

LANGUAGE OF THEIR OWN

**TWO MORE WEEKS ADDED!
NOW PLAYING
THRU MAY 28!**

BY **CHAY YEW** DIRECTED BY **KENG-SEN ONG**
WITH **DAVID DRAKE, FRANCIS JUE, ALEC MAPA & B.D. WONG**

"LANGUAGE IS A LOPSIDED BEAUTY, INTRODUCING ONE OF THE MOST ORIGINAL NEW VOICES OF THE SEASON - IT IS NOT WRITTEN SO MUCH AS IT IS SCULPTED, WITH THE SUPPLE PRECISION OF A REAL ARTIST. YEW'S PLAY IS AS MUCH ABOUT LANGUAGE AS IT IS ABOUT HUMAN CONNECTIONS: THE LINK BETWEEN MOTHER TONGUE AND PERSONAL IDENTITY, THE PRIVATE LANGUAGE WITH WHICH LOVERS COMMUNICATE."

"A MEDITATION ON LOVE, A SPOKEN LOVE DUET."
VINCENT CANBY, THE NEW YORK TIMES
"LOOK BACK IN ANGER" FIRST DREW ATTENTION TO THE SECRET CODES OF LOVERS. MR. YEW'S BEAUTIFULLY WRITTEN PLAY EXQUISITELY EXPRESSES THAT THE DOTS, DASHES AND PAUSES OF THAT CODE ARE A METAPHOR FOR THE COURSE OF AN AFFAIR - AN ALLEGORY OF LOVE?"
CLIVE BARNES, NY POST

DANCING on Moonlight



"Distinctive, searing poetry with an ominous, percussive score by the great Max Roach!"
BEN BRANTLEY, THE NEW YORK TIMES
"The ensemble acting is flawless! An evening you won't readily forget."
CLIVE BARNES, NY POST

BY **KEITH GLOVER**
DIRECTED BY **MARION MCCLINTON**
MUSIC BY **MAX ROACH**
CHOREOGRAPHED BY **DONALD BYRD**



A SOAP OPERA FOR THE TRAGICALLY INSECURE

DOG OPERA

BY **CONSTANCE CONGDON** DIRECTED BY **GERALD GUTIERREZ**

PETER IS GAY. MADELINE IS NOT. THEY ARE TWO SOULMATES - BOTH LOOKING FOR MR. RIGHT.

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THE PUBLIC THEATER



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The New York Times

Arts & Leisure

'A Language Of Their Own'

Chay Yew's play opened with two attractive men alone together on a stage as functionally bare as a courtroom. Oscar (played effectively by Francis Jue) wants to break up; Ming (played efficiently enough by B. D. Wong) doesn't. Oscar has AIDS, Ming doesn't. That is the immediate crisis. The broader conflict is that strange mingling of passion, attraction and incompatibility that turns lovers into strangers or mortal enemies but keeps them haunting each other.

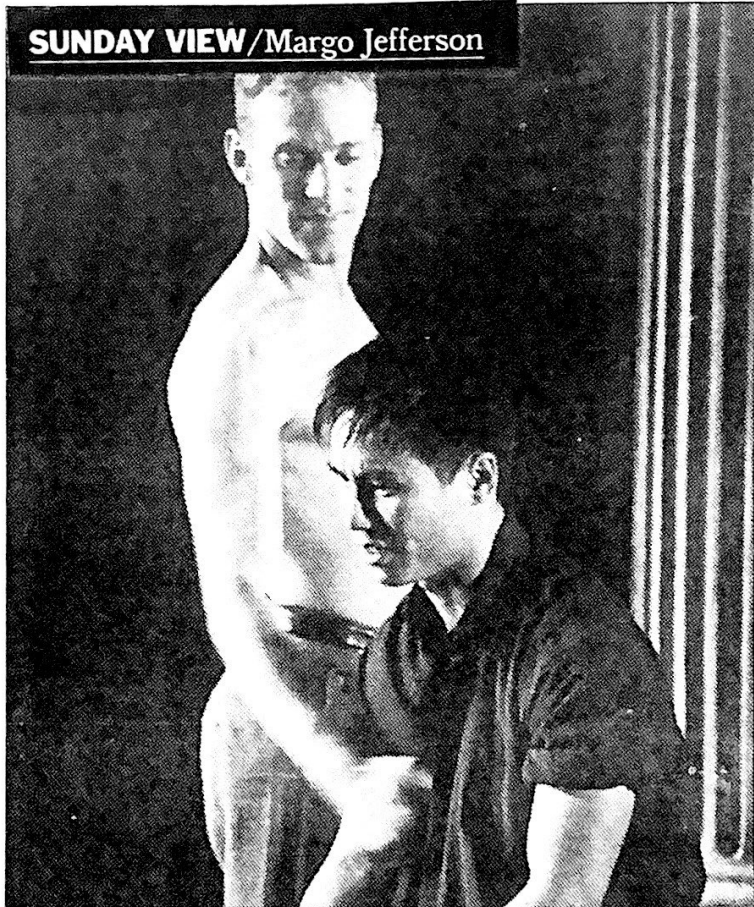
Like lawyers in court, the two argue and put their case to us. The director, Keng-Sen Ong, stressed this with terse, almost mechanized pacing. He also had the actors deliver their monologues and their dialogue to us and to each other: this is a popular theater strategy these days that needs to be used more sparingly; the analytic distance it imposes can grow as monotonous as earnest naturalism or sentiment.

