

Lambda

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a review of contemporary gay and lesbian literature

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Fusion

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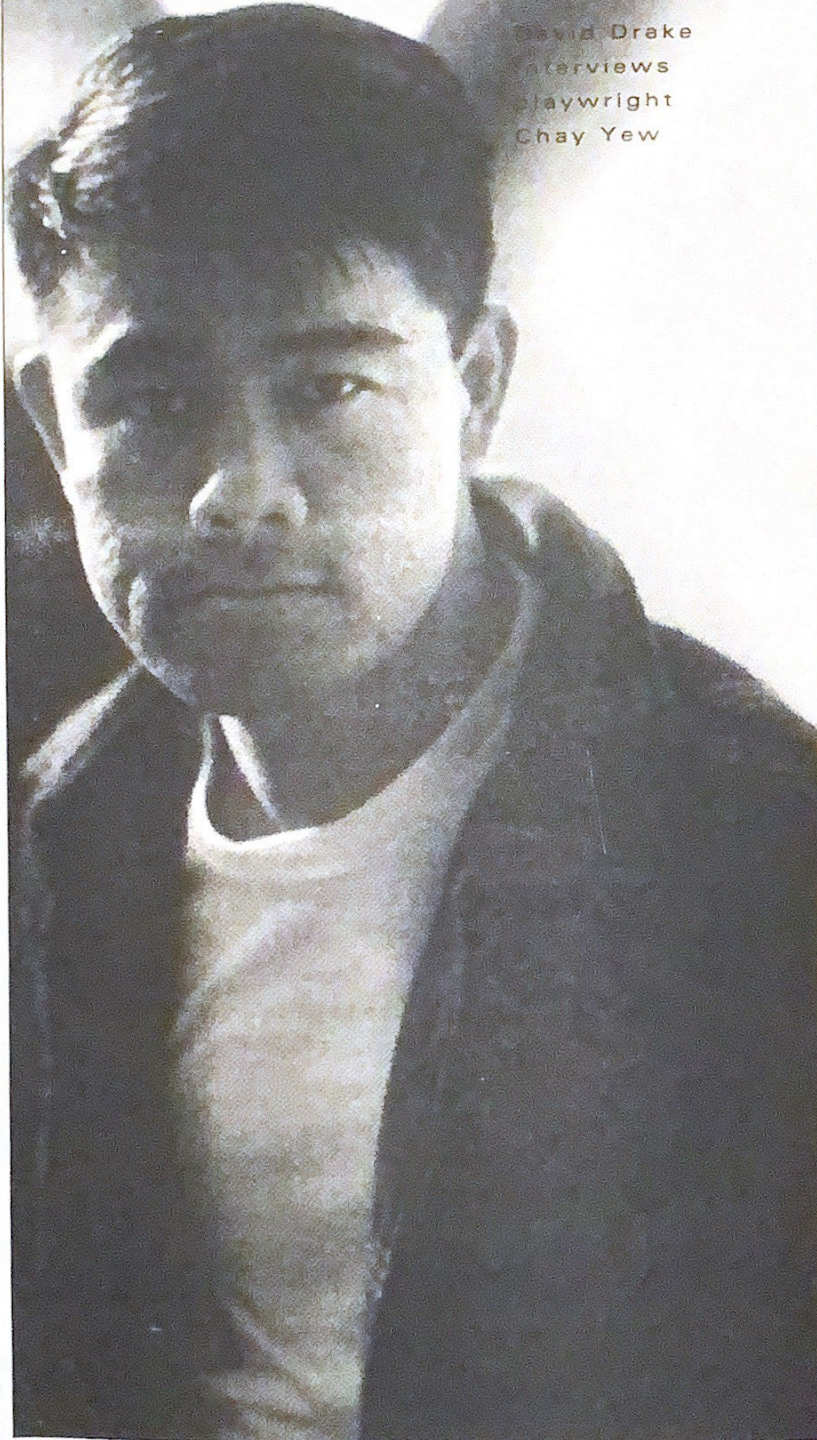


photo by Jose Pombo

Born in Singapore 32 years ago, educated at Pepperdine and Boston Universities in the United States, Chay Yew has emerged as one of the most promising Asian American playwrights on the world stage today. And the only one who's openly gay.

