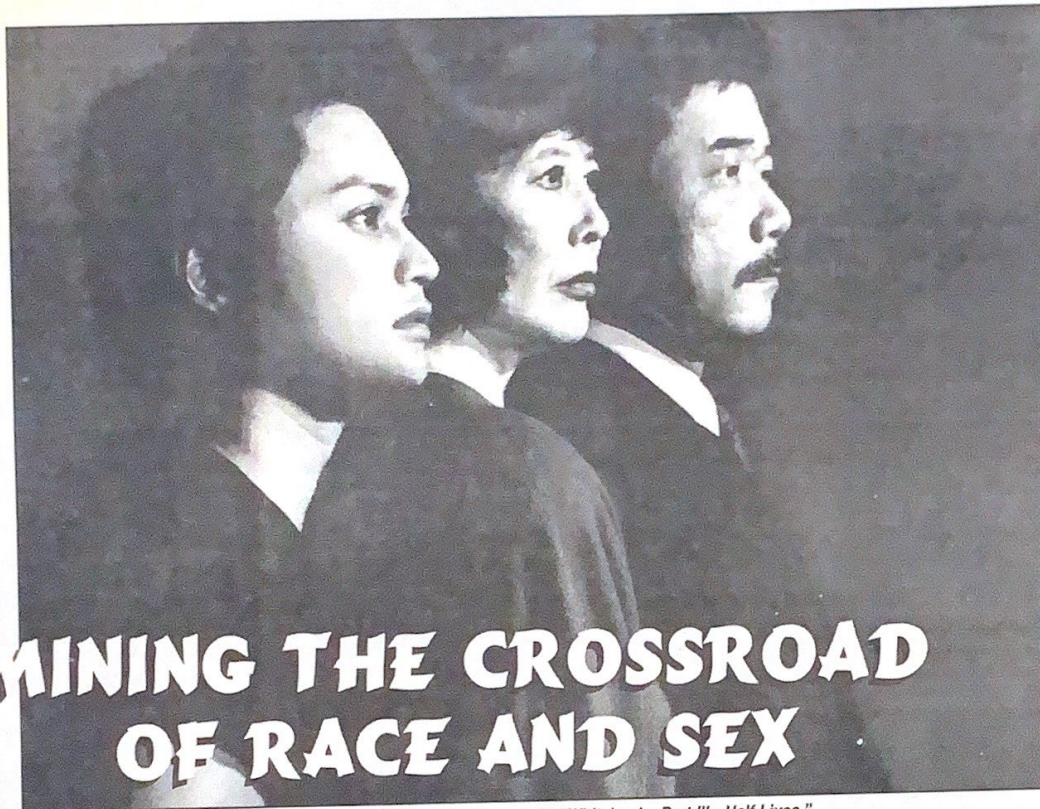


MINING THE CROSSROAD OF RACE AND SEX



Alec Mapa, Tsai Chin and Dana Lee in "Whitelands: Part III—Half Lives."

GARY KUWABARA

CHAY YEW'S
ACCLAIMED
PLAYS
TAKE AN
UNFLINCHING
LOOK AT
THE
MAJORITY,
THE MINORITY

BY
CARLOS MENDEZ

Chay Yew taps the most sensitive of American nerves. In the troubled crossroad of race and sex, he probes the impact of racism and the question of sexuality on gay identity. All the while he disdains the idea of politics.

"There's a place for [that]," he remarked on an earlier occasion, "it's called the government."

The 30-year-old playwright is the author of two award-winning plays, "Porcelain" and "A Language Of Their Own." "Porcelain" won London's 1993 Fringe Award, and "Language" was judged GLAAD's Best Play of 1995.

Yew garnered national attention last year with New York's Public Theatre production of "Language." In the *Advocate's* year-end review, *New Yorker* writer Brendan Lemon called him one of the new gay male voices. He was also listed as one of the 50 leading Asian Americans in 1996 by *Asian Week*.

The New York cast of

"Language" included B.D. Wong, Francis Jue, Alec Mapa, and David Drake of "The Night Larry Kramer Kissed Me" fame. With no intended irony, *New York Post* theatre critic Clive Barnes called his the "token" white role. The former three actors each played the transvestite Song-Lilong character in David Henry Hwang's "M. Butterfly" on Broadway.

"Porcelain" and "Language," along with Yew's new play "Half Lives" form the trilogy "Whitelands," which plays in Los Angeles through April 21.

Yew is currently one of three Mellon Fellows at the Mark Taper Forum. As part of his resident-artist role, Yew stipulated the Taper create a new Asian Theatre Workshop. He was subsequently made program director.

A 16-year-old Yew left his native Singapore for the 'whitelands' in 1982. Given the choice between the University of South Carolina and Pepperdine University, the only two schools willing to accept an underage high school grad, the savvy teen settled on Malibu. "I knew I didn't want to be in the south, God forbid," he recalls today. At

Pepperdine, Yew majored in the-atre arts, film and television.

As if to dispel an imbedded stereotype, the fiercely verbal Yew makes a virtue of his pugnacity. It was either arrogance or blindness, he says, that allowed him to resist identifying as a "minority."

Growing up in Singapore had its advantages. What many journalists call a repressive society, Yew called home. "When I was a young adult in America," he explains, "I realized Asians are supposed to behave in a certain way. Because I was brought up in the majority, I have a very strong majority mentality."

Yew acknowledges that a big part of his majority mentality was forged in the funhouse of American popular culture. As do many who've experienced American media culture from afar, he describes an enormously powerful dream machine dominating the world's perception of America.