The scenes played out like pieces of conflicting evidence. Ming hurriedly launches himself into a new romance with Robert (played slightly less than efficiently by David Drake), and Oscar slowly accepts a new lover (played wittily but rather too predictably by Alec Mapa) and, still more slowly, acknowledges his approaching death.

Have I mentioned that three of the four characters are Asian-Americans? No, and that was by design. What I liked best in "A Language of Their Own" were the moments when the ethnic facts of life were simply part of the landscape, not its *raison d'être* — the irritating differences in outlook between the bilingual Oscar, who was born in China, and the American-born Ming, who can barely place an order in a Chinese restaurant, Oscar's irritation that Robert is white and Robert's self-consciousness about being so single-mindedly attracted to Asian men. I kept thinking that I was seeing two plays in fact: one a schematic exegesis of ethnicity and romance in the 90's, the other a wilder, much more telling inquiry into love, loss, language and the endless process of self-definition.

You can read "Porcelain," an interesting early play by Mr. Yew, in the current issue of *Performing Arts Journal* (No. 48). And you can wait, as I will, for his next play, where I hope he will give (and be encouraged to give) free rein to his multiple languages.

SUNDAY VIEW/Margo Jefferson



Michal Daniel: "A Language of Their Own"

"A Language of Their Own," with David Drake, standing, and B. D. Wong, at the Joseph Papp Public Theater.



FRIDAY, APRIL 21, 1995 • 50 CENTS

THEATER

REVIEW

Gays and a 'Language' of Otherness

Yew's 'Language'

LANGUAGE from Page B21

A LANGUAGE OF THEIR OWN. By Chay Yew. Directed by Kong-Sen Ong. With David Drake, Francis Jue, Alec Mapa, B. D. Wong. At the Public, Susan Strea Theater, 425 Lafayette St., Manhattan. Seen at Wednesday evening's preview.

By Jan Stuart STAFF WRITER

JUST HOW GAY is this theater season? When Terrence McNally captivates Broadway with eight "Friends of Dorothy" and Horton Foote nabes a Pulitzer for busting open the closet of Heartland, America, you have to figure something is up. The homosexual dam has burst onto our stages with such ferocity that a Queer Theater Conference will convene next weekend to try to harness all that creative energy.

For all the buzz, only a handful of works signals a genuine coming-of-age for gay and lesbian theater. In plays like Claire Chazee's "Why We Have A Body," Peggy Shaw's "You're Just Like Your Father" and now Chay Yew's "A Language of Their Own," one senses the artist struggling to evolve a language that

can uniquely convey the experience of Otherness in a straight society. Fragmented, non-linear and unabashedly poetic, these pieces challenge their audiences in the upstart manner of the vintage black and feminist drama of the '60s and '70s.

You couldn't find a more self-reflexive title than that of "A Language of Their Own," a play whose heightened and heavily codified style equals the substance of its message. In this four-character poem, the Singapore-born Yew confronts the double bind of being gay and Asian in America. The four men choose their words with a care that connotes a lifetime spent walking on eggshells. "Language" is not written so much as it is sculpted, with the supple precision and blistered fingers of a real artist.

The play opens with a breakup. Boston couple Ming (B. D. Wong) and Oscar (Francis Jue) are calling it quits after four years -- Oscar has been diagnosed with HIV and Ming wants out. The specter of AIDS only muddies the rift that has grown between them, a divide fraught with cultural flashpoints. If Oscar is grounded in more traditional Chinese values and clenched male behavior, Ming is a swinging gay Asian American, sex-

ually restless and ethnically conflicted.

