

ENTERTAINMENT

'Whitelands' a powerful study in individuality, acceptance

By Daryl H. Miller
Daily News Theater Critic

The characters in "Whitelands" just want what we all want: to be included. Yet society sets them apart because of their ethnicity, their sexuality or their HIV status.

Their fate as outsiders — rejection, isolation and loneliness — courses through the three plays in

REVIEW

this collection, erupting in ways that are sometimes shockingly unpleasant, sometimes surpassingly beautiful, sometimes both at once. As staged at East West Players in Silver Lake, the action is almost balletic, with people coming together and flying apart, coming together and flying apart again. And the language is nearly poetic — colorful, evocative, graphic, exhilarating.

Chay Yew, a 31-year-old Singapore native who lives in Los Angeles, has begun to make a name for himself with two of these plays, "Porcelain" and "A Language of Their Own," already presented in Los Angeles and cities far and wide (including a much-praised staging of "A Language of Their Own" by the New York Shakespeare Festival last spring). The third play, "Half Lives," is brand new.

Many of Yew's characters are doubly and triply discriminated against as they face not only ethnic bigotry, but sexual and other prejudices as well.

The central character in "Porcelain" is a 19-year-old Chinese-British man who defiantly yet tenderly reveals to a criminal psychologist why he shot his white former lover to death in a public lavatory. In "A Language of Their Own," two Chinese-American men must adapt to new lives as their differences — perceptions of ethnicity, approaches to intimacy, HIV statuses and more — sunder their four-year relationship. And in "Half Lives," a Chinese-American family disintegrates under the pressures of prejudice — society's and their own.

Frustration tends to implode or explode on these characters. Too often, they internalize the prejudice, turning it on themselves and each other — thereby sabotaging their own fondest hopes.

Again and again, Yew's words and images sear themselves into the brain.

Bigotry is chillingly depicted in "Porcelain" as four white characters close in on the Asian youth and yell ethnic and sexual epithets at him, their screaming, distorted faces pressing ever closer to him. And loneliness is poignantly evoked in "A Language of Their Own" as the ex-lovers sit side by side, yet miles apart — one thrilling with hope and anticipation when



In "Half Lives," with Alec Mapa left, Tsai Chin and Dana Lee, a Chinese-American family disintegrates under the pressures of prejudice.

THE FACTS

- **The show:** "Whitelands."
- **Where:** East West Players, 4424 Santa Monica Blvd., Silver Lake
- **When:** Various dates and times, through April 18.
- **Running time:** One hour, 20 minutes for "Porcelain"; two hours for "A Language of Their Own"; one hour, 20 minutes for "Half Lives."
- **Tickets:** \$20 per play or \$50 for all three.
- **Our rating:** ★★★★★

the other's knee distractedly leans against his, then watching with a look of fathomless loss as it pulls away.

Descriptions of sex and violence are sometimes graphic — as if Yew is daring the viewer to be offended. Yet he and director Tim Dang often manage to co-opt these words and images into visions of astonishing beauty. In "Porcelain," for instance, descriptions of the blood-spattered public toilet are evoked in dozens of origami cranes that the imprisoned young man folds from pieces of red paper and sets at his feet.

Dang's direction subtly underscores the play's themes. Painterly use of lighting leaves actors in mere silhouette — suggesting the shadowy nether regions of the human soul. And his staging of the hot-and-cold-running emotion in "A Language of Their Own" is almost a dance, with characters hovering close to each other for a few moments and then skittering to opposite sides of the stage.

The performances are uniformly excellent, with particularly fine work by Alec Mapa as the tortured youth in "Porcelain" and the



Alec Mapa plays a tortured youth in "Porcelain."

upward-reaching son in "Half Lives," as well as Eric Steinberg as the bold lover and Steve Park as the more cautious and reserved one in "A Language of Their Own."

The three plays are only loosely connected by theme; none of the characters recur from play to play. Viewers have the option of seeing any one — or all — of the shows, which are presented various evenings or in daylong weekend marathons.

Only "Half Lives" — with its rather over-the-top depictions of the American dream gone bad — doesn't quite measure up to the others. But give a listen to what Yew has to say; it's some of the most thrilling work issuing from Los Angeles' stages.