"Baywatch," he notes, is the most popular American television series on the international market. The surf's up, babes-and-boys-filled frolic sells a seductive image of American life, he says.

It isn't only the show's swimsuit depiction of heroes and villains that captures the world's imagination. "To some extent, it's propaganda. But that's the image the world has of America—and what new immigrants bring with them to this country."

People are drawn to that, he

AND
EVERYTHING
IN BETWEEN



SHANE SATO

Radmar Agana Jao and Steve Park in "Whitelands: Part II—A Language of Their Own."

continues. "I was, too, as a child. America has always been this dream that people work towards. It's a global dream. When you come to America, I feel, reality sets in. Every day is not sunny. There could be racism, classism, sexual discrimination, sexism." But the dream retains its luster, he adds, because the promise of opportunity is often real.

"I'm fascinated by the individual—how the individual survives in their environment," says Yew. "I don't question the environment, because I think the environment speaks for itself. I question how the person deals with his environment. How the person is suffocated by it. How he overcomes it. Or, how the environment changes, and the consequence to the individual."

"That's why in my plays the characters are paramount and supreme. Whereas, in the work of someone like Tony Kushner, who comes from the school of Brecht, the environment is important. The world the characters inhabit is a bigger essay than the individuals involved. I look for what

makes a person tick. What drives an individual to violence," he says.

"Whitelands" explores the outsider status of the gay-Asian immigrant, how they come to terms with the world to which they want to belong. In

"Porcelain," the first part of the trilogy, the outsider wants to embrace the majority, become a part of its lifestyle and culture.

The play, says Yew, asks one basic question: what happens when you find the person who embodies all of your dreams and he embraces you only to later reject you? What does a person do to get that back?

How does one react? In this case of a young boy, he kills.

Murder isn't metaphor in Yew's theatrical landscape. Although beautifully written and conceived, "Porcelain" is an often angry play about anger—the anger of loss and rejection, an outsider's desperate anger. But Yew's precise articulation of that anger makes "Porcelain" an often stunning piece of literature and performance.

While set in the working-class section of East London, the play was inspired by news reports of campus security raids in the Boston area. In 1989, Yew attended Boston

University for his master's degree in theatre arts. He recalls how he and a friend followed newspaper coverage of a crackdown in the men's public toilets used to solicit sex at Harvard, MIT and BU. Yew transposed locations for London's Mu-Lan Theatre in his year as resident playwright.

"Porcelain" recounts the loneliness of a Cambridge-bound British-born Chinese found cradling his murdered lover on the floor of a London restroom. Rebuffed in the gay marketplace, a 19-year-old resorts to "cottageing"—the quaint British expression for anonymous washroom sex.

"Think Joe Orton and 'Prick Up Your Ears,'" one character remarks.

In one of the more perceptive reviews the play, *L.A. Weekly's* Judith Lewis wrote:

"Because 'Porcelain' is stripped of gender politics, a crime of passion can be understood for what it is: the final controlling act of a powerless outsider, moved to act by an anger that peaked

long before an ill-fated romance set it off." She also noted a viewer's response to the character—as victim or villain—depended on their alignment with the dominant culture.

Yew insists he never intellectualizes

motive. What a person's actions and the consequences of those actions are derive from plot.

In the murder of a white man by an Asian teen, Yew emphatically dismisses any notion of a sexual politic. Both "Porcelain" and "Language" explore the tangled and languid magnetic field of snow and rice—the classic rub of "orientalism."

"My play says what it does, and it never talked about race," he says. "I make an audience an active participant by the experience they bring to the theatre. There could be in and of itself some racial element. I recognize it, but I don't want to talk about it. I set it up. My kind of theatre has never been to instruct. There are other writers who do that. I find that kind of theatre very boring."

Yew's also reluctant to discuss the power dynamics in certain interracial couplings—the dangerous liaisons where age, income and cultural disparity weave their distinctive emotional bliss or abuse. Yew explains his



Chay Yew with Veronica Chambers

'I want to invite people who come from completely different experiences to my plays. For 90 minutes to two hours, let them see and feel how my characters live. See how much they have and don't have in common. At the end of three days, can they understand how we live, how we are so similar and dissimilar, and share the same fuckin' space?'

approach to the highly charged terrain of sexual and racial identity is humanistic, not political. To write otherwise, would be reductive, he says—the work trivialized by falling under the heading of “problem” or “issue” play.

“I’m gay. I’m Asian. So what’s it to you?” is Yew’s rebuke to anyone who’d trespass on his turf.

“I’m not fighting for that right,” he continues. “My plays are not ‘in-your-face.’ They explore a way of life. In and of itself that may be political. But I don’t want to be on a soapbox ranting and raving. In the theatre community, there are people who believe in political theatre and belong to that category. I don’t want to belong to any category; I’m just fascinated by all these things.

“How can you not be political when your characters deal with all those things?” he says suddenly, modulating his tone. “But I don’t want to slam that in anyone’s face. I want to invite people who come from completely different experiences to my plays. For 90 minutes to two hours, let them see and feel how my characters live. See how much they have and don’t have in common. At the end of three days, can they understand how we live, how we are so similar and dissimilar, and share the same fuckin’ space?”

Shifting gears again, Yew proffers an unlikely revelation. “I know this is going to sound strange,” he begins, “but I’d rather be an insider, and not be a writer or an artist. You don’t have to ask for things. You just are. The question of the outsider is that no one wants to be one. I feel I can never belong. These three plays deal with that experience.”

“The trilogy is based on themes of the outsider surviving in this place called ‘Whitelands,’” he says. “I deliberately called it ‘Whitelands’ because I feel most outsiders come to places where they are the minority, and the majority is white.”