By Act Two, the pair have settled in with new lovers. The assimilationist Ming has found the ultimate white boy in blond Robert (David Drake), while Oscar has landed Daniel, a campy Filipino (Alec Mapa) who fulfills all of his gay domestic fantasies (i.e., weekend excursions to Ikea). Each of these new relationships is put to an acid test -- Daniel must cope with Oscar's illness, Robert with Ming's promiscuity.

Like Brian Friel's ill-starred "Translations," Yew's play is as much about language as it is about human connections: the link between mother tongue and personal identity, the private language with which lovers communicate. Yew's own image-strewn language improves markedly as the evening progresses, as if gathering steam as he wrote. In Act One, there is a rhythmic monotony to Ming and Oscar's rapid-fire exchanges -- they alternate between addressing the audience and each other, like a table tennis match with no flubs or fouls. Even the content seems a bit banal. Sentimental reveries about reading the Sunday paper and listening

to music smack uncomfortably of a cozy duet out of "Flower Drum Song."

Yew's peripatetic style beats up with the entrance of the new boyfriend, in no small part due to the butterball charm of Alec Mapa, whose suggestion of a younger, dizzier Peter Lorre puts a hip new spin on dated ethnic pop icons. Under Kong-Sen Ong's swift direction, the actors are perfectly in synch with each other and the popcorn-spray of Yew's lines, climaxing in a sweltering monologue for Wong about the impersonal allure of bathhouse sex.

Myung Hee Cho's Chinese-red backdrop and Scott Zielinski's achingly expressive lighting are lovely to gaze upon, yet Yew's verbally imagistic and intimate play would probably benefit more from a thrust staging than the invisible proscenium set-up at the Susan Shiva. Words should wrap around us, fly past our shoulder, plop in our face. Still, "A Language of Their Own" is a loped beauty, introducing one of the most original new voices of the season -- gay or straight, Asian or non, in or out of the Public Theater. ■

Please see LANGUAGE on Page B31



POST WEEKEND *Plus*

Right place, Wong time

A PLAY — a decent, proper play that is — is a journey into an interior, a landscape with figures, a roller-coaster ride with thrills, often of recognition. The interior, landscape and ride can be territory known or unknown, places visited, explored or completely uncharted.

A play — a decent, proper play that is — is a tourist trip for the mind and soul.

Chay Yew's fascinating "A Language of Their Own," which opened at the Public Theater last night, speaks of a life pretty remote from my own, as it talks about experiences which on many levels are to me either fiction or reportage.

For the play is rooted — and flowers from — the soil of the expatriate Asian experience in a Caucasian-angled culture, as well as the gay experience in the Age of AIDS.

The story is simple — it's almost an update of Puccini's "La Boheme" without the music, and with AIDS at this performance playing the role of Death, usually taken by Tuberculosis.

A long-established gay couple break up at the insistence of one of them, who has just tested HIV-positive, and doesn't think his

THEATER review

lover could or should be put through the strain of his pending death sentence.

Life continues. They have other relationships, other lovers. The man with the HIV infection eventually dies of AIDS — or commits a timely suicide — and in his final thoughts imagines himself actually visited by his earlier lover. It's all as honestly sentimental — with different trimmings — as that old tear-jerker movie "Love Story."

But the Singapore-born Yew has many fish to fry — his play ranges from the differences between Asians and Asian-Americans ("bananas — yellow on the outside and white on the inside"), to the consolations of impersonal bath-house sex.

But the real theme (and I think it transcends all local barriers of sexual preference and race) is the human being's search for love, and the way the stages and signposts of that search are indicated by the individual language of lovers.

Forty years ago John Osborne in "Look Back in Anger" first drew attention to the secret codes

Clive Barnes



of lovers. Yew's beautifully written play now suggests that the dots, dashes and pauses of that code, the words and gestures, their establishment and sometimes their erosion and final collapse, are a metaphor for the course of the affair, indeed, an allegory of love.

It's a thought, and one exquisitely expressed. And it makes up for much of the banality (although mind you, it takes a universal truth to make something banal) of the theme, and slight flaws in dramaturgy, such as leaving doubt as to whether characters are addressing the audience or their fellow actors.

For this occasional irresolute blurring of barriers, the director Keng-Sen Ong could also be held to fault, and the staging was not as taut as it might have been. But for the acting, the director can share the plaudits with the excellent cast, B.D. Wong, Francis Jue, David Drake (the play's token white!) and Alec Mapa.



