

The Arts

US-based S'porean playwright and director Chay Yew is back in town to direct his play *Red* for the Arts Fest. He talks to **PARVATHI MAYAR** about his art and work

Write where he belongs

THEATRE doesn't get more theatrical than this "gay" play banned, playwright leaves town, returns 12 years later as the hugely successful prodigal son. Sure, it's tempting to talk of US-based, Singaporean playwright Chay Yew in those dramatic terms, but the reality is simpler — yet more complex.

As *If He Hears* (1989) was indeed banned because of the overtly gay and sympathetic protagonist, but TheatreWorks' Ong Ken Seng persuaded Yew to rewrite the piece. It was then cleverly staged, so the sexual orientation was perfectly clear without having to spell it out. "If you keep the doors open, you never know what you'll learn," grins Yew. "The experience taught me the meaning of subtlety — and in Asia we speak in subtlety."

In town to direct his play *Red*, produced by the Singapore Repertory Theatre for the Arts Fest, Yew is in a chatty, reminiscing mood. We talk of the departure before the homecoming.

Censorship was a major issue of principle, however the practical reason Yew left all those years ago was to study film and TV at the Boston University. There he produced a late-night TV series *Nightshifts*, did a two-year stint (1992-94) with Columbia Pictures in the "getting scripts green lit" department, and ran into celebrities like Emma Thompson.

A world he chose to leave, when his own playwriting career took off. Yew's starkly moving *Porcelain* about a gay man who murders his lover in a public toilet, was picked practically out of no-

where, to be staged at London's prestigious Royal Court Theatre. The second play of the *Porcelain* trilogy, *A Language of Their Own*, was chosen by New York's Public Theatre.

Porcelain is currently being revived in LA, and the experience of dropping into rehearsals was a complex one for Yew. He says with surprising candour, "It was embarrassing. *Porcelain* reminds me of the awkward teenager I was, and I wonder if he's still there beneath — this."

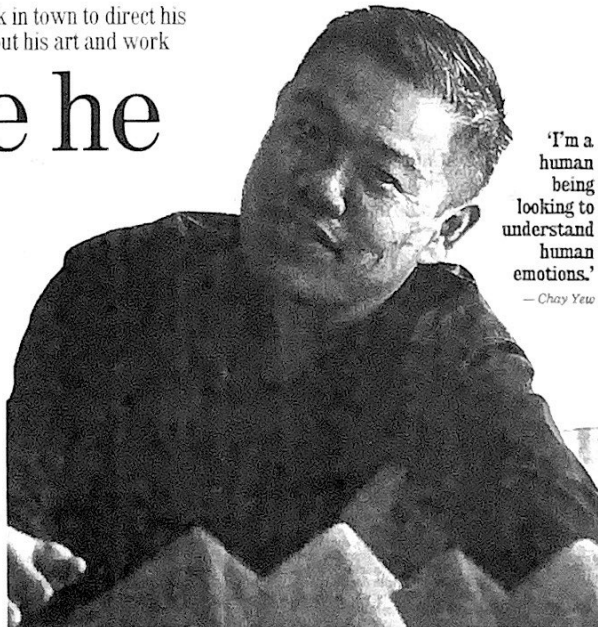
"This" being success as both playwright and director, so much so that he's booked back to back till March next year. "This" being his role as director of the Asian Theatre Workshop that he founded at the Mark Taper Forum, LA. "This" being the freedom to rub shoulders with the likes of celebrated gay playwright Tony Kushner.

But, it's like being someone "who's not on the guest list, but finds himself at the banquet table", laughs Yew.

Yew has a real sensitivity in writing the female perspective, which he attributes to being brought up by strong women. "I understand women. I like plays about women. I'm interested in exploring how women are their own worst oppressors, by following the rules laid down by men and passing them onto their daughters."

Of course, the issues of being gay and Asian-American find their way strongly into his work. However, he isn't comfortable being hailed as some sort of "voice" for the Asian American. Such monikers are for the politically inclined while "I'm a human being looking to understand human emotions."

A pursuit that fuelled the writing of *Red* though other specific ingredients were thrown in



'I'm a human being looking to understand human emotions.'

— Chay Yew

actors he's picked are those who have worked with him before; given the time constraints, he could almost use a shorthand directorial process.

Yew's directorial style is minimalist. A hint, his favourite props are empty chairs. So those who expect a *Miss Saigon*-esque exotic East are likely to be disappointed in *Red*, he warns. In fact *Red* — rather than nostalgia — was the real reason Yew chose to come back to Singapore now. For it was a chance to direct *Red* the way he had always seen it as a play about "what you would do for your art and at what cost."

The homecoming

In a curious case of life imitating theatre — the play Yew directed before coming to Singapore was *Five Boy* by Sunil Kuruvilla. The play is about a Canadian Indian going to India one summer and his experience of not belonging. As for Yew, it's a familiar strangeness, wandering through a Singapore where the landmarks are gone but memories remain.

Of being carted off in his flip-flops to Chinese street operas by his grandmother, or producing theatre at ACS with today's stage personalities like Ong Keng Sen. So Yew believes "it's important to nurture young playwrights and create a canon of Singaporean theatre. Plays, novels, poetry — these live, even when the buildings are torn down."

Future plans seem likely to stay entwined with US theatre though other Singaporean collaborations may arise, he and TheatreWorks' Ong are talking about re-doing *The King and I* from a Thai perspective, for instance.

And so the playwright has returned. He is comfortable with the Singaporean press he carries, yet is not completely Singaporean, nor quite American. Yew accepts he inhabits an in-between world. Speaking to Yew, you sense it's the empty theatre that beckons with familiarity and opportunity, the rehearsal process that offers sustenance, the creative community that is family. "I've become the workaholic I swore I'd never be," he agrees wryly. "Work has become home."

Red, June 21, 23, 8pm (additional matinee on June 23 at 2.30pm), SRT Theatre, 20 Merbau Road, Robertson Quay, tickets \$22-\$42 from SISTIC

to the artistic cauldron, outrage at the US government's plans to cut funding for the arts, inspiration from actress Tsai Chin's story of her father who was a Chinese Opera star purged during the Revolution, and an interest in women's rights.

What's in Red

Red is a non-linear narrative about a present-day writer of popular fiction, who runs into the ghost of a murdered Peking Opera star in an abandoned theatre in Shanghai.

The play was well received in the US, but has also provoked a few controversies. Tsai Chin has complained that *Red*'s Opera star is one who plays female roles, thereby fitting into a stereotypical pattern familiar to the Western. Yew responds: "I may start with a stereotype because it is important to set a context. Then, with every scene, I break that stereotype."

While on the issue of not casting Singaporeans in the play, Yew says there wasn't enough lead time to cast or work with local actors. The trio of

ARTIST: LEA