Beyond its racial politics, “Language” is also as close as theatre gets to punk rock without having any of its bodily parts pierced or permanently tattooed. It’s an unsparing look at the bitter sweetness of gay romance and relationships in a time of AIDS in urban America. Written a short time after “Porcelain,” it’s what theatre critics call a more “mature” work.

If Yew projects a sense of invincible good cheer, despite the occasional burst of anger or petulance, it might be because the darkness at his journey’s end is not a cosmic one. After crossing over the border, with no place to turn back to, home, he discovers, is no longer only a matter of geography. The border is both physical and psychological.

“Home is within yourself,” says Yew. It’s an internal gyroscope and compass.”

Whether the outsider—gay or straight, the immigrant—Asian, Latino or black—will find comfort in Yew’s conceit, it’s one possible way of keeping the blues at bay.

“Half Lives,” “Porcelain” and “A Language of their Own” play separately at the East West Players Theatre through April 21.

“Whitelands,” the entire trilogy, has marathon performances every weekend. (213) 660-0366.

East West's Yew Turn

by Walter Sawicki

In its mission to cultivate opportunities for Asian-American actors and playwrights, East West Players has done its fair share of groundbreaking. But *Whitelands*, a trilogy of plays by the young playwright Chay Yew which opened Sunday at the Silverlake theatre, marks a radical departure. Indeed, Yew—an artist in residence at the Mark Taper Forum and director of the Taper's Asian Theatre Workshop—admitted that moments of his own work still give him pause.

"It's so graphic," said the 31-year-old Yew, who first moved to Los Angeles from his native Singapore when he was 16. "Sometimes I wonder what happened in my head to write something like this." He is referring to *Porcelain*, the series' first play, in which an Asian boy in London murders a white man, and which deals matter-of-factly with homosexuality, sex in public toilets, and rape. Despite a successful run at the Royal Court Theatre and London's Fringe Award for best play in 1993, it was turned down by East West when Yew submitted it during a U.S. tour.

The middle play, *A Language of Their Own*—which opened at L.A.'s Celebration Theatre in 1994 before going to New York's Public Theater last April—deals with the disintegrating relationship of two Asian-American men in Boston, one of whom has AIDS and eventually dies. An earlier version of that play was also turned down by EWP.

At least one reason East West has not only relented about these two plays but commissioned a third, *Half Lives*, is the artistic directorship of Tim Dang, who took over East West in July, 1993 and is directing *Whitelands*. Dang said his predecessors shied away from the two plays because they felt "the audience East West served wouldn't necessarily go for

NEWS

East West's Yew Turn

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something like this."

Dang felt differently, but admitted that he's taking a gamble with an audience that is mostly Japanese-American, between the ages of 45 and 65, and conservative in outlook. Indeed, last year, when EWP produced a play featuring a nude male actor running through a cornfield as part of a ritualistic cleansing, 12 "totally offended" subscribers wrote Dang and complained. Dang wrote back:

"I absolutely thanked them and told them that if theatre wasn't inspiring and pushing buttons, we wouldn't be doing our job," he said. "I also told them that we have a lot more Asian-American writers now, and they're not necessarily writing about home life and identity. They're talking about other things, and we need to be as open to them as we are to these other writers we've been crafting for the last two decades."

This conciliatory gesture, Dang said, elicited several donations and 12 renewed subscriptions.

In *Half Lives*, which is getting its world premiere, Yew explores the breakup of an Asian family in America and the disillusionment that results as they pursue, but never quite achieve, the American Dream. It has one gay char-

acter, but its primary focus is the family.

"I'm curious to see how the audience is going to make the journey from the first play through the third," said Yew, "and hopefully get a sense of that journey of the Other. Society has unwritten laws. But what if you're not one of the chosen? What if you're not that straight, white male who has children and a career? *Whitelands* is a journey of looking for a place called home. Even though it's specifically from a gay Asian point of view, I want to make sure anyone who comes into the theatre will know what it's like to want to fit in, because we all want to belong."

Dang had wanted to bring a gay-themed play to EWP since, he believes, there is a sizable, under-represented gay Asian community. Some audience members may find *Porcelain* "way out there," he said, but balance is provided by *Half Lives*. Interestingly, what worries him more than the content of any of the plays is another kind of shock: a Caucasian actor portraying, in addition to five or six other minor characters, an older Asian man. Yew wrote this politically incorrect casting instruction himself:

"At this theatre," said Dang, "we don't do that kind of things—in fact, we do the opposite. Once you see this white man speaking broken English in an Asian accent, I don't know how jarring that's going to be. So, we're prepared."

Curtain rising for Chay Yew

Trilogy speaks volumes about acclaimed playwright

By Janet Weeks
Daily News Staff Writer

THE FACTS

Playwright Chay Yew's first work — an AIDS drama — was summarily banned in his native Singapore by government conservatives offended by its positive portrayal of a strong, handsome, hard-working gay man.

The bruising rejection might have crushed another playwright. But not Yew.

True to what he calls "the Asian way — just nod and smile," Yew listened to the censors and promptly went back to work, cleverly rewriting "As If He Hears" into a play with the same message in a different package.

"I decided to take out all those words, all the language that made the character sound pontificating," Yew says.

He also added character descriptions that turned the leading man from a regular guy into a lispng, limp-wristed homosexual.

"I had him 'glide into the room, arms akimbo with a Bette Davis smile."

The result was a smash success. Yew not only fooled censors, but ended up with a play that forced the audience to look beyond silly stereotypes.

