

Privy Politics

When a young Chinese man living in London kills his white, working-class lover in a public lavatory, the event provokes a storm of soul-searching, both public and private. While the outside world speculates about his motives, John Lee sits in a prison cell folding paper cranes. When he finally tells his side of the story, the act releases a tide of emotion that touches on racism, homophobia, domestic violence and the pain of rejected love.

The crime of passion at the heart of *Porcelain* isn't based on a true story, but it feels as gripping as the latest headline. Playwright Chay Yew was a graduate student at Boston University when campus police arrested several men for having sex in public restrooms. Yew became fascinated with the cases: "I became an encyclopedia of lavatory-sex information," he jokes.

As a playwright-in-residence at London's Mu-Lam Theatre, Yew worked his material into a voice play that was as verbally rich as it was physically austere. Five men were seated on stage: John Lee and a chorus of four voices.

For its third production—*Porcelain* opened the season at San Francisco's Theatre Rhinoceros, and is currently running through Oct. 16—director Adele Prandini mounts the play in a more expansive, physical style. Avant-garde musician Donald Swearingen provides "toilet music," a haunting collage of dripping water, clanging and clanking partly recorded in the theatre's bathrooms. A urinal hangs over the stage, giving audiences a dead-on view of the drain.

But for all these accouterments, *Porcelain* is about more than toilet sex. "The base of it is about wanting to belong," says Yew. John feels like an outsider in his family because he's gay, but he

feels cut off from the men he desires because he's Chinese. He engages in anonymous sex, yet he's really looking for affection. When one man takes him home, John falls in love, even though he's mistreated and then is unceremoniously dumped.

But where some see a tragic love story, others see a controversial drama of racial self-hatred. Yew's no stranger to controversy (one of his plays was banned in his native Singapore because of its sympathetic treatment of a character with AIDS), but he prefers to frame the story in terms other than race. "This is about a doomed love affair and about a person trying to find his own little niche in the world," he says. "There's a place for politics—it's called the government. For me, theatre is about storytelling."

Still, *Porcelain* feels so provocative precisely because of the issues it raises about sexual and racial politics. The play contains a harrowing rape scene that brings up issues of violence and vulnerability among men. "This is a play that bangs on a lot of emotional doors," says Prandini. "In many ways, this could be a battered woman's story." That kind of universality would probably suit Yew. "There are so many things to write about," he says, sighing. "And I don't like to be boxed in." —Heather Mackey



Porcelain at Theatre Rhinoceros with Phillip Begin, left, and Mikael Duden.

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