I must confess, I know Chay. I had the honor of acting in his Off Broadway debut, *A Language of Their Own* at the New York Shakespeare Festival's Public Theater back in 1995. A four-character play that starred B. D. Wong, Alec Mapa, Francis Jue and me, *Language* went on to win a GLAAD Media Award as Best Play of the season, along with the George and Elisabeth Marton Playwriting Award and a Lammy nomination for the published edition from Grove Press.

For the past three years he's been working at the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles. Knowing Chay, it came as no surprise when I asked, for the record, what is your title? and he said, "Diva in Residence." (Off the record, make that Resident Artist, as well as running the Asian Theatre Workshop, where he develops new theatre work by Asian American artists.)

Just back from Intiman Theatre in Seattle, where he's been rattling off re-writes for the premiere of his newest play *Red*, Yew's star is clearly rising, as I always knew it would. Upon returning to his home in L.A., Yew was informed that he'd won this year's Robert Chesley Playwriting Award.

After *Red* opens in Seattle, productions are slated for Portland Center Stage in Oregon, Connecticut's Long Wharf Theater and then, this Spring, at the prestigious Manhattan Theater Club in New York City.

David Drake: *Red*. What's it about?

Chay Yew: It's fundamentally a story about a best-selling romance novelist, an Asian Barbara Cartland, who goes to China to research the subject of her next book: the relationship between a male Chinese Opera star and a female Red Guard who interrogates him during the Cultural Revolution.

DD: Where did the idea come from?

CY: It came from so many different places. That's how my plays usually originate; never from one source but from the fusion of many. I think it was originally born out of my immediate response to the American government's, particularly Newt Gingrich's, move to shut down the NEA. I got infuriated because this country is one of the super-powers of the world, and yet we don't have public funding, don't have support for the arts—which I find amazing. It's a sharp contrast to Europe and Asia. I felt a lot of anger.

DD: I've found that anger has often been a

fertile artistic starting point in my own work.
CY: I agree. For me, it was the picture of this pompous, ultra-conservative screeching "Look, we're going to control art, we want art to be a certain way. And if your art is contrary to my beliefs and values, we're cutting your funding." In a democracy, surely this is the purest form of censorship. And, in an ironic way, it's really Communism at work. "There is only one way to view art. There is only one way to do art. The government's way." What about the freedom of speech? The freedom of expression? What was this country built on? Did I forget something? Look at the remnants of ancient civilizations: People perish, buildings are demolished, but the art lives on and enriches future generations. It begs the question: What will we hang on the walls of museums thousands of years from now? What will we give our children and descendants? Our economics? Our stupid laws? The fucking Starr Report? I'm incensed by the short-sightedness and selfishness of American politicians that use art as a weapon to further their ambitions. With this swirling in my mind, I needed to find a conduit to express my feelings.

DD: And that's where *Red* began?

CY: Yes. In an interview with Tsai Chin two years ago [Chinese actress best known to US audiences from the movie *Joy Luck Club*, and more recently on Broadway in David Henry Hwang's play *Golden Child*], she talked about the purging of her father, a famous Beijing opera star, during the Cultural Revolution in China. I said it was the same thing that was occurring in the United States: government controlling art. And she said, "No, it's not. Lives were not lost." She added, "You must know more about the Cultural Revolution. You must read my book!" So I did. (It's a great read, actually—her autobiography *Daughter From Shanghai*—very dishy [laughs].)

And after reading and researching the Cultural Revolution, as I began writing *Red*, I saw it as a metaphor for the way the government in America feels about the arts today.

DD: And so?

CY: That was my response to Mr. Gingrich and to all the Gingriches of this country.

DD: Actually, you have quite a history with government censorship in the arts. Wasn't one of your first plays banned back in Singapore?

CY: Yes. That's why I am particularly sensitive about the de-funding of the NEA and the recent controversy that erupted over Terrence McNally's *Corpus Christi*. It was 1988 and I had gone back to Singapore to work with TheatreWorks, a theater company there. As I studied that year I saw that they had a slot for a play about AIDS, and—fasci-

nated—I said, "Who's writing this play?" And they said, "No one yet." And I said, "Oh. How much does it pay?" And they said "\$500." And I said "I'm writing it." [We both laugh.]