"When the character came out — this big raging queen — the audience laughed at the character. Halfway through, they laughed with the character. And at the end, they empathized with the character so much that they felt uncomfortable. I had people tell me 'I never realized gay people had feelings like I do.' And some actually volunteered to help an AIDS service in Singapore."

"As If He Hears" also launched Yew's career as one of the most cutting-edge and critically acclaimed young Asian playwrights of the '90s.

This weekend, a trio of Yew's plays — collectively titled "Whitelands" — premieres at the East West Players in Silver Lake. The plays can be seen separately on weeknights or together in marathon weekend performances.

The three-at-a-time format is rare for 99-seat theaters, and a testament to Yew's rising-star status.

■ **The show:** "Whitelands," a trilogy by Chay Yew.
■ **Where:** East West Players, 4424 Santa Monica Blvd., Los Angeles.
■ **When:** Through April 21.
■ **Tickets:** \$20 per show (\$15 for students and seniors) or \$50 for the trilogy (\$40 for students and seniors). Call (213) 660-0366.

"I believe Chay is going to be the next big Asian-American writer," said Tim Dang, artistic director of the East West Players. Dang predicted that Yew is on the brink of achieving the kind of crossover success currently enjoyed by Tony winner David Henry Hwang ("M. Butterfly") and Philip Kan Gotanda ("The Wash").

"They're the two most foremost Asian-American playwrights," said Dang. "I believe Chay is going to be the next who's going to do that."

Yew, 31, was born in Singapore to middle-class parents who encouraged him to read great literature — everything from Shakespeare to Capote — while very young.

He also developed an early understanding of theater, thanks to his grandmother's love of Chinese street opera, a cultural tradition that involves plays staged on sidewalks for free at night.

"I remember being a kid and wearing pajamas and eating and watching Chinese opera in the streets of Singapore."

After graduating from high school, Yew came to California to attend Pepperdine University. In 1992, he wrote his second play, "Porcelain," while serving a playwright-in-residency at London's Mu-Lan Theatre Company. The play, which won London's 1993 Fringe Award (the equivalent of an Obie), is about a gay Asian teen-ager who kills his lover in an East London restroom.

At the time of "Porcelain's" West Coast premiere in 1993 at Los Angeles' Burbage Theatre, Daily Variety called it "a gripping, gritty, graphic voice poem ... an impressive and stimulating theater experience."

"Porcelain" is the first third of the "Whitelands" trilogy. The other plays are "A Language of Their Own" and "Half Lives."



John McCoy/Daily News

"The problem with L.A. theater is that it tries too hard to be New York," says playwright Chay Yew.

Yew says the plays are thematically linked by a fable about a crow.

In the tale, a crow is happy until he sees sparrows flying overhead. He longs to join the elegant birds and does — only to be rejected as clumsy. He eventually gains acceptance, even though he never truly fits in.

When the crow decides to go home, he finds he no longer fits in with crows, either. So he leaves for a tree where he lives alone.

"My plays take chunks of the fable," says Yew. "In 'Porcelain,' a young boy living in England wants to be accepted in their society. 'Language' is about when the crow is with the sparrows and learning how to live together and at what

cost.

"'Half Lives' is when the crow wants to go home and cannot go home. The only place he finds a sense of home is within himself."

Although he has lived all over the world, Yew chooses to make Los Angeles his home. He is dedicated to improving the theater scene here both through his writing and as director of the Asian Theatre Workshop at the Mark Taper Forum.

"The problem with L.A. theater is that it tries too hard to be New York," he says. "It should create a voice that is unique to itself. We need to promote that. We need to tell playwrights, 'Stop doing those plays about England or New York.

You're in L.A. Write about L.A.'"

Yew also sees himself writing for larger audiences — perhaps through television — down the road.

"I love TV to death," he says, an uncommon statement for a theater person. "I feel TV is today's theater."

But for now, he feels more at home writing for the stage, which allows for more controversy and anger than television. Indeed, he even finds the stage to be too tame a medium.

"I wish that theater was more challenging," he says with a sigh. "I wish theater artists and directors would take a leap. Don't be afraid to be ugly."

Universal Storyteller

Chay Yew came to America from his native Singapore to pursue his dream of becoming an actor—and became a playwright instead.

By JULIE HA
RAFU STAFF WRITER

As Asian American playwright Chay Yew was watching the Academy Awards Show on TV Monday night, he became a little emotional.

The broadcast reminded the Singapore native of why he wanted to immigrate to the United States some 15 years ago. He believed this country advanced the idea that "you can be successful in what you want to do" and be recognized for it—even if that something you wanted

to do was to be an artist. An avid watcher of Western TV shows during his childhood in Singapore, Yew thought of America, "This country really appreciates artists."

Of course, several years and NEA (National Endowment for the Arts) cuts later, the 31-year-old playwright realized that some of his ideas about the U.S. were an illusion. Regardless of this fact, pursuing an occupation in film, TV or theater was not feasible in Singapore, said Yew, and it was possible, despite barriers, in America.

So, at 16, he came to the U.S., to pursue his dream, which at the time was to be an actor.

"I had to take the leap, test the waters," remarked the playwright during a recent interview at the East West Players Theatre in Silverlake. He added jokingly, "Crocodiles—oh no!"

Despite the crocodiles in his path, Yew is making a living in America as an artist, but not as an actor. He is a playwright and also serves as the resident artist and director of the Asian Theatre Workshop at the Mark Taper Forum, where he commissions new Asian American writing, as well as produces and directs pieces.

Currently, his playwrighting work is being featured at the East West Players Theatre. Yew wrote "Whitelands," a trilogy of intensely moving plays dealing with issues of homophobia, racism, isolation, AIDS, assimilation, love and loss.

