



A THINKING (AND FEELING) REED

Playwright Chay Yew Is Tired of Gay Plays About Rich White Men Who Take Their Clothes Off

by Chad Jones

Anyone who remembers Theatre Rhino's production of gay playwright Chay Yew's *Porcelain* several years ago will recall a stark, beautifully poetic, emotionally gripping drama that explored issues of sexuality and race with candor and lean efficiency. Well, the 30-year-old Yew has been busy in the intervening years and has come back to San Francisco for a spell to work on the Asian American Theater Company production of his latest play, *A Language of Their Own*, which opened last week for a month-long run.

Yew brought *Porcelain* to San Francisco from the Royal Court Theatre in London in 1993, where it won the London Fringe Award for Best Play. This establishing Yew as one of the preeminent gay playwrights of his generation. Living up to his reputation, Yew's next work was born of two one-act plays, *Learning Chinese* and *Broken English*. The plays were workshopped in Los Angeles at the Mark Taper Forum's Asian American Friends Reading Series in 1993. The one-acts were combined, and the full-length work that became *A Language of Their Own* premiered at the New York Shakespeare Festival/Public Theater last spring, where

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Chay Yew

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the run was sold out and forced to extend while the play was still in rehearsal.

Sitting in Cafe Flore on a rainy December day, Yew explains the genesis of *Language*. He says that the play was, first of all, a response to his mother's wish that he would follow the dark, bloody *Porcelain* with something brighter, like a love story. "My take on love is through the eyes of my friends and through my slight experiences with it," Yew says. "My brushes with love have been, for the most part, negative. People do such strange, evil, nice, weird things in a relationship — especially a caring one. That's why language is so important. It has to convey all those things and more."

The play itself was actually begun in a cafe, so unlike the one Yew sat in for this interview. "I was eavesdropping on that couple — I love doing that when I'm bored — when the man said to the woman, 'I don't think we should see each other anymore.' I was so embarrassed for the girl. I tried to imagine what it would have been like to be in that position. I knew then I had the first line of my play."

A Language of Their Own is the story of two lovers, Oscar, who was born in China, and Ming, an American-born Chinese. Oscar, who has AIDS, wants to break up, Ming does not, but the couple eventually parts, and the lovers move on to other relationships. Ming almost immediately begins a relationship with Robert, a bunky blonde California waiter, and Oscar slowly begins a relationship with Daniel, a Filipino business student at Harvard. "Language was written," the playwright says, "because I was interested in why people hurt each other mentally and verbally. For all its words, *Language* is about what is unsaid. Abuse and love are an interesting combination."

Don't preach to the converted

Yew says he expected to die "a flaming death" with *Language* in New York. "They love to knock you down because you're young," he explains. "They did knock me, but not too much. It was tremendously successful, sold-out runs, standing ovations, you name it. But what was ultimately the most heartening was the reaction of the straight people, the non-Asian people, all of whom reacted strongly to the play."

"That's what gay theater — or any minority theater — should do, because these theaters appeal mostly to their own communities. But how long can you preach to the converted before they get bored? Minority theater should be given to the Newt Gingriches of the world because they are the ones who affect change. Gay theater has to be for the people. Gay people can claim it, but the public must come. Otherwise, you might as well stay home and perform for your friends."

The genesis of Yew's playwrighting career began in his native Singapore when a friend needed an AIDS play for his theater. The play Yew wrote, *As If He Heard*, embarrassed the writer now ("It's playwrighting 101," he says), but it did create quite a stir. The first play to deal openly with AIDS and Singapore's emerging gay subculture. Yew's work was banned by the government. Officials suggested to Yew that he change the main character, a gay man, into a woman. "I didn't want to revise the play," Yew says. "But my friends guilted me into it — guilt is not just a Jewish thing. So I revised the play, but the character is still a gay man. I just took out a lot of the gay-related stage directions and made them more subtle, so that the character swivels, he mimes his way across the room, he flourishes. The government approved it, and on stage the character was more flamboyantly gay than he was originally." The play was a hit and was later turned into

a successful television docudrama that is still used extensively in Singapore schools and colleges.

Yew says he wants to continually challenge himself and his notion of gay theater. "When are we going to have a gay play that is not all about rich white men on vacation having a wonderful time?" he queries. "Where are the problems? And I'm not just talking about AIDS. Where are the day-to-day issues? What about money issues, our inability to connect with each other? Let's explore gay people of color. Let's explore gay people who are old — these are people we should focus on rather than going to see young gay men take their clothes off. I suppose there's a place for that, but we have an overabundance of it right now. Where is the play about gay alcoholics? Where is the play about hopelessness in gay youth? What about people who cannot work with AIDS patients anymore because of their frustration over the fact that people still insist on having unsafe sex? If theater cannot address the issues and ask the questions, they might as well be back doing vaudeville, which died a slow death. They had no issues."

Life, Yew points, is like sex. It could be great, could be awful, could be dangerous. You just never know. "But theater," Yew insists, "is safe sex. You can go all the way, but you know you're protected. You leave and you feel you've been penetrated in some way. You go home to your nice house, but at least you have been brushed by something important. I hope never to stop having questions and will never stop wanting to know more. Theater is about questions. My theater doesn't answer questions. Do audiences want the answers so they can go home feeling safe? Maybe, but I want them to go home and think." ▼

Chay Yew's *A Language of Their Own* continues at the Asian American Theater through Feb. 4. Call 751-3074 for info.