



6th Row Center

TONGUE UNTIED

A. Magazine's Terry Hong talks to Chay Yew, author of the play *A Language of Their Own*.

When the scheduled run for your brand new play—receiving its world premiere at a major New York venue—gets extended even before previews have begun, you know you must be doing *something* right. But just in case, Singapore-born playwright Chay Yew, creator of the lyrical *A Language of Their Own*, which debuted at the

Joseph Papp Public Theater/New York Shakespeare Festival in April, has a backup plan. “If theater doesn’t work out for me,” Yew quips, “there’s always that job at Barney’s.”

For now, Yew’s retail career can wait, because the theater world is keeping a firm grip on this young playwright—especially in the wake of the success of

Language. Advance buzz on the four-character play, about '90s love in the era of AIDS, was so strong that the Public’s production was given another full month beyond its intended three-and-a-half-week run. Audiences weren’t disappointed, and reviews have been glowing. “*Language* is not written so much as it is sculpted, with the supple precision and blistered fingers of a real artist,” said *New York Newsday*. “Fascinating,” “beautifully written” and “exquisitely expressed,” wrote the *New York Post*. And from the *New Yorker*: “Mr. Yew exhibits a talent for using words that are plain and simple to get at love’s rich complications.”

At the core of *Language* is the never-resolved relationship between Ming, an American-born Chinese, and Oscar, his less-assimilated, Chinese-born lover. Oscar is HIV-positive and does not want Ming to be burdened with caring for him, so he valiantly insists on letting Ming go. Ming escapes to California with Robert, a beautiful Caucasian waiter, while Oscar settles for an IKEA-style version of domestic bliss with Daniel, a young Filipino business student.

In addition to telling a compelling story, *Language* also provides a rare opportunity for Asian American actors to show their dramatic mettle. In the Public’s production, Ming, Oscar and Daniel were played by B.D. Wong, Francis Jue, and Alec Mapa respectively. Interestingly enough, each of the very different actors had been lauded for their earlier portrayals on Broadway of Song Liling, the alluring Chinese opera singer in David Henry Hwang’s multi-award-winning *M. Butterfly*. “I’m really angry [at the entertainment industry] that these incredibly talented actors haven’t been able to do more since *Butterfly*,” says Yew. “I’m really honored to have been able to work with them.”

While *Language* may be the 29-year-old Yew’s strongest success thus far in his short career, it’s certainly not his only achievement. His first work, *As If He Hears*, was the first drama in his native Singapore to deal openly

PHOTO BY RICHARD MITCHELL

with the issue of AIDS, and was initially banned by the government. Rewritten as a docudrama, the work was subsequently used to raise AIDS awareness in schools and colleges throughout Singapore and was eventually aired by the Singapore Broadcasting Corporation.

Yew's next work, *Porcelain*, written while he was resident playwright for the Mu-Lan Theatre, a London-based Asian theater company, was moved to the Royal Court Theatre, and won the Fringe Award (equivalent to an Obie) for best play in 1992. Yew says that *Porcelain*, which was originally intended as a film script for Yew's graduate thesis at Boston University, is the first installment of a trilogy of "gay Asian plays," of which *Language* is part two.

With all the attention and praise being heaped upon him, Yew remains almost comically humble. "No, I can't say that I have any lofty ambitions, to further the Asian American theater community or anything admirable like that," he insists. "I just want to be part of a DKNY ad with John Lone and Joan Chen. Or maybe a Gap ad. They still haven't called me. I would be great for selling Gap socks," he adds as he strikes the perfect pose.

Despite the self-deprecation, Yew is deeply concerned about the future of Asian American theater. While *Language* drew crowds into the Public, Yew parlayed his influence to organize a forum to discuss the current state of Asian American theater and its prospects for the future. For the panel, he convened Asian American theater luminaries, including David Henry Hwang, Ping Chong, and Tim Dang (head of L.A.'s East West Players). "As Asian Americans in theater, we need to stop doing the same story over and over again," he declares with sudden seriousness. "Enough with the internment crisis and family generational dramas. We need to do something that's going forward."

"We keep hearing from Chinese and Japanese voices because they were the

first here, but being Asian today means so much more. We need to find and nurture these other voices. The first generation of writers—like Philip Gotanda, David Henry Hwang, and Velina Houston—represented an angry, but unified voice that posed basic questions about who we are and how we fit in as Asian Americans in white America. The new generation is very different. Now it's like a huge dim sum banquet. The palette is really exciting. And that's what is going to bring more people to see our theater."

Now with a New York success on his resume, Yew is moving on to new

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work. His next play, *Half Lives*, will finish out the trilogy. "*Porcelain* was a very gritty piece of theater. My anger piece, about being Asian, about not fitting in. Then *Language* dealt with

Asians who fit into the so-called system, but it questioned how they fit in with each other. In the last play, *Half Lives*, the characters question why they fit in at all, why they have assimilated to the point that they no longer want to belong." *Half Lives* is slotted for a fall world premiere at East West Players in L.A.

"When I finish with this gay Asian male thing," Yew continues, "I want to write about Asian women. Something new, something different. Because if I get bored, the audience will be bored. I can't be a one-trick pony."

Yew laughs.

"Besides, every break I've ever had has been given to me by a woman," he says. "I want to make these women proud of me because I feel like I owe it to them. I identify more

with women. There's less role playing. With men, you have to play football to be in with them. Women are more complex. Men can be complex, too, but they're also easy to read." ■

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