White Heat

Yew Trilogy Proves Engrossing But Uneven

By Neal Weaver

Few playwrights have the good fortune to chart new territory. Writer Chay Yew has managed it by dealing with gay themes in an Anglo-Asian context. His plays have been seen and acclaimed in London, Los Angeles, New York, and elsewhere. Now, East West Players has assembled a marathon three-play cycle called *Whitelands* which allows us to see Yew's work in a larger perspective.

Whitelands is the obviously symbolic name of a shopping mall which figures in each of the plays, even though they are set, respectively, in London, Boston, and Los Angeles. The plays share a common style (an elegant, stripped-down abstract realism) and common themes, but vary considerably in quality and content.

protests, but he leaves. In time, each of them takes another lover. But the new lovers know, in their hearts, that they are living in the shadows of their predecessors. It's not, on the face of it, much of a plot. But character, not plot, matters here. The action is achingly emotional and subterranean, emerging as a subtle, intricate, heart-breaking, and occasionally brutal romantic/erotic minutiae.

This production lacks the surface sensuality of the previous staging, but it's stronger and cuts deeper, and the four actors are superb. Steve Park deftly reveals the understated wit and painful vulnerability beneath Oscar's awkward charm. Art Desuyo makes Ming into an almost heroic figure, only slowly allowing us to perceive



Leo, Chin, and Mapa

The tightly written *Porcelain* centers on a brutal murder. A young man has been shot in a public lavatory. The killer is Tom Leo, a young Chinese student, found cradling the corpse in his arms and weeping over it. He has confessed his crime but not explained it. Now he sits in silence, endlessly making origami birds of crimson paper. The court-appointed psychiatrist must make him talk and determine whether he's sane enough to stand trial. In a style and structure reminiscent of *Equus*, the story is revealed in bits and pieces and reflected through the prism of other voices: the cynical and manipulative psychiatrist, a ruthless television newsmen, the boy's father, the murdered man himself.

Tom is a quiet, repressed, but effeminate gay boy, rejected by the white majority because he's Asian, by his Chinese family because he's gay, and by the gay subculture because he's Asian, effeminate, and shy. His life is briefly transformed when he thinks that he has at last found a lover. When he's subjected instead to physical abuse and betrayal, desperation erupts in violence.

Alec Mapa, seen previously in Los Angeles as the cross-dressing diva in *M. Butterfly*, skillfully captures Tom's porcelain stillness, and the lurking rage which can emerge only in self-defensive arrogance and clipped, brittle, Bette Davis-like diction. Tom Jameson artfully sketches the engaging faux sympathy of the duplicitous psychiatrist. Tom Donaldson is persuasive as Tom's rigidly conventional father, Phil Oakley is suitably obnoxious as the sleazy newsmen, and Thomas Weber is handsome and conflicted as the ill-fated cockney lover.

A Language of Their Own revealed its considerable merits in an earlier production at the Celebration Theatre, and a second viewing re-emphasize its strengths. It's the most organic and least contrived of the three plays, the richest and most fully dramatized, and certainly the most moving.

Oscar and Ming are lovers. Ming is handsome, virile, and demonstrative, while Oscar is a charming nebbish and terribly inhibited. Oscar has tested positive for AIDS and feels he must break with Ming; it's not fair to expect Ming to stay on and take care of him. Awareness of the disease has created deep chasms between them. Ming

his selfishness and fear of commitment. Ben Shepherd, as Robert, movingly captures the agonizing fatalism of a man too much in love (or too emotionally dependent) to break with the lover he knows will abuse and betray him. And Radmar Agana Jao finds the gallantry, stoic loyalty, and iron strength in a boy who seems at first to be only a smug and silly little queen.

Half Lives is the most ambitious of the plays, but it's also the least successful. The plot recalls Arthur Miller's *All My Sons*, and given the vast burden of woes heaped on the father character, it also suggests the *Book of Job*. But here, the embittered workaholic father is such a dyp and wimp that it's hard to care about his fate. And unlike Job's, his faith is futile. His narrow, rigid, intolerant Christianity can drive him to disown his gay son, but it affords him no strength in adversity. While mother and son are viewed with some degree of sympathy, the father is virtually a nincompoop, set up only to be knocked down.

There are effective scenes and provocative moments, and the three characters are clearly drawn. The Singaporean-born mother, in particular, is richly observed. But in the end, the play seems like a writer's vendetta, designed to punish the parents for rejecting their gay son.