The trilogy includes "Porcelain," about a crime of passion involving an Asian teenager and his White lover victim in a public toilet in London; "A Language of Their Own," about relationships and the private language of lovers that can bring two people together, but also tear them apart; and "Half Lives," about a contemporary Asian family pursuing the elusive American dream.

Although the plays can be seen individually, the three parts, directed by East West Players' Tim Dang, is billed as an epic about "living, loving and longing" with a common theme of searching for a place to call home.

Yew said of "Whitelands," "Hopefully it's every man or woman's story. We all want to be part of this big group. When will this longing stop?"

"How do you break free of these categories and



Chay Yew

be the true person you want to be?" he continued. "We really have to break free. We are our own liberators."

Yew's own search for home, at the moment, has stopped at West Hollywood, where he resides, on a more figurative note, the playwright said his sense of home is defined by a place he can practice his craft with a certain amount of respect.

On that note, after being schooled in Singapore until he was 16, Yew came to Los Angeles and attended Pepperdine University, studying theater in the hope of becoming an actor. "As the story went, I couldn't get parts because I didn't look it," he explained. "So I left it."

But instead of abandoning theater altogether, he discovered another creative role he could play in theatrical storytelling—that of a writer. Yew said he loved actors because they possessed the power to control people's emotions, to move an audience. But he later realized "more creative control would be to direct and write."

"Who tells the story?" asked Yew. "The writer tells the story a lot. I always loved telling stories. My grandmother always told me stories in the oral tradition. She probably was very influential in the things I learned."

In fact, Yew's grandmother used to take him to see Chinese opera in Singapore, which was his first exposure to theater. He believes that is where the seeds of his love for storytelling and the theater were planted.

At 21, Yew returned to Singapore to complete his military service and became involved in the theater there. He wrote his first play, "As If He Hears," commissioned by Singapore's Theatre Works. The play, to promote AIDS awareness, was banned by the government initially because it was considered "sympathetic to the portrayal of homosexuals," said Yew.

Frustrated by the censorship, he was going to return to Los Angeles, but a friend urged him to make the project work. So Yew said he rewrote the play to make it "less gay" by removing select dialogue. But he skillfully rewrote the stage direction so the characters' gestures were "more gay," since the censors did not read stage direction.



SHANE SATO

Left to right, Radmar Agana Jao and Steve Park in a scene from "A Language of Their Own."

The Singapore audience who started out laughing at the gay character, at a certain point, started laughing with the character, observed Yew. He noticed that the play made people question themselves, so that by the end of the play, they were thinking, "It's so weird, I'm in touch with this person who's always been the subject of ridicule," said Yew.

But such is the power of theater, according to the award-winning playwright, who received the 1995 George and Elisabeth Marton Playwriting Award and GLAAD's Best Play of 1995 for "A Language of Their Own" and the 1993 London Fringe Award for Best Play for "Porcelain."

People of different ethnicities, sexual orientations and backgrounds can for a few hours enjoy an experience collectively. "People you're ordinarily not connected to become connected," said Yew. "They realize we're all bound by the same things."

"I wish there was a way we could do this for more than two hours."

With this perspective, Yew said he refuses to write plays that only target Asian American audiences. "The world is

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Universal Storyteller

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our stage," he said. "We cannot afford to be isolationists."

"One thing good about East West Players is that it also has non-Asian American audiences. And the works here not only represent, 'Hey, Asian Americans, it's only for you.' They can be enjoyed universally, so by the end of the day, [people] can say, 'How different we are, yet how similar.'"

Yew believes the people who should see plays about Asian Americans are White legislators who "need to see Asian Americans in a differ-

ent light." "Why preach to the converted?" he asked. "I'd rather watch 'Friends.'"

Speaking of TV, Yew dabbled in this medium while living in Boston, where he was studying for his masters in TV and film at Boston University. He worked as a writer and producer of a late-night series called "NightShift," whose target audience was college students. The initially obscure show, broadcast on WCVB-TV, became a top-rated series, attracting 2 to 3 million viewers and reaching cult status in New England.

Hosted by a character named Sebastian, the series addressed issues like date rape, sexism, homophobia and had one show dedicated to Asian American artists.

Although practicing his craft in the theater medium currently, Yew has not ruled out working again in TV. "I respect it as an art form," he said. "I hate to say it, but 'Friends' is very funny."

Yew added that for people his age or Generation X-ers to say they are not interested in TV is a lie. "TV was my babysitter," he said, pointing to Mary Tyler Moore, Farrah Fawcett and the "other two minor angels." "I saw America through their eyes."

In addition to doing TV again, the artist also sees directing and producing in his future. Does he still want to act? "Acting was a nice little dream," said Yew, and he wants

to leave it at that, preferring to write, direct and produce.

Although he came to America pursuing a dream, the playwright insists he is a realist. "There's no use being a dreamer if you come home to an empty bank account and you don't know where next month's rent is coming from," he said.

At a time when artists are not being given much financial support in the U.S., Yew urged the Asian American community to be more supportive of the theater. Citing institutions like East West Players, he remarked, "This preserves Asian American history and broadcasts it to other communities."

Yew cited "Whitelands" as further proof he is not a dreamer, but very much "awakened" to the realities of the elusive American dream, the elusive social acceptance of persons who are "different." "If I were a dreamer, I do not think I would write such sad pieces," he commented of the trilogy of plays which deal with a great deal of tragedy.

But, at the same time, as heavy as the subject matter gets in his plays, they also carry many moments of laugh-out-loud humor. Such a perspective reflects the playwright's own outlook on life.

"I think life is that way," explained Yew. "It is serious, and sometimes infused with so much humor... and some beautiful moments. It is bearable."

