston—not only Boston University where I was, but Harvard, MIT. And I said to myself, what happens if the person who was going there went there for the wrong reasons—the need to be loved, the need to be wanted by people. What happens if something went wrong?"

Sparked by this question, Yew developed his project into a prospective television movie that served as his master's thesis. All of his characters were white originally. At the suggestion of an astute and supportive professor, Yew decided that it might be more interesting if his central character were Asian. But *Porcelain* was never realized as a TV movie, since there were no Asian students who could act the part, or wanted to.

Yew shelved the project, but not for long. An offer to be a writer-in-residence at the Mu-Lam Theatre took him to London, where he redesigned *Porcelain* as a stage play. With Yew's old school chum Glen Goei directing, the play became a knockout success, the spartan simplicity of its five-chair set a striking contrast to its gritty tangle of themes: racism, homophobia, homicidal passion. The play stirred audiences to compassion for the murderer, John Lee. Indeed, beneath its shocking surface lay a more plaintive theme: the notion, says Yew, "of wanting to fit in and of what one would do, what price one would pay, to be accepted, to be loved by the majority."

The theme of acceptance is also explored, albeit in a different way, in Yew's second play, *A Language of Their Own*.

Like *Porcelain*, *Language* begins with a question. "I decided to explore how gay men act towards each other in this thing called love," explains Yew. "Because they are men, they just can't seem to be with one another in an emotionally honest way. Why?"

Yew stumbled upon the starting point for this play one evening when he eavesdropped on a conversation in a restaurant. "This man and woman were sitting there and this man said to this girl, 'Hey, I don't think we should see each other any more.' And it was a shock. How could this man, this asshole, say this to this woman in a public place? What happened was that this woman was calm, but you knew that inside she was breaking apart. And I thought, Wow, what happens if someone says that at the top of the play and then [we

go on to see what the relationship was all built on?"

Using "I don't think we should see each other any more" as a refrain, Yew composed *A Language of Their Own*, a play which examines three gay male couples and the psychological ties that bind. The play begins when Oscar, an assimilated Asian man who is HIV positive, breaks up with Ming, his younger Asian American lover. Yew became exhilarated as he looked at these emotions. "I kept exploring the character of Oscar. He tends to be someone who is kind of a victim at the beginning of the play but turns out to be kind of a questionable character in the end. And he uses the lessons from his last relationship to get someone, but only because he's lonely. In the end he never says, 'I love you.'"

As acclaimed as *Porcelain* before it was, *A Language of Their Own* received the 1995 George and Elisabeth Marton Playwriting Award and was recognized as GLAAD's Best Play of the year. "I feel a certain achievement in *Language*," Yew says. "It's not a lofty play. I'm not telling the world some social issue. But I feel it's ultimately an essay of the heart—what people do to get one another and what they do to lose one another."

Indeed, despite its focus on relationships between gay males, *Language* has had broad appeal among women, who have often proved more receptive to the work. "I've always been astounded that most of my big breaks have been given to me by women," Yew says. "It took a woman at the Public Theater to champion *Language* and to get it made. She just understood it, and she made sure everyone else did." On the other hand, Yew admits that most men don't really appreciate *Language*. "Even the literary manager here, who is a man, said, 'This is not as interesting as your other play.'"

That doesn't surprise Yew. "*Porcelain* is more masculine," he observes. "I saw why people were intrigued by that—it was just pop, pop, pop, pop, pop. But I felt tired of that. I wanted to do something different. I hope eventually, at the end of my career, that I will have tried things that have failed and things that have worked, but that, in any case, I will have tried something new all the time."

Yew sees his experience at Pepperdine University as crucial to his artistic perspective. "I thought once I'd left Singapore and all that oppression, I'd have freedom on the wonderful sunny beaches of California. Wrong! At Pepperdine they were oppressive in some very interesting ways."

Those college days not only buoyed Yew's fighting spirit, it introduced him to a minority awareness that proved significant not so much in his life as in his work. "Personally, I've never felt like a minority," he says. "When I was growing up, I was in the majority. I was the one who was gay. And I've never backed down from that position."

Despite his personal feelings on this

issue, Yew's work came to mirror a sense of displacement and a corresponding search for belonging. Central to *Porcelain*, for example, is the tale of a crow who longs to be a sparrow. Yew based it on an Ethiopian fable he encountered when he was in college. In Yew's version, the crow decides to fly to the tree of the sparrows, who, too genteel to point out his lack of grace, accept him. Eventually, however, the crow becomes homesick. But when he returns to the crows, he discovers that he no longer belongs in his old home either. He leaves, forced to seek out his own tree and spend the rest of his life in solitude.

Yew says the fable hit home when he went back to Singapore for a visit. In America, he felt, "he could never really belong." But in Singapore, too, there were problems: his friends had either changed or were unwilling to listen to the American ideas he brought back with him. "I came back with all these Americanisms—about democracy, about fighting for women's rights and gay rights. And meanwhile these people just don't want to deal with it because every time they deal with it the government is going to be breathing down their necks. And then I realized, God, this place called home is no longer home. Where do I belong now? Have I no choice but to find a tree?"