THE NEW YORKER

MAY 8, 1995

THE THEATRE

WORDS OF LOVE

"A Language of Their Own."

BY NANCY FRANKLIN

A LANGUAGE OF THEIR OWN," at the Public, marks the New York debut of the twenty-nine-year-old Singaporean playwright Chay Yew, and, under the direction of Keng-Sen Ong, it's an auspicious beginning. The play itself, though, seems to begin inauspiciously: two men stand on a bare stage and talk to each other and to the audience about their relationship. One says, "I can never forget what he said to me." The other says, "I don't think we should see each other anymore." As they proceed to dissect the unravelling of their life together, you expect the play to fall into a kind of he-said, I-said lockstep—a dreary dissertation on the distance between lovers who have become friends. But something much more delicate happens: the back-and-forth reveals the closeness in distance and the distance in closeness, and when the line "I don't think we should see each other anymore" is repeated, about ten minutes later, after we've learned what caused them to part, the words have an unexpected weight.

The two men, Oscar and Ming (played by Francis Jue and B. D. Wong), are Asian-Americans living in Boston. Oscar is a Chinese immigrant, and Ming is an "A.B.C."—an American-born Chinese—and, in a sense, they don't speak the same language; their cultural differences play a part in their breakup,

which is set in motion when Oscar tests positive for H.I.V. and Ming tests negative. Ming speaks his mind, and he says he wants out. Oscar, more "Chinese" when it comes to expressing himself—he can't bear to fight with Ming, or to tell him that he loves him—lets him go.

In the second half of the play, Oscar and Ming are with new boyfriends. Oscar is seeing Daniel (Alec Mapa), a Filipino business student at Harvard, and Ming has moved to California with a handsome blond waiter named Robert (David Drake). Daniel is adorably campy—he says that being with a person who is H.I.V.-positive forces you to act like "June Cleaver on a good hair day"—but he's grounded, and committed to Oscar. (In the theatre these days, flaming queens always possess the virtues one associates with Lassie: steadfastness, loyalty, and courage.) At one point, Daniel tells us that Oscar says "I love you" to him "every moment of the day." Oscar stands behind him, punctuating Daniel's monologue with those three little words, over and over, while Daniel becomes more and more exasperated. It's a punchy, fast scene, and wryly shows how learning too much from your past mistakes can drive another person crazy. Here, and throughout the play, Mr. Yew exhibits a talent for using words that are plain and simple to get at love's rich complications. ♦

OPENING IN N.Y.

'Language of their Own' fluent on gay themes

By MICHAEL SOMMERS

NEW YORK—Although the current musical theater scene is dreary, we are presently experiencing a golden age of gay-themed theater in New York.

There are all sorts of interesting reasons for this trend, which will make a nice Sunday feature—I promise to write it sometime soon—but for now let's just consider a sterling new example of the genre, Chay Yew's "A Language of Their Own," which opened last night at the New York Shakespeare Festival.

A play centering upon professional Chinese-American men in Boston and Los Angeles, this is an elegantly written study of several linking relationships.

As the play begins, Oscar (Francis Jue) breaks off his four-year union with the younger Ming (B.D. Wong), mostly because Oscar has discovered he's HIV-positive and wants to free his mate from being a caretaker. Ming takes up seriously with Robert (David Drake), who is not Asian, even as the asymptomatic Oscar forges a new live-in relationship with the even younger Daniel (Alec Mapa), described as "a radical queer Asian who breathes Sondheim."

So though everything seems happily ever after—again—it's really not, since Oscar still yearns for Ming, while eventual conflicts between Ming and Robert lead to physical abuse. Then Oscar's health starts to fail.

Oh, but this basic boy-meets-loses-meets-boy synopsis sounds pretty much like the usual gay soap operatics with AIDS underpinnings. Lucky for us, however, the playwright is mostly able to avoid any such clichés through his skillful deployment of verbalization, time, and mood. Although the subtleties of Asian-American existence are considered as much as contemporary gay mores, it's really the sophisticated way that the author has crafted his play which makes it all so intriguing.

"A Language of Our Own" is a seamless work that glides between narrative and drama as the characters talk to you and to each other. They speak very beautifully at times. Consider: "In the beginning of our relationship, we learned each other's language," says one of the men to the audience. "Each action and deed, every word and sen-



B.D. Wong, foreground, and David Drake take leading roles in 'A Language of Their Own,' Chay Yew's new play at the New York Shakespeare Festival

tence was a joy, and an excitement. Then we tired of it. Lost interest. Got lazy. Became indifferent. In the end, we spoke different languages even though we wanted the same thing."