The "Whitelands" trilogy, presented separately and in marathon weekend performances, plays at the East West Players Theatre, 4424 Santa Monica Blvd., in Silverlake, through April 21. For schedule and ticket information, call (213) 660-0366.

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A Language Of His Own

Playwright Chay Yew
Searches for the
American Dream

By DEBORAH KLUGMAN

FEATURE

Perhaps it was the dismal prospect of performing in *The King and I* for the rest of his life that launched playwright Chay Yew on his singular path. Yew was a drama major

at Pepperdine and auditioning like crazy when he realized that the Hollywood dream to which he aspired just might not be his for the taking.

He'd arrived here from Singapore brimming with confidence, hoping for a career on the stage and in film. For Yew, Southern California was a foreign place, but American culture was an old friend. As a kid, he'd watched plenty of television.

But things didn't turn out as he expected. His readings at university auditions never landed him any roles. "Chay," a friend said to him one day, "the play you're reading for is English. The family is an English family, and they live in the Midlands. Somehow you just don't look the part."

Suddenly, Chay realized the obvious: he would need to leave Pepperdine; to make his mark, he would need to forge his own way.

That was eleven years ago, and much has transpired since then. The young drama student who couldn't land a part has emerged as a compelling playwright. *Whitelands*, a trilogy of his plays, opened March 14 at East West Players in Silverlake.

Rehearsals are still in progress as Yew lounges across an old upholstered chair in an office at the theater. It's a rainy afternoon, and Yew is discussing everything from his beginnings as an artist to new directions in

Asian-American theater. Yew loves to talk about his work; it's part of the passion with which he pursues his craft.

"I always think, when I'm writing, can I reach the audience, can I not reach them? What makes them tick? What makes them move?"



A Majority Of One

Caught Between Two Worlds, Asian-American Playwright Chay Yew Endeavors to Find Universal Themes in His Uncommon Experience

By Deborah Klugman

Yew keeps busy days, shuttling back and forth between East West and the Mark Taper Forum, where he serves as a resident artist and director of the Asian-American workshop. Various labels—gay, Asian, and Asian-American, Yew's work—which has been acclaimed from Singapore to London—defies easy categorization. A singular voice, he writes searching dramas which eclipse the very political themes upon which his works touch. Appealing to non-Asians as well as Asians, women as well as men, straights as well as gays, Yew's plays deal with universal themes: love, loss, and the need to belong.

Yew first captured the attention of Los Angeles audiences with his play *Porcelain*, which ran for four months at the Burbage Theatre in 1993. Prob-

ing and provocative, *Porcelain* tells the story of John Lee, a nineteen-year-old gay Asian man who murders his white lover in a public toilet. Commencing with the dirty deed—Lee is found cradling his dead lover in his arms—the play then recounts their relationship and explores the need that drove its protagonist to commit this desperate act. Premiering at the Etœtera Theatre in London, and then moving to the Royal Court, *Porcelain* won the 1993 London Fringe Award for Best Play (the British equivalent of the Obie) and has since been hailed not only in Los Angeles, but also in San Francisco, Chicago, and Dallas.

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Yew

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Yew family was part of the Chinese ethnic majority in straight-laced and politically repressive Singapore. His interest in the arts blossomed early and was inspired, oddly enough, by exposure to modern American culture via television.

"Growing up, like any kid in America, I had the TV, the babysitter. I sat and watched *Rhoda*, *Mary Tyler Moore*, even *Seam Street*. And I started to get emotionally involved in some of the things they were saying—about love, happiness—I found myself being Americanized in a very strange way and attracted to the idea that storytelling can be so fascinating, so vivid, so interesting. So I think it was quite natural that I went into TV, film, and theater."

Yew began to participate in school plays, much to the consternation of his conservative, business-minded father, who envisioned a more respectable career for his son. But Yew, who knew what he wanted, persevered. "At first, I saw myself as an actor," he recalls with a laugh. "Most people do. You don't want to be the person *behind* the set. You want to be *the star*. But when you're one of the few people in the school doing it, you also direct, do the sets, do everything. It's *Yentl*. It's Barbra Streisand 101. It's a great way to hone your tools."

Not until much later, when he was serving a required stint in the Singaporean military, did Yew happen upon an opportunity to write for the theater. "I was bored," he recalls. "The military is really nothing. I had a nine-to-five job. After that what are you going to do?" Yew says he often read in his spare time and did some acting with a local theater company called TheatreWorks. When the time came for the company to launch a new season, Yew inquired as to its program. He was told they were planning a new play, one not yet written, that would deal with AIDS and its explosion in Southeast Asia. No one had yet been commissioned to write the new project; Yew volunteered.

The result was Yew's first play, *As If He Hears*, about a gay social worker and his efforts to provide support to a straight heterosexual man who has AIDS. The inclusion of a sympathetic gay character both frightened and embarrassed the Singaporean censors. It disturbed them that the sick man resembled "the typical model Singaporean." Immediately, the play was banned. "The government was just frightened that it might be possible that a gay man or woman could be viewed positively," says Yew. "At the time I didn't want to fight this. Sometimes it's just no-win."

Yew put the incident behind him and left Singapore for graduate work at Boston University. (He had returned to his homeland after leaving Pepperdine.) But he soon got a call from TheatreWorks urging him to rewrite the play. Indifferent at first, the fledgling playwright nonetheless felt a sense of responsibility, toward both the company and his play's subject matter. "They had a point: AIDS in Asia was about to explode."