At the time I was much influenced by Larry Kramer's work, as you were. Watching *The Normal Heart* at the Public Theatre was a major turning point in my life—where I realized that theater could really be socio-politically charged with a rich emotional life. So I decided to use what I learned from Kramer's work in my first play, *As If He Hears*.

DD: So what happened?

CY: When TheatreWorks submitted the play to the government for vetting [a mandatory practice there], they read it and objected to the main character who was gay. Since I didn't portray him as a limp-wristed, effete character made for ridicule and comedy, it was quite difficult for them to digest.

The play centered on a relationship between this character (a gay social worker) and the model Singaporean male—heterosexual, well-off—who gets infected with AIDS from his frequent business trips to Bangkok.

The imbalance, and perhaps inversion, of power that the government perceived in that relationship made them uncomfortable, and they basically said that it was "contrary to their social value system to have a homosexual character portrayed positively onstage."

DD: Wow.



"You can never belong to a tree of crows or a tree of sparrows. You belong to a tree of your own because you're in-between."

Alec Mapa in "Porcelain" photo by Shane Sato

CY: So they banned it, and I said fuck it, and came back to the States. But then a little while passed and the artistic director of TheatreWorks, Ong Keng Sen [who also directed *A Language of Their Own* at the Public], called me and said that they still wanted to produce *As If He Hears*. Keng said it was important that a play about AIDS be produced in Singapore as AIDS was about to reach epidemic proportions in Asia in the late Eighties. I agreed and did the appropriate rewrites. But what I did, really, was a devious thing. Like one of those "writing exercises" you find in the playwrighting manual—"How Not To Write Literally."

Basically I maintained the character's homosexuality, but I excised all the Larry Kramer-isms, you know—pounding on a pulpit stuff. Instead, I wrote in subtext. So, in a way, I made him gay-er—he glided in onstage with a lisp, but he still had the same integrity and coif. Since he was fey, the audience laughed at the character on first sight. But by the end of the play, they totally empathized with him.

See, when the government had vetted the [re-written] play they couldn't read the...

DD: ... the "acting" part of it?

CY: Yeah, they only read the dialogue. Not between the lines where the characters lived and felt. So, I won a little battle there.

DD: Has the publication of *A Language of Their Own* inspired more productions of the play?

CY: Some [new productions] came of it that way, but what's been fascinating for me is students reading and studying the play in college classrooms now. It's been really interesting to get enthusiastic responses clear across the boards—straight, gay, male, female, Asian, non-Asian.

DD: "Interesting," how?

CY: They seem to identify wholeheartedly with the characters that I have written about gay and Asian. No barriers. I think there has been a greater attempt by theatre audiences to enter worlds beyond their racial or sexual demographic. For the last decades, gay theater has seeped into the mainstream. And I think that's what ideally we want as a community, too—to have our own individuality but yet be a part of the larger society. I see a lot of plays that are written by both gay and straight men that have gay characters, and most of them are pretty fleshed out, and integral to the landscape in which they live. It's like what's happened to most "ethnic" theater groups. You have Jewish Theater, Women's Theater, Deaf Theater...and next thing you know it finds itself the mainstream. There's no need to have your own ghetto.

DD: And yet the ghettos—in theater—remain. Why do you think that is?

CY: Well, I think those theater companies are still important. Because sometimes in the

large institution called "The American Theater," how many plays do you see written by Latinos? Asians? African Americans? Women? These [smaller] companies help develop and nurture these voices, and I know a lot of innovative and exciting work is still found there. So I believe in the existence of both.

DD: You bring up an interesting idea here about authenticity and identity. With all the emphasis these days on "telling our own stories," as playwrights, are we allowed to step out of our own experience anymore? Are you allowed to step out of being Chinese? Or being gay?

CY: Oh, we must! I think the wonderful thing you have, as an artist, is this invisible passport that allows you to go to any country, any place, any world. And it must be so. Because what kind of artist are you if you only write about one thing? I mean, you may be a fine artist, but a greater artist is one who dares to take risks, and visit worlds you never dared to visit.

