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METRO ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT WEEKLY



"Where
are
our
gay
poets?
Our
gay
sportspeople?
Why
are



we
choosing
people
who
are
porn
stars
to
be
our
icons?"

THE
LANGUAGE
OF
CHAY
YEW

INTERVIEW AND PHOTOGRAPH BY RANDY SHULMAN

WHICH CAME FIRST, THE QUESTION or the answer? In the case of Chay Yew, it's sometimes hard to tell.

It's a brisk Sunday morning and Yew, who has come to Washington from LA to see the Studio Secondstage's stunning production of his work, *A Language of Their Own*, is sitting in the theater answering a reporter's questions. Well, not so much answering as using them as springboards to let his mind wander through a fertile field of ideas – ideas about gay life, love, icons, and culture.

At 30 years old, the Singapore-born Yew is emerging as one of America's great new playwriting voices. His works *Porcelain* and *Language* – part of a trilogy that will include the forthcoming *Half Lives* – are compelling explorations of life as seen from a gay Asian perspective. But as with all great drama, his works strive for a sense of intimacy, immediacy, and universality. And like his contemporary Tony Kushner, Yew is not content to sit back and take what is forced to him. He questions everything. Everything. It is, as he notes, the very reason why he writes.

METRO WEEKLY: Talk to me about the origins of *A Language of Their Own*.

CHAY YEW: My mother said to me, "Why don't you write a story about love?" And I said, "Okay, why not?" But, of course, my ideals of love are not the same as hers, not the same as those MGM musicals with Judy Garland and Mickey Rooney. I've seen love sought, love lost, love destroyed amongst my friends. And then I was in a restaurant, and overheard someone say to someone else, "I don't think we should see each other anymore." It was so weird to hear such an intimate exchange between two people. And I said to myself, "I should begin the play with that phrase." Of course, that set the play's tone. So I went on to explore this thing called love: the beauty of it, the adventure of it, the dark side of it.

METRO: There's a lot of complexity in the way the story unfolds. So many contemporary playwrights take a linear narrative path, but you jump back and forth in time, constantly shifting perspectives. The first act plays out like a poetic stream of consciousness.

CHAY: Some playwrights write scenes, but I get bored doing that. I wanted to try something different, because I thought love is

very weird, right? It's like air, it flows. But sometimes it stagnates....

The reason why I write is because sometimes I have questions, but I just don't know how to answer them. And by posing these questions in a dramatic way, I basically [find] a storyline.

METRO: Compared to the first act, the second is almost a jolting departure in tone.

CHAY: I deliberately wrote the second act in a different style. I wanted to explore a different momentum now with different characters. But yet it's interwoven into the first.

METRO: While *Language* addresses a specific group – gay Asians – it also strikes a chord of universality.

CHAY: I try not to write for specific audiences. I think minority theater should break out of that mold because when you preach the same messages over and over again, especially to those people who already know those messages, they eventually stop responding to what you're talking about. Theater should be available to people who don't usually belong to this world, because only theater can bring all varieties of people together to witness an emotional moment, a universal truth, or a point of view that they could be alien to. And that, to me, is

why I write. Because if I write for my people only, I feel myopic.

METRO: *Language* seems to be a tough experience for the individual performers.

CHAY: It is. It's very layered. When I was speaking to the [Studio Secondstage] cast last night I was saying,

"There are many ways to say a certain moment, but you have to choose it. And sometimes you shouldn't choose it, because the audience will fill it in." I've always believed that plays or theater should allow the audience to participate, not in a physical way, but in an emotional way.

METRO: All the characters in *Language* wear some kind of emotional mask at some point.

CHAY: True. I think gay men wear masks all the time because we have to be something that we're not – that's what gay society is all about. Who are our role models? They're white, beautiful looking young men. What happens when you're not young anymore? What happens if you're not white? What happens if you're not exactly good looking, or don't have a full head of hair, or don't have a chiselled, defined chest? Then you don't belong to this group. The funny thing is that we all have this ideal icon – and I think this icon has to be gotten rid of.

Where are our gay poets? Our gay men who are sportspeople, who competed against everyone and still came out on top? Who are our gay leaders in politics? Why are we choosing people who are porn stars to be our icons?