Yew felt that the censors would likely check the play for any gay lingo; he also knew that they were unlikely to be clever enough to read between the lines. Thus he rewrote his play to omit all homosexual allusions. Instead, he incorporated innuendoes into the stage directions in a way that made the sexual predilection of his gay character absolutely clear. The man spoke with a lisp. He quoted from movies. He glided across the stage.

Yew's ruse was successful; the play was approved for production, and despite its sanitized dialogue, the audience got the point. "When he glided in, the audience laughed. Without one word they knew who he was. But he was still a positive role model."



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As If He Hears enjoyed a long run, and its success proved one of the most gratifying events in Yew's career. "Many people who saw the play decided to support the Singapore AIDS Task Force," Yew recalls with satisfaction. "And a lot of people were more aware of gay characters. For the first time they felt like they could identify with a gay character instead of using him or her just as an object of ridicule."

Yew says the experience taught him to respect the unsaid. "I think words are wonderful, but I don't use them to say what the characters want to say. In fact, I want to say what's not said. In *Porcelain*, and even more in *A Language of Their Own* [Yew's next play], what is *not said* is ultimately the play."

Yew first conceived of *Porcelain* while reading a college-newspaper article about anonymous sex in public lavatories. "Basically, they were arresting these people in Boston—not only Boston University where I was, but Harvard, MIT. And I said to myself, what happens if the person who was going there went there for the wrong reasons—the need to be loved, the need to be wanted by people. What happens if something went wrong?"

Sparked by this question, Yew developed his project into a prospective television movie that served as his master's thesis. All of his characters were white originally. At the suggestion of an astute and supportive professor, Yew decided that it might be more interesting if his central character were Asian. But *Porcelain* was never realized as a TV movie, since there were no Asian students who could act the part, or wanted to.

Yew shelved the project, but not for long. An offer to be a writer-in-residence at the Mu-Lam Theatre took him to London, where he redesigned *Porcelain* as a stage play. With Yew's old school chum Glen Goei directing, the play became a knockout success, the spartan simplicity of its five-chair set a striking contrast to its gritty tangle of themes: racism, homophobia, homicidal passion. The play stirred audiences to compassion for the murderer, John Lee. Indeed, beneath its shocking surface lay a more plaintive theme: the notion, says Yew, "of wanting to fit in and of what one would do, what price one would pay, to be accepted, to be loved by the majority."

The theme of acceptance is also explored, albeit in a different way, in Yew's second play, *A Language of Their Own*.

Like *Porcelain*, *Language* begins with a question. "I decided to explore how gay men act towards each other in this thing called love," explains Yew. "Because they are men, they just can't seem to be with one another in an emotionally honest way. Why?"

Yew stumbled upon the starting point for this play one evening when he eavesdropped on a conversation in a restaurant. "This man and woman were sitting there and this man said to this girl, 'Hey, I don't think we should see each other any more.' And it was a shock. How could this man, this asshole, say this to this woman in a public place? What happened was that this woman was calm, but you knew that inside she was breaking apart. And I thought, Wow, what happens if someone says that at the top of the play and then [we

go on to] see what the relationship was all built on?"

Using "I don't think we should see each other any more" as a refrain, Yew composed *A Language of Their Own*, a play which examines three gay male couples and the psychological ties that bind. The play begins when Oscar, an assimilated Asian man who is HIV positive, breaks up with Ming, his younger Asian-American lover. Yew became exhilarated as he looked at these emotions. "I kept exploring the character of Oscar. He tends to be someone who is kind of a victim at the beginning of the play but turns out to be kind of a questionable character in the end. And he uses the lessons from his last relationship to get someone, but only because he's lonely. In the end he never says, 'I love you.'"

As acclaimed as *Porcelain* before it was, *A Language of Their Own* received the 1995 George and Elisabeth Marton Playwriting Award and was recognized as GLAAD's Best Play of the year. "I feel a certain achievement in *Language*," Yew says. "It's not a lofty play. I'm not telling the world some social issue. But I feel it's ultimately an essay of the heart—what people do to get one another and what they do to lose one another."

Indeed, despite its focus on relationships between gay males, *Language* has had broad appeal among women, who have often proved more receptive to the work. "I've always been astounded that most of my big breaks have been given to me by women," Yew says. "It took a woman at the Public Theater to champion *Language* and to get it made. She just understood it, and she made sure everyone else did." On the other hand, Yew admits that most men don't really appreciate *Language*. "Even the literary manager here, who is a man, said, 'This is not as interesting as your other play.'"

That doesn't surprise Yew. "*Porcelain* is more masculine," he observes. "I saw why people were intrigued by that—it was just pop, pop, pop, pop, pop. But I felt tired of that. I wanted to do something different. I hope eventually, at the end of my career, that I will have tried things that have failed and things that have worked, but that, in any case, I will have tried something new all the time."

Yew sees his experience at Pepperdine University as crucial to his artistic perspective. "I thought once I'd left Singapore and all that oppression, I'd have freedom on the wonderful sunny beaches of California. Wrong-o! At Pepperdine they were oppressive in some very interesting ways."

Those college days not only buoyed Yew's fighting spirit, it introduced him to a minority awareness that proved significant not so much in his life as in his work. "Personally, I've never felt like a minority," he says. "When I was growing up, I was in the majority. I was the one who was given. And I've never backed down from that position."

Despite his personal feelings on this

issue, Yew's work came to mirror a sense of displacement and a corresponding search for belonging. Central to *Porcelain*, for example, is the tale of a crow who longs to be a sparrow. Yew based it on an Ethiopian fable he encountered when he was in college. In Yew's version, the crow decides to fly to the tree of the sparrows, who, too genteel to point out his lack of grace, accept him. Eventually, however, the crow becomes homesick. But when he returns to the crows, he discovers that he no longer belongs in his old home either. He leaves, forced to seek out his own tree and spend the rest of his life in solitude.