Such a rueful reflection could mark the decline of any romance regardless of its specific sexuality. No doubt you remember the time when someone once told you, "We just don't speak the same language anymore."

Certainly there's more to this drama than its lyrical wordplay, but it's probably most notable for the way Chay Yew offers up tender matters of the heart in strikingly universal terms. For those who care to listen, "A Language of Their Own" easily crosses many prejudicial barriers of race and

sexuality.

The play is winningly acted in this spare, polished production directed by Keng-Sen Ong, who makes an impressive American debut here. An actor not afraid of being quiet, Francis Jue is touching as melancholy Oscar whose good intentions forever muck up his own happiness. Looking young and sporty as a so-called "banana" (yellow outside, white on the inside), B.D. Wong portrays the feckless Ming in a charming manner that makes you regret his shortcomings far more than he does. David Drake is highly assured as the blond whom Ming nabs on the rebound. Boyish Alec Mapa is funny and sweet as Daniel, and just you watch

him grow up as the play progresses to its wistful conclusion.

Myung Hee Cho's simply perfect abstract setting is perfectly simple—clean lines and shapes graced by a modest stand of birch trees to one side that accommodates all locations. The play has been lit with poetry by Scott Ziehlinski and brushed with occasional strains of Asian string music by Liang-King Tang.

Running through May 14, performances are Tuesdays through Sundays at 8 p.m. with Saturday and Sunday matinees at 3. Tickets are \$25. The box office phone is (212) 260-2400. The New York Shakespeare Festival is at the Public Theater, 425 Lafayette St., south of Astor Place.

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Curtain Up by Ron Lasko

The theater world's buzz-of-the-moment surrounds *Sunset Boulevard* as this year's only eligible nominee for the Tony's Best New Musical award. In the past when there have been two or less candidates, the prize has been suspended.

Now the talk is whether the nominating committee will alter the existing rules to recognize Glenn Close and company. Whatever the decision, this lack of new musicals will surely lead to the obligatory "Is Theatre Dead?" article in the Sunday Times Arts & Leisure section. I was

ready to write that eulogy myself before I stumbled blindly into a little play called *A Language of Their Own*, enticed by star power (B.D. Wong of *M. Butterfly* renown), the promise of male flesh (David Drake of *The Night Larry Kramer Kissed Me* fame) and the reputation of The Public Theater.

Playwright Chay Yew's witty and emotional new drama, without a doubt the best new gay play since *As Is*, has completely renewed my faith in New York theater. The primary focus of this lyrical piece is on Ming (Wong) and Oscar (Francis Jue) a thirtysomething Asian couple on



David Drake and B.D. Wong in *A Language of Their Own*

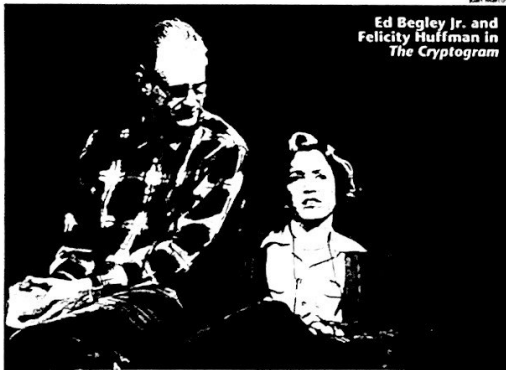
Incorporating them into our language. Speaking as one. Thinking as one. Feeling as one. And in the course, we invented new words, gave existing words new meaning, redefined and polished our language, making it a special one of our own."

Although Yew's story revolves around Chinese-Americans, the themes in *A Language of Their Own* are universal. Wong and Jue are excellent in the lead roles. David Drake does a fine job as Ming's uptight and overly demanding

Historically, Mamet has been repeatedly criticized for being homophobic and elitist, overly vulgar, and morally bankrupt. Whether consciously or subconsciously, Mamet seems to be responding to these complaints with *Cryptogram*. This time around, he's chosen a woman, a child and a gay man as his characters and plopped them down in a rather Puritanical '50s household. What more could his critics ask for? An engaging piece of theatre might be nice. Creative writing teachers across America will be using this as a textbook example of why you should stick to writing what you know.