Recently I met a gay couple who had stayed with each other for fifty years. And I was really amazed. And when I spoke to them, I realized, "God, what a wealth of information and history. Why am I learning all these things about Jeff Stryker when I can learn so much from these people—people who lived through different times." I wish that we elevated [gay couples] more, instead of putting them into shadows. We come from a lot of persuasions, and usually the ones we see are the ones who are beautiful and ready to go.

METRO: You were raised in Singapore until you were sixteen, more than half your life. Then you came here, to America. Culturally, where do you feel most aligned?

CHAY: That's a question that I've been pursuing through my trilogy of plays, the White Lands trilogy [which includes *Porcelain*, *Language*, and an forthcoming work entitled *Half Lives*]. The trilogy came from an Aesopian fable which I kind of took liber-

ties of [appropriating]. It is the story about a black crow in a tree. When the crow saw another tree over yonder with sparrows, he was intrigued. The sparrows always sang, they flew in fancy formations, they ate nicely, they were beautiful and dainty. And this crow was like, "Cool. I want to join them." So he packs his bags and flies away to the other tree. At the other tree, the sparrows are first very suspicious of him. They resented him, but were curious about this object. Eventually, the crow joined them in singing. Of course, the crow sang out of tune, ate very sloppily, flew clumsily in his formations. But sooner or later he was part of the group and was happy.

After some time the crow realized that he didn't feel like he belonged. He did the things of the sparrow, but he could never be the sparrow. So he flew back to the tree of crows. And it was very strange, because the crows started observing new things happening in this particular crow: He sang on key, he flew in formation, he ate in very small bits. And they grew suspicious of him. So in the end, the crow bade farewell to the crow tree and went to a different tree. And in this tree was only him. And the crow lived in that tree, alone.

In the trilogy called White Lands—*Porcelain* is a young man who tries to assimilate into a big culture that he wants to be a part of. That's when the crow has flown in and he is trying to belong. *Language* is when the crow is learning how to sing, how to eat, and so on. And then *Half Lives* is when the crow realizes that no matter what you do, you can never, ever belong, so you leave. And when you leave, you realize you can never go back. So the only place to be is in between.

METRO: Where do you belong?

CHAY: When I was younger, I thought I was American. So glad I was to shake off anything that was of Asian origin. I assimilated very well. I learned the accent. I was a Valley Boy. And then I went back for a time to Singapore, and returned to America and realized I'm seeing America in a different light. I still love this country but I question it more—the only way that you can allow society to go forward is by questioning it. But I realized that no matter how American I can be, or how assimilated, or how much I belong in this community, I don't think I will ever belong.

METRO: Do you feel alone on your tree?

CHAY: No, because I bring a

lot of other birds to my tree. I collect people—that's very strange. It sounds like Truman Capote—but I do. I do it because I enjoy a lot of people, and I recognize in them a sense of sometimes not belonging. Gay people don't really belong [in America]. We all want to. And it's smart that we have carved our own kind of country within America. And within that country are little cities with their own little laws. The best way to tell a gay society is go into a gay bar. You see different types of people gathered together. And they all have their own kind of identity. Which is

interesting, but rarely do those communities or identities meet each other.

We know what we want, we know what we like, we know what we can create out of our culture, and it's good, because if we try to assimilate, I think we'll lose our own unique perspective. There wouldn't be *Priscilla*, for example. That's very unique to us, you see, that's our [gay] culture.

METRO: Have you found love in your life?

CHAY: Not really, but I think I've found shades of it. And it's interesting because in my play I question it: Have I found love and then thought that it wasn't the

one, and I went looking for something else only to have let it go? What if that was the big love and I'm too fucked up to see that all I wanted was this perfect icon and all I find for the rest of my life are pale carbon copies. All I can say is, finding love cannot be an obsession for me. If it happens, it happens. Meanwhile there are plays to write. Places to go see. Friends to have lunch with. Things to do. People to destroy. [Laughs.] Things like that. ■

A Language of Their Own plays Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays through November 19, at the Studio Secondstage, 1333 P Street NW. Call (202) 332-3300.

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