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Chay Yew Mines Dark Side of Asian Life in 'Porcelain'

By T.H. McCULLOH

Playwright Chay Yew admits he doesn't have any answers.

"A lot of people want answers from the theater," says the Singapore-born writer. "The theater does not give answers."

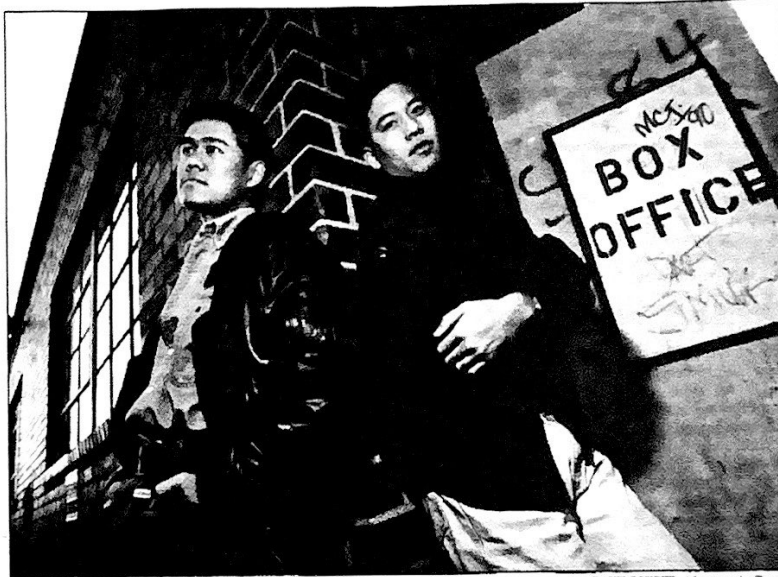
Yew's latest play, "Porcelain," opens Friday at the Burbage Theatre. It poses questions that he hopes will force the audience to formulate its own answers.

His first produced play raised questions the Singapore government objected to. And his latest play continues that provocative tradition.

Originally produced at London's Etcetera Theatre, "Porcelain" was later moved to the Royal Court. Both were sellout engagements. The play concerns a Chinese teenager from East London who is discovered with the body of his Caucasian male lover in a men's restroom. A crime of passion. A story that could come from today's headlines.

The germ of the tale came from a series of stories published in the college newspaper when Yew was a graduate student at Boston University. Arrests in a public toilet, involving men on campus and off, piqued his interest. At the time, Yew was looking for a subject for his master's degree thesis film. The faculty thought the screenplay was interesting and the subject controversial. But Yew could not get actors to take on the roles, and the project was never produced.

When Yew left Singapore, al-



DAVID BOHRER / Los Angeles Times

"Porcelain" playwright Chay Yew, left, alongside Garrett Wang, star of the Burbage Theatre production.

most a decade ago, to continue his education in America, his first stop was the theater department of Pepperdine University in Malibu. Spending the rest of his life appearing in "The King and I" didn't appeal to him, and he moved on to Boston University to delve into other facets of drama.

"After I graduated from Boston U.," he says, "a theater company in London, called Mu-Lan, decided to have me come on as resident playwright. They said to write anything I wanted to. I still wanted to do the story of 'Porcelain.'"

He expanded the screenplay into a stage version and Londoners flocked to see it, as did representatives of the Royal Court.

Yew has a dark view of life that finds its way into his work. He's now working on a script about incest in an Asian family. The play done in Singapore, which the government banned, was called "As If He Hears," about a Singapore man with AIDS.

"Being the kind of government it is," says the playwright, "it's afraid of how art can influence its people, its politics. I'd made the character too real, too human, and the government didn't feel very comfortable with it."

Government censorship taught me how to not write directly, how to write between the lines with subtext. The funny thing is, censorship helped me in a lot of ways.

Every play Yew has written has been commissioned. But the subject matter has always been his own choice.

"I like to shock sometimes," he says, "to bring people to their

senses by saying this could happen right here where you live, to someone you know. Every one of us has a certain amount of hypocrisy, certain parts of their life which are sheltered. All of us have a dark side. The English are the worst, that's why this play was well received."

Yew says, "'Porcelain' is not about racism. Nor is it about homosexuality and homophobia or about toilet sex. I didn't expect to delve into all these issues and answer them. It's really about loving and relationship. It's also about being different, which is a universal theme."

Being different is a familiar situation for Garrett Wang, the young Chinese actor playing the teenager in "Porcelain." Wang, now nearing the end of his studies in the UCLA theater department, is a native Californian. His family moved to Indiana when he was very young, then to Bermuda. But his formative years were spent in Nashville, Tenn.

"I have a double whammy," Wang says. "I have the conservativeness of the South and the fact that I'm from a Chinese family." The role, which Wang says a lot of other young Asian actors wouldn't even audition for, has given him a chance to grow as an actor, to go against the grain of being the stereotypical Asian. "The character," he says, "has a lot of things I feel inside. Americans buy into specific images, and they don't see anything beyond that."

Exploding that image is not new to Wang. "Growing up," he says, "the only people I hung around with were Caucasian. For the majority of my life I dated white

women. Then recently, I took a trip to Taiwan, and I'm much more in touch with my roots now."

If Wang is looking for atypical roles to shatter stereotypes, Yew has the same goal in his writing.

"When I write plays," he says, "if it has to do with a gay character, or an Asian character, or even a Caucasian character, to endorse a stereotype, it's an affront to myself. It's self-debasing. People like to box people. When they stop playing musical chairs with identity and status, people freak out. People like comfortable places, and the best place to put people is, he runs a Chinese restaurant, they belong in West Hollywood. This is not going to happen in my neck of the woods."

Yew's neck of the woods is on a side road, away from the main highway of most Asian theater, where he investigates what he calls "the dark side" of today's Asian.

"I left acting," he continues, "and moved to something where I can give. The problem with Asian theater is that there are a lot more actors than people who are directing it and writing it. And it's always the same old subjects, like Japanese internment during World War II. I'm sick of hearing that. It's all right, but let's move on. It's been done. It's time to write about something in their lives now." □

"Porcelain" plays at 7:30 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays through Feb. 27 at the Burbage Theatre, 2330 Sawtelle Blvd., West Los Angeles. Tickets \$15. Call (310) 478-0897.

T.H. McCulloh writes regularly about theater for *The Times*.