To his credit, Mamet has succeeded in creating his most sensitive, realistic characters since *The Woods*. The main problem is that these characters have virtually nothing to do and very little to say to each other, although all they seem to do is talk. As important as subtext might be, it's best to at least start with a text.

A secondary problem lies in Mamet's decision to use a child as a primary character. Can a 10-year-old really be expected to master Mamet's briskly paced dialogue? To their credit, Felicity Huffman and Ed Begley Jr. both do an admirable job with their roles in spite of everything, but set designer Lee Beatty (a personal favorite) seemed to phone this one in with a unit set as bland as the situation. This week, don't bother trying to decipher *Cryptogram*; stick to learning a new *Language*. ▼



Ed Begley Jr. and Felicity Huffman in *The Cryptogram*

the verge of breaking up despite their love for one another. This troubled relationship suffers its final blow when Oscar discovers that he is HIV+ and Ming's fear of physical intimacy drives them further apart.

Language is the key in this relationship as well as the new ones which follow. As Oscar explains, "As if through osmosis, we used each other's words and expressions, borrowing shamelessly and indeliberately."

lover, and Alec Mapa adds a blend of comic genius and pathos to his portrayal of Oscar's flaming, Ikea-loving boyfriend. Much credit should also be given to director Keng Sen Ong whose simple staging allows Yew's language to be the driving force of the production.

Since you'll be too busy scrambling for tickets to *Language* (which closes much too soon on May 14), you probably won't get a chance to catch playwright David Mamet's new drama, *The Cryptogram*. Consider yourself lucky. This follow-up to his masterpiece *Oleanna* focuses on a woman whose husband is cheating, on her. And that's the whole play—with a running time of about 75 minutes, it's at least half-an-hour too long.

A LANGUAGE OF THEIR OWN

EXPLORES THE MYSTERIES OF RELATIONSHIPS

by Andrew A. Beck

"IN THE BEGINNING OF OUR RELATIONSHIP," RECALLS A character in Chay Yew's lyrical new drama, *A Language of Their Own*, "we learned each other's language. Each action and deed, every word and sentence was a joy and an excitement. Then we tired of it. Lost interest. In the end, we spoke different languages even though we wanted the same thing."

In his new play, now at the Joseph Papp Public Theatre in New York City, the Singapore-born playwright uses the possibilities, limitations and barriers represented by language and culture to portray the difficulties of relationships as encountered by four young gay men in contemporary Boston.

Language is a rich, lush piece of writing, full of vivid, expressive images and precise emotional connotations, especially in its much finer, more cohesive first act. In this act, which is essentially a well-done, two character one act play, we're introduced to Ming, the "ABC" (American-born Chinese) and the Asian native, Oscar, who tell the story of their relationship, their break-up and its aftermath.

It's a great conceit of the playwright's to have both characters telling the story to the audience together—long after their break-up—and with hindsight, all the while reacting, contradicting and responding to each other in a way that clearly indicates a strong emotional connection, even though their lives have gone separate ways. Thanks to a buoyant performance by the enchanting B.D. Wong, the original Song-Liling in *M. Butterfly*, and a powerfully introspective one by Francis Jue, a later Song Liling, the characters and their relationship grow on us, conveying the joy and connections that once marked their time together.

Throughout the act, Yew plays with the notion of words, language, meaning and communication. As Ming and Oscar circle each other on the dimly lit stage, he slowly reveals the cultural differences between the Asian and the Asian-American that sometimes keep their mutual understanding at bay. He then offers simple humorous juxtapositions, such as the fact that the American-born Ming actually changed his name to make it sound more Asian, while the Asian-born Oscar changed his name to make it sound more American. The chasm between the two men grows when Oscar learns that he is HIV-positive and nothing—language, memory, understanding—seems able to connect the unexpressed emotions that drive both men further apart.

The central development of the first act is a party to which Oscar invites Ming and his new for-now unseen American boy friend. The reunion, after months of separation, is painful, as Yew's dialogue expertly shows how meanings can be misconstrued, cues can be misread, and how two people who have a such strong connection to each other cannot find common ground.

The less satisfying second act introduces the new partners, Ming's American waiter, Robert, and Oscar's "gay Asian activist who lives and breathes Soundheim," Daniel. The development of these relationships is far less absorbing, partly because of the strength of the first act and the dynamic way Jue and Wong played off each other. David Drake (whose one-man show, *The Nights Larry Kramer Kissed Me*, played all over the country and was later turned into a best-selling book) is wooden as the shallow Robert, while Alec Mapa is

more the loopy adolescent than the ACT-Up firebrand we're led to believe he is. Here again, Yew has his characters address the audience from some future viewpoint while interacting with each other and it doesn't quite work as well here.