DD: So why do you think we so often only

have to go beyond it.

DD: So what do you see on the horizon for gay theater?

CY: The most wonderful thing about gay theater is that there's so much to choose from. There isn't one type. I do feel, unfortunately, a lack of good socio-politically charged gay plays. Once in a while, there's one that blows me away. Craig Lucas' suffocatingly brilliant *The Dying Gaul*, which I recently saw, is a great example. Naked men prancing about singing Cole Porter isn't. Unless I get comped.

DD: Do you think a lot of contemporary gay plays being produced are really just fantasies of how we would like to live?

CY: Sometimes. I think it's also just mere titillation, with a little projection and fantasy. I'm sure there's a place for Ronnie Larson's plays [author of the long-running Off-Broadway hits *Making Porn*, *Peep Show* and *10 Naked Men*]. I may not be a fan of

enlighten, provoke, entertain, transport us. And throughout history, these core questions remain the same. In Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*, he raises all these haunting questions to the audience, ending with "Let the great work begin."

DD: Yeah, he gives it over to the audience. It becomes their responsibility.

CY: Right. Tony's pointing the finger. "Now, what the fuck are you going to do?" Which is so exciting. Theater, gay or not, must have all these questions.

DD: Well, I would say you're in a very interesting position to ask some pretty good questions. You know, an interviewer once queried James Baldwin by saying, "You're

What will we give our children and descendents? Our economics? Our stupid laws? The fucking Starr Report?

allow writers to draw exclusively from their own personal experience? Especially with gay writers?

CY: I think it's a necessary first step, to be honest with you. There's a need to talk about who we are, and what we are. It's the same with Asian American Theater; like David Hwang writing about who we are, and what we are. But my generation of fellow Asian American writers are thinking—now that we know who we are, what's next? How do we live with other people? How do we relate with the rest of society? And that's what I think is going on with gay plays now, too. We are the descendants of Robert Chesley, Mart Crowley and William Hoffman with an eye on the present and the future.

DD: Are there still a lot of identity issues going on?

CY: Well, identity is important to most art forms in the early stages, and then it evolves into something else. From the Me to something else. If you just dwell on Me, Me, Me, it gets very myopic and boring. And now in the 90's, I think the question of identity is still vital, but the more important question to me is: What is before us? How do we live now? Where do we go from here? It's one of the primary questions. You cannot skip by [the] identity [question], but, ultimately, you

them, but I feel they are a part of this bigger family called gay theater. However, it does make me wonder: Do gay audiences only want to see flesh, titillation, lifestyle plays, you know—happy gay plays?

Is it because the plays reinforce our lifestyles, the images we have of ourselves? Or is this what we strive toward? I'm actually worried about the impact of these images too. Surely, the constant embrace of the nude male in the theatre says something about ourselves.

DD: Why do gays need to use the medium of theater to escape?

CY: I'm not sure we really use the gay theater for escapism, perhaps with the exception of these skin shows. There must be a need for them, otherwise they won't be running for more than two years and raking in millions of dollars. But I really long for the Craig Lucas, the Larry Kramer, the Tony Kushner kind of theater that says, "Look who we are. What we are. Look, look, look, look, look. What do we need to move on?" Ultimately, I feel that great theater raises core questions, questions about our humanity and our place in the world. These questions reflect and represent our lives. They



a scene from "A Beautiful Country" photo by Craig Schwartz

Black. You came from a poor family. And you're a homosexual. When you took stock of these things, how did that make you feel?" And without missing a beat, Baldwin said, "Like I hit the jackpot." As an artist, how do you see yourself in the American landscape?

CY: I'm not really sure. I guess the best way to describe my situation is the fable about a crow and a sparrow I wrote about in my play *Porcelain*—that's how I've always felt about my being in the world: That you can never belong to a tree of crows or a tree of sparrows. You belong to a tree of your own because you're in-between. There's an in-between-ness about me—coming from Asia, living in America, being in LA, going to New York all the time, working in one rehearsal room to another. And with this template, this is how I look at how I fit in. ■

DAVID DRAKE IS THE AUTHOR OF THE THE NIGHT I KISSED LARRY KRAMER.