Chinese-born Teal Chin is, to some extent, reprising the tough, pragmatic mothers she played in *The Woman Warrior* and *The Joy Luck Club*, but she does it powerfully and well. Alec Mapa, in high contrast to his role in *Porcelain*, plays the son as a kind of gay all-American boy, tough and extroverted enough to survive even as a street hustler and male stripper. As the unfortunate father, Dana Lee works hard, and he has a couple of brutally effective scenes with his son. But the author's lack of compassion has stacked the deck against him.

Tim Dang directs with elegant simplicity, sharp focus, and evenhanded sympathy. And Akalme Mitterfeiner's set is as bare and white as an operating theater, designed to focus attention entirely on the psychic and physical action. ■

Whitelands

At East West Players through April 21
For information call (213) 660-0366.

CORRECTIONS:

Last week's review of Chay Yew's *Whitelands* incorrectly identified the actor playing Ming as Art Desuyo. Eric Steinberg starred in the role. The review also wrongly referred to a character as Tom Leo rather than John Lee.

Renard Garr took the photos for last week's feature story "A Majority of One."

WHITELANDS Chay Yew's beautiful prose alone justifies East West Players' decision to produce a festival of three of his plays, all elegantly directed by Tim Dang. An obsession with language runs through these narrative chorales, with scenes interposed. One character will keep finishing another's sentence, suggesting that the characters understand each other, but the device actually underscores their misunderstandings. Dang is absolutely right to stage the plays on Akeime Mitterlehner's white, raked platform stage, spliced by two blood-red pillars — a spartan setting that focuses attention upon Yew's intricate linguistic patterns. In another astute directorial choice, the actors seldom look at each other when they speak — keeping the plays' proportions operatic rather than soap operatic. Both *Porcelain* and *A Language of Their Own* (previously produced in L.A.) are about being possessed, in a desperately romantic, pathological sense. Yew's latest effort, *Half Lives*, is about the opposite, being *dispossessed*, though all of his characters endure the unbearable anguish of falling off the map — people marginalized by their ethnicity and/or sexual orientation, who have no place to call home. In *Porcelain*, a young Chinese-Englishman named John Lee (Alec Mapa) shoots his Caucasian lover (Thomas Weber) to death in the Bethnal Green lavatory where they first met while "cottaging" (having sex in public toilets). Rather like an Asian-gay-angled *Equus*, the motives unfold after the incident, mostly through interviews with a psychologist named — with a nod to Oscar Wilde — Jack Worthing (Tom Jameson), through flashbacks and a kaleidoscope of TV interviews. (As Lee's father, Tom Donaldson delivers a shame-drenched confession to a news team, in broken

English, that is heartwrenching.) As Worthing, Jameson resembles a young, English Tom Hanks — slightly oafish in Worthing's attempts at sensitivity, and blustering with rage when he's clearly outwitted. But the production ultimately turns on the sly facetiousness of Mapa's cherubic, agonized killer, guilty mainly of presuming that his newfound love was something, someone, he could own. Act 1 of *A Language of Their Own* smacks of *The Odd Couple* when taciturn, fastidious Chinese-American Oscar (Steve Park) tells Ming (a suave Eric Steinberg) — the far more spontaneous, assimilated partner — that they shouldn't see each other anymore. Their four-year partnership has been shattered by Oscar's HIV-positive diagnosis. Oscar confides to us that he doesn't want Ming to endure the responsibility of caring for him. (That he doesn't discuss this with Ming before breaking up is a condescension that spurs Ming's justifiable rage.) Love and loyalty are tested when Oscar and Ming each find a new partner — Oscar with a prissy yet sturdy narcissist (the fine Radmar Agana Jao) who dutifully ushers Oscar through his diseases, Ming with a sensitive, Caucasian romantic (Ben Shepard) whom he beats. They all suffer bouts of jealousy and remorse in their restless, futile search for a common language in romance. *Half Lives* dramatizes a pitch being made by a porno actor (Mapa) for a serious film about the story of his family. In it, a mother (Tsai Chin) is brought to America from Singapore after duping a Chinese-American architect (Dana Lee) into marrying her. In America, the housewife looks patronizingly upon her workaholic husband as a "model immigrant," as spineless and affable as a guest in some-