This act is clearly the darker one—the "language" that develops between one set of lovers becomes physically violent and AIDS begins to take its course. But what Yew is able to do best in the problematic second act is to allow the spirit of Ming and Oscar's love to hover over the stage, just out of reach but a palpable enough presence to color the course of their new relationships. The ending is both somewhat predictable and a bit hurried, but it does allow for a few moments of eloquence between Oscar and what turns out to be his hallucinatory vision of Ming.

The production marks the American directorial debut of Keng-Sen Ong, the Artistic Director of Theatreworks, Singapore's largest theatre company. His first act direction, on Myung Hee Cho's sparse yet attractive set, is outstanding. The more crowded second act makes such flow difficult, though his increasing use of traditionally Asian theatre movements toward the end of the evening is effective. Scott Zielinski's dim lighting adds to the gentle, yearning atmosphere.

Chay Yew is clearly a playwright to watch. His first play, *As If He Hears*, was initially banned by the Singapore government. It was the first drama to deal openly with the issue of AIDS and the emerging gay culture in that country. He later revised the play, whose success led to the teleplay, *Someone I Used To Know* which raised AIDS awareness in Singapore schools and colleges and was eventually broadcast. He currently resides in California. ▼

A Language of Their Own is playing at the Joseph Papp Public Theatre at the New York Shakespeare Festival, 425 LaFayette Street, New York, through May 28. For more information and tickets, call the Box Office at (212) 260-2400.

Andrew A. Beck is the Managing Editor of *Metroline*.



Photo: Michal Daniel

(l to r): B.D. Wong and Francis Jue

The Totally Biased
Politically Incorrect
Party Paper

HOMO XTRA

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Tongue-tied:
David Drake
and B.D. Wong



Photos: Michal Daniel

★ A Language Of Their Own ★

There are no shaggy-haired songstresses in Chay Yew's somber *A Language of Their Own*, but throughout the entire performance I was continually reminded of Pat Benetar's seminal '80s smash "Love Is a Battlefield." Finally, a gay romantic drama reminiscent of the rock diva's own pop morsel, that's neither dizzy with sentiment nor blind to reality. (I had to be restrained from leaping up during the play and shouting, "We are young!")

A Language of Their Own, directed by Keng-Sen Ong, is a darkly comic, often macabre survey of the hems and tatters of a gay relationship. B.D. Wong and Francis Jue star as Ming and Oscar, the fragmented duo who announce their separation during the opening refrains and then proceed, in the brilliantly solid first act, to unfold their troubled history. Neatly balancing the complex gay Chinese-American aspect of the characters, *Language* inscribes its first half with a tight construction that will leave you breathless at intermission.

The second half is a bit trickier. We're introduced to Ming's new lover Robert, a head waiter played by sex kitten David Drake, and Oscar's new interest Daniel, an Ikea-queen effutely played by Alex Mapa. Suddenly we're forced to watch our two once-interesting lovers fall into frameless relationships, playing the kinds of games that are all too familiar among gay men. Yew's script isn't just realistic, it's downright scary.

The metaphor of words as a barometer of distance is hardly a new concept, but here it is given a robust treatment. Just as Ming decries his loss of the Chinese language he once knew as a boy, so too he laments the passing of language between lovers. A thorny message, to be sure, but one Yew prescribes with generous witticism and catty retorts,

two things a Drama Queen like myself most adores.

The language of *Language* is driven home by some interesting performances. Though Wong is undoubtedly the star here—he brings chills during a soliloquy on a bathhouse affair—it's Jue's quirkier portrayal that left me clutching my wadded hanky in delight. You can literally view his character's tragic decline in his slumped shoulders and weakened voice.

David Drake, creator of the now-classic *The Night Larry Kramer Kissed Me*, has a relatively small role and pulls it off on the simple appeal of his stage charisma. (The man, however, should be legally prohibited from ever putting on a shirt. Ole!) Meanwhile, Mapa, playing the most unexpected character to saunter into this love story, adds much-needed comic relief to the play's final chords.

I won't propose this play for lovers (unless you're craving an on-stage dissection of your relationship), but for the rest of us who love ourselves, *A Language of Their Own* is a splash of cold water that's both a refreshment and a reality check.

A Language Of Their Own plays at the Public Theatre through May 14.