Yew says the fable hit home when he went back to Singapore for a visit. In America, he felt, "he could never really belong." But in Singapore, too, there were problems: his friends had either changed or were unwilling to listen to the American ideas he brought back with him. "I came back with all these Americanisms—about democracy, about fighting for women's rights and gay rights. And meanwhile these people just don't want to deal with it because every time they deal with it the government is going to be breathing down their necks. And then I realized, God, this place called home is no longer home. Where do I belong now? Have I no choice but to find a tree?" With its eloquent, universal metaphor, the crow's story applies anywhere. "It's about anyone," says Yew. "We just want to belong. The girl who couldn't make it to cheerleading squad. The guy who couldn't be one of the boys." Yew points out that the fable might even serve as a symbol for such common experiences as working in an office and starting to feel out of place because there's someone younger or more aggressive threatening one's job.

Of the three plays in *Whitelands*, *Half Lives* relates most specifically to the immigrant experience. Yew terms it "an essay on America," saying, "It's one of my more domestic plays. It's basically about an Asian-American family. The husband is Asian-American, an architect, and he builds this shopping mall called *Whitelands*. All the characters are in pursuit of the American dream, dreams that were meant for movie stars."

Altogether, Yew says, the three plays that make up *Whitelands* are a search of this place called America, or this whiteland, where we need to find a home.

Yew's plays almost always start with a "what if" question relating to human behavior. After that, he does research, usually talking to people about their lives. In preparing *A Language of Their Own*, for example, Yew researched physical abuse between people of the same gender, gleaming first-hand accounts from friends and acquaintances. For *Half Lives*, he spoke with Asian women, whose prob-

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lems presented him with a new dramatic arena. "Women have different baggage," he says. "Being a mother is different. Being a wife is different. I just don't know how hard a woman can be and how ambitious and at what cost."

Spurred by a driving curiosity about human behavior, Yew sometimes questions the ethical appropriateness of his research. "Most people—a homeless person or someone who's been abused, for example—lose those lives. And then I come along and say, Hey, you know what? I'm gonna just touch your life, come into it for a few moments." And then what I've got is this great mind trip, and then I write this play, hopefully as honestly and truthfully as possible. It's cowardly in a way, but I guess most playwrights do it." Growing up in repressive Singapore has made Yew steer clear of politics and of identifying himself as a political person. "To be political in Singapore, you have to suffer quite a bit. They can lock you up in jail. When people call me political, I immediately freak out. It's a Pavlov-dog situation. It's conditioning."

That doesn't mean that educating and enlightening the audience isn't of prime importance to Yew—only that his approach is softer and more subtle than, say, Tony Kushner's. "Tony is political and his speeches are political, and I appreciate them. But meanwhile, my background has been from human connections. What can the human connection tell you about the bigger picture? I try not to be literal and obvious, and I think in that way I can be political yet not be."

As a minority artist, Yew welcomes the challenge of reaching out to the population at large. "Minority artists should not only speak to their own minorities. We know the issues. It's those Pat Buchanans who need to hear, those Jesse Helmses. How can you change them in two goddamn hours—not change them but question them, make them walk away with questions, thinking about something?" Minority or otherwise, few productions in Los Angeles present the kind of challenging drama that Yew would like to see more of. "Sometimes I feel there's no interesting work," he says. "There are just hiccups. It's these hiccups that are really exciting." As for the rest of what local theater offers, Yew finds it passionless, boring, or safe. "How many times can we see another Pinter

play? How many times can we see another Shepard? Why not at least do something really interesting? Do a Shepard play with trapezes—I would want to see that. L.A. is so very much a knockoff town, and what you have at the end of the day is lots of bad theater. There are some plays which are like a TV show. Now why would I pay \$10 or \$20 to see a TV show?"

Similar concerns color Yew's perspective on contemporary Asian-American theater. "I think they are so blind to just do one story over and over again," he says, speaking of a general propensity of Asian-American companies to stage plays about the Japanese internment. He thinks that if they're to be done at all, such works demand revitalization. Meanwhile, there are a host of other stories to be told. "There are tons of Asian minorities in L.A.," Yew declares, rattling off half a dozen questions that might serve as a starting point for a play. "How are Cambodians settling in here from a country which is torn by strife and war? How are neighborhoods which have Hmong and Vietnamese populations dealing with them? When dogs are missing in the neighborhood, and they always say it's the Vietnamese, is it true? What are their stories?"

As for Yew's own projects, in the immediate offing is one starring a Filipino dancer from the Paul Taylor Company. "I probably will do a text-based dance with him, using words and the repetition of words and rhythms. And you will see how a man lives a day in a life in New York City. I've also got some commissions that I'm trying to work on for the Public Theater."

In the long run, Yew hopes to move away from specifically gay and Asian themes. Not that he minds identification as an Asian or gay playwright—only that he does sometimes find it "annoying." "Artists just don't want to be pigeonholed," he says. "What we want is to be given a blank canvas."

Whatever the canvas or the tale, Yew is likely to pursue future works with the same fervent curiosity which he's applied in the past. And his twin aspirations remains the same: uncovering human truths and relaying them to as many people as he can. "In New York, my friend brought her mother to see *Language*. She was 80 and black and straight. And she was laughing and crying. And I said, 'Yeah, that's where it's at: the one from whom you're most removed shares the same space with you for two hours.' You've done something right. You've spoken to them. You've become part of them, and they've become part of you. That's the highest joy I have in theater." ■

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