With its eloquent, universal metaphor, the crow's story applies anywhere. "It's about anyone," says Yew. "We just want to belong. The girl who couldn't make it to cheerleading squad. The guy who couldn't be one of the boys." Yew points out that the fable might even serve as a symbol for such common experiences as working in an office and starting to feel out of place because there's someone younger or more aggressive threatening one's job.

Of the three plays in *Whitelands*, *Half Lives* relates most specifically to the immigrant experience. Yew terms it "an essay on America," saying, "It's one of my more domestic plays. It's basically about an Asian-American family. The husband is Asian-American, an architect, and he builds this shopping mall called *Whitelands*. All the characters are in pursuit of the American dream, dreams that were meant for movie stars."

Altogether, Yew says, the three plays that make up *Whitelands* "are a search of this place called America, or this whiteland, where we need to find a home."

Yew's plays almost always start with a "what if" question relating to human behavior. After that, he does research, usually talking to people about their lives. In preparing *A Language of Their Own*, for example, Yew researched physical abuse between people of the same gender, gleaning first-hand accounts from friends and acquaintances. For *Half Lives*, he spoke with Asian women, whose prob-

continued on next page

Yew

continued from previous page

lems presented him with a new dramatic arena. "Women have different baggage," he says. "Being a mother is different. Being a wife is different. I just don't know how hard a woman can be and how ambitious and at what cost."

Spurred by a driving curiosity about human behavior, Yew sometimes questions the ethical appropriateness of his research. "Most people—a homeless person or someone who's been abused, for example—love those lives. And then I come along and say, 'Hey, you know what? I'm gonna just touch your life, come into it for a few moments.' And then what I've got is this great mind trip, and then I write this play, hopefully as honestly and truthfully as possible. It's cowardly in a way, but I guess most playwrights do it."

Growing up in repressive Singapore has made Yew steer clear of politics and of identifying himself as a political person. "To be political in Singapore, you have to suffer quite a bit. They can lock you up in jail. When people call me political, I immediately freak out. It's a Pavlov-dog situation. It's conditioning."

That doesn't mean that educating and enlightening the audience isn't of prime importance to Yew—only that his approach is softer and more subtle than, say, Tony Kushner's. "Tony is political and his speeches are political, and I appreciate them. But meanwhile, my background has been from human connections. What can the human connection tell you about the bigger picture? I try not to be literal and obvious, and I think in that way I can be political yet not be."

As a minority artist, Yew welcomes the challenge of reaching out to the population at large. "Minority artists should not only speak to their own minorities. We know the issues. It's those Pat Buchanans who need to hear, those Jesse Helmses. How can you change them in two goddamn hours—not change them but question them, make them walk away with questions, thinking about something?" Minority or otherwise, few productions in Los Angeles present the kind of challenging drama that Yew would like to see more of. "Sometimes I feel there's no interesting work," he says. "There are just hiccups. It's these hiccups that are really exciting." As for the rest of what local theater offers, Yew finds it passionless, boring, or safe. "How many times can we see another Pinter

play? How many times can we see another Shepard? Why not at least do something really interesting? Do a Shepard play with trapezes—I would want to see that. L.A. is so very much a knockoff town, and what you have at the end of the day is lots of bad theater. There are some plays which are like a TV show. Now why would I pay \$10 or \$20 to see a TV show?"

Similar concerns color Yew's perspective on contemporary Asian-American theater. "I think they are so blind to just do one story over and over again," he says, speaking of a general propensity of Asian American companies to stage plays about the Japanese internment. He thinks that if they're to be done at all, such works demand revitalization. Meanwhile, there are a host of other stories to be told. "There are tons of Asian minorities in L.A.," Yew declares, rattling off half a dozen questions that might serve as a starting point for a play. "How are Cambodians settling in here from a country which is torn by strife and war? How are neighborhoods which have Hmong and Vietnamese populations dealing with them? When dogs are missing in the neighborhood, and they always say it's the Vietnamese, is it true? What are their stories?"

As for Yew's own projects, in the immediate offing is one starring a Filipino dancer from the Paul Taylor Company. "I probably will do a text-based dance with him, using words and the repetition of words and rhythms. And you will see how a man lives a day in a life in New York City. I've also got some commissions that I'm trying to work on for the Public Theater."

In the long run, Yew hopes to move away from specifically gay and Asian themes. Not that he minds identification as an Asian or gay playwright—only that he does sometimes find it "annoying." "Artists just don't want to be pigeonholed," he says. "What we want is to be given a blank canvas."

Whatever the canvas or the tale, Yew is likely to pursue future works with the same fervent curiosity which he's applied in the past. And his twin aspirations remains the same: uncovering human truths and relaying them to as many people as he can. "In New York, my friend brought her mother to see *Language*. She was 80 and black and straight. And she was laughing and crying. And I said, 'Yeah, that's where it's at: the one from whom you're most removed shares the same space with you for two hours.' You've done something right. You've spoken to them. You've become part of them, and they've become part of you. That's the highest joy I have in theater." ■