

“Thank you for allowing me to talk at such length about myself!” jokes Chay Yew, as we wind down an hour-long telephone interview. I’ve called the Singaporean transplant at his LA home, which is just up the street from the infamous Viper Room where teen heart-throb River Phoenix gasped his last breath.

References to Hollywood abound throughout the conversation with the 32-year-old, who counts practically the entire cast of *Joy Luck Club* as friends. “I just came from dinner with Tsai Chin,” he says when asked who he’s been hanging out with in his home of eight years. You may recall the venerable actress as Tamlyn Tomita’s sharp-tongued mother in the Wayne Wang movie. “Two nights ago I went to one of those dreadful Hollywood parties,” he continues. “Garrett Wang from *Star Trek: Voyager* was there. So was Tamlyn and Ming-Na Wen. I was, in fact, the only one there who *hadn’t* made *People* magazine’s 50 Most Beautiful list. Oh gad, I’m sure I sound like one of those awful society types, don’t I?”

If being included among Asian Hollywood’s ‘in’ crowd doesn’t convince you this holder of an MA in broadcasting and film has it made in the States, consider the fact his play *Porcelain*, about a crime of passion between a Chinese teenager and his white victim, was praised on the pages of *Time* magazine, and won him ‘Best Playwright’

kudos at the London Fringe Festival. (*Porcelain* director and fellow Singaporean Glen Goei won ‘Best Director’.) Chay’s other plays include the award-winning *A Language of Their Own*, and *Falling*.

Chay left Singapore eight years ago to pursue film studies in the U.S. Around that time, his first work, *As If He Hears*, was commissioned as part of TheatreWorks’ Aids double bill, *Safe Sex*. Since then he’s made a name ➤

The America -based Singapore playwright, whose work earned kudos in *Time* magazine, talks candidly to ANGELA LEE about self-identity even as he rubs shoulders with Hollywood stars.

CHAY YEW

PHOTOS: JOSE POMBO

► for himself as a playwright overseas, first in England, then in the US.

TheatreWorks' production of *Half Lives*, starring Lim Kay Siu (who also directs) and Neo Swee Lin this week marks the first time in eight years Chay's work has been staged in Singapore.

8 DAYS: How do you put a write-up in Time and winning numerous awards in perspective?

CHAY YEW: I try not to quantify my achievements, because I'm afraid I'll become complacent and lazy. I do get secret pleasure from being written up in Time magazine, but I've learned never to ask for nor expect support for what I do. My parents were never very encouraging. So it was up to me to gauge my own abilities when I was growing up.

Have you always known you wanted to write plays?

Storytelling has always intrigued me, probably because my grandmother, mother and teachers were all great storytellers. My first exposure to theatre was watching *wayang* at the pasar malam every Friday with my grandmother.

Do you stay abreast of the Singapore arts scene?

I know there are some very good artists in Singapore. Singaporeans need to support these people before they support the Madonnas of the world. These are artists from our own backyard, writing *our* story, singing *our* songs. We've been influenced by the Shakespeares, Tennessee Williams and Andrew Lloyd Webbers of this world. But we have to realise that Singapore has its own Shakespeares just waiting to be discovered.

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The characters in *Half Lives* are Asian. How easy is it to write plays like that for audiences who are predominantly non-Asian?

Asian stories need to be told. And since they're about the universal human experience, they'll transcend cultural lines. I remember sitting beside a 60-year-old black woman at one of my plays, and seeing her laugh and cry through the whole thing. Somehow she connected to it and understood what I was trying to say.

The mother in the play is Singaporean. How have you characterised her?

She is uniquely Singaporean, not only in the way she speaks, but in personality. I find that a lot of Asian-American women are less strong-willed than Asian women. It makes a difference when you're born into a country where you're the majority. It shows in the way you walk into a room. My Asian-American friends are a little more unassuming.

***Half Lives* is about the Chows, an Asian family trying to find their place in society. Are there any elements of your own life in the play?**

No. I never write about my life. I guess it's very Chinese to want to

keep things private. But I do write about the feelings I've had. In the play, the man, an American-Chinese, is the typical model minority: hardworking, doesn't like to make waves. His wife is a Singaporean who loves everything about the American lifestyle. They have a son who is completely American.

I am all three of them. I was the little kid in Singapore who wanted to live what I saw in American movies. Then I moved here and realised, 'Oh, silly me. There's a glass ceiling. I'm not one of them, really.'

The Chow family starts out living the ultimate American Dream, but then it starts to fall apart. They embrace the American way of life, but does the American way embrace them?

What is your idea of the American dream?

It's to be like people on TV: beautiful, young, with lots of hair. Where your life is filled with adventure and your problems are solved within half an hour. The Singapore ideal is even worse. It's accumulating *things*. But I have to say that in the end, the play isn't even about America. It's about finding a place where you belong.

So what is your idea of 'home'?

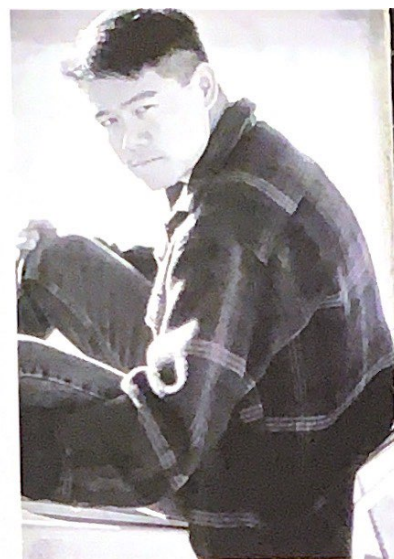
It's not a physical place. For me, home has been where my work is. But it's also who you belong with. Do I belong in America, truly? Maybe not. Do I belong in Singapore? My soul is there. My father always told me how important it is to find happiness in life. Hopefully, this play will encourage audiences to take a good look at their lives and then go out and find their own sense of home and happiness.

You worked in film development at Columbia Pictures (now Sony Pictures). What was that like?

The best thing about working at Columbia was getting to read so many screenplays, and becoming thoroughly familiar with the whole film industry. Before that, I worked at one of the movie studios. But I was nobody. I'd meet people like Andy Garcia and have conversations like, 'Oh, you're looking for that room? Well, just go down this hallway and make a left.' Then I would brush against him a little as he walked by so that I could tell all my cheap-thrill friends that I touched Andy Garcia!

Any interesting stories to tell?

It was a real thrill to meet Emma Thompson. I remember getting a copy of the script to *Sense and Sensibility*, which I still have — the title's written in her own handwriting — and thinking, 'Who does she think she is, trying to write a screenplay. She's just an actress! [Laughs] It was three hard years of 10- to 12-hour days. But every so often you're reminded of the magic. Every morning I'd walk through the studio lot and see, just like in the movies, people wheeling costumes to wardrobe, and actors walking around, and the *Hook* set in one corner, the *Dracula* set in another, and thinking, 'Wow. You're here. This is what you dreamed about since you were in secondary school.' You can't lose sight of the magic. Once you do, it's time to move on. ■



Half Lives rated R(A) runs till 14 Dec at the Drama Centre. Tickets through Sistic.