body else's home. One day, long after their son is already working in Hollywood as a hustler, a shopping mall that the father designed collapses, and with it, any remaining vestiges of the couple's American Dream. Yew's portrait of despondency is executed in sweeping literary brushstrokes, which makes it a far less nuanced and satisfying work than the others. Furthermore, Lee isn't able to meet Yew's linguistic demands, though Chin is simply a treasure. The characters all loathe each other with a blistering authenticity, but their anger is not to be confused with the play's. Anger is small, and Yew is no small writer; behind the characters' rage lies the plays' far more elegiac tone of regret — the spike on which Yew's world spins. *East West Players*, 4424 Santa Monica Blvd., Silver Lake; *Porcelain* perfs Wed., 8 p.m., Sat.-Sun., 2 p.m.; *A Language of Their Own* perfs Thurs., 8 p.m., Sat.-Sun., 4 p.m.; *Half Lives* perfs Fri.-Sun., 8 p.m.; thru April 21. (213) 660-0666. (Steven Leigh Morris)

A Moment With MOMO

By
Momoko Murakami

'Half Lives', the third of Chay Yew's trilogy, 'Whitelands', reflects the tragedy of a man who does the right thing and is destroyed because he did the right thing. It is the third of the East West Players' 1995/96 season's productions.

Only an hour and twenty minutes long, it exposes layer by layer, dimension by dimension, the deconstruction of a construction by an architect who did the right thing. The slow unfolding exposure reminds one of a noh play. The personal and structural destruction reminds one of a Greek tragedy.

Fortunately the actors' emotions are subdued. This play could have been composed of screeching confrontations of man and wife, father and son. The audience's attention then would have been focused on a series of emotional apexes, the catharses. To be sure, there were emotional scenes: husband and wife confrontations, father learning his only son is a homosexual.

But the underlying tragedy



Pictured l-r: Alec Mapa, Tsai Chin and Dana Lee in 'Whitelands: Part III - Half Lives' by Chay Yew. Through April 21 at East West Players.

Photo: Gary Kuwahara

of the consequences of the right decisions, the right actions of the moment, the circumstance, supersedes the raw surface emotions. The tragedy in all its manifestations, all its dimensions are suggested from the ripples of the confrontation, the potential of the action.

As with all human decisions, the consequence can go any one of three ways: it can be the right thing to do and lead to recognition, it can be the wrong decision with its consequences; and it can simply move the status quo along. Unfortunately for the father, Dana Lee, he did the right thing and he was destroyed.

On a trip to Singapore he meets a woman, Tsai Chin, last seen in *The Woman Warrior*. She tells him she is pregnant. He does the right thing, he marries her. As time passes and she does not seem to manifest any signs of pregnancy, he doubts her. She has a miscarriage. She insists with some angry emotion that she fell down the stairs. There are only four steps. She fell. This marriage structure is unstable from the beginning. In time it collapses.

They do become the parents of a son, Alec Mapa, last seen on the Los Angeles stage in *M. Butterfly*. He was A. Mapa then. When he admits to his father he is a homosexual, the father, a fourth generation Chinese American workaholic model minority and Christianized can only refer to a Biblical passage, Leviticus 20:13. "If a man lies with a man as one lies with a woman, both of them have done what is detestable. They must be put to death; their blood will be on their own hands."

He suffers the crushing pain of seeing his son perform in an adult entertainment theater. He adds to his own pain when he goes backstage to meet the performer trying to remain incognito. The son knows who his visitor is. But he refuses to live a half life. He insists on living his life to the fullest, no compromises.

The father was too busy working to spend time with his son. Gave him money instead to go buy something. The son wishes the father had at least selected something for him.

The father is the architect responsible for designing and building a mall, the largest mall in the city with over two hundred stores. He was ordered to build it within a certain budget and within a certain time. He compromised on quality. He compromised on workmanship. He built it within the budget and within the time frame demanded. He worked hard

to fit in. He even received a bonsai for his years of faithful service. But he was always the friendly Oriental down the hall.

Until the mall collapsed. It is small wonder the concept of responsibility is so elusive. Responsibility means scapegoat, blame. Somebody has to be blamed. Now the friendly Oriental man down the hall is a pariah. His co-workers avoid eye contact. The security guard escorts him out of his office. He cannot even retrieve his bonsai, the only symbol of his service to the company.