DRAMA
Queen
BY GREGORY YOUNG

S I G H T I N G S

THEATER South Africa

Ace Is the Top Card

You A.N.C. *Nothing Yet*. Written and Performed by Pieter-Dirk Uys



IF ALL SOUTH AFRICA'S political world is crowding onto the tiny stage of Cape Town's Dock Road Theater, is there anyone minding the store? Speaker of Parliament Frene Giniewala complains that the change to "Africa time" is ruining legislative punctuality. Jay Naidoo, the rabble-rousing former union chief who heads the government's Reconstruction and Development Program for people whose lives have been wrecked by apartheid, claims that the initials should stand for Really Depressing Prospects. These two leaders are part of the parade of characters sketched in by the country's leading satirist, Pieter-Dirk Uys, in his latest one-man hit show.

You A.N.C. *Nothing Yet* comes 12 months after Uys (pronounced Ace) vowed to give the government a grace period. The year has provided rich ore that he mines with gusto. "The sacred cows have become just cows," wrote the Cape Town *Argus* approvingly, "and Pieter-Dirk is back in business." An impersonation of Nelson Mandela is his sole deferential touch because, as Uys has often said, he respects the man greatly. In drag, Uys skewers Winnie Mandela with a skit in which she works two cellular phones, berating Justice Minister Dullah Omar on one, while on the other she romances actor Omar Sharif with talk of a joint tourist venture. After Cape Town and then Johannesburg, the winning Uys takes his act on the road to London.

THEATER United States

Speak Low When You Speak Love

A Language of Their Own by Chay Yew; Directed by Keng-Sen Ong; Public Theater, New York City

THE FIRST TIME CHAY YEW WROTE ABOUT AIDS and a hero who was an openly gay man, the play was banned in his native Singapore. A rewritten version was later produced there. Now 25 and living abroad, Yew has again written about AIDS and a gay man's life; this time he has

been praised by New York City critics and called a promising new voice in American theater. *A Language of Their Own* was directed by Keng-Sen Ong, who heads Theaterworks, Singapore's largest stage company, and it is about the shared silence of love as well as the terrible barriers between people who struggle to find words of affection and trust.

Beyond the poetic meditations on the sad futility of people who cannot express the most basic emotion, the play examines how Asians—and to some extent Asian Americans—fail to speak directly but disguise meaning. That is a challenge to any playwright, but says Yew: "I like limitations. Only with limitations can you fly." His characters have diverse ethnic and cultural ties: Oscar, an elegant Chinese immigrant, is cool and reticent, using speech to maintain distance; Daniel, a wry Filipino, is handy with hip, pop-culture references. Ming speaks in slang and sometimes with his fists. He is an A.B.C.—American-born Chinese—who turned away from the language of his ancestors so that he could be fully assimilated, only to realize that what he has lost cannot be replaced.

MOVIES Bolivia

Swallowed by the Leviathan of Family

Jonah and the Pink Whale; Directed by Juan Carlos Valdivia



AT THE LA PAZ PREMIERE of *Jonah and the Pink Whale* (*Jonás e la Ballena Rosada*) last month, a spectator observed, "There is something more difficult than being President, and that is being a filmmaker in Bolivia." The well-informed speaker was Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada, the country's President and also a former movie producer. *Jonah* was directed by Juan Carlos Valdivia, who breaks with the Bolivian tradition of creating films with political and ideological commentary. Based on a 1987 award-winning novel by Wolfgang Montes Vanucci, it is a love story and does not pretend to offer a solution for Bolivia's problems or those of any other Latin American country.

Jonás is a bewildered high school teacher married to an overbearing woman from a rich family. They expect him to rise from his present mediocrity,

and he feels swallowed up by their clamorous demands. He takes refuge in the leaky cellar of his in-laws' mansion, where his sister-in-law Julia finds him, and a doomed affair begins. The movie is set in the early '80s, when inflation and drug trafficking plagued the country. Film critic Gumucio Dagron says the character of Jonás, who relies on cynicism to protect himself from a go-getting society, "represents a hangover from the lost political enthusiasm of the 1970s." The biggest hit Bolivia has had in years, the film set an attendance record when it was screened in Santa Cruz.

BOOKS Britain

Moral Dimness

Brownout on Breadfruit Boulevard; By Timothy Mo; Paddleless Press, 288 pages



WITH CRITICAL ACCLAIM THAT drew comparisons to V.S. Naipaul, four novels that sold briskly and three Booker Prize nominations, Timothy Mo would seem to be one author who would not lack for a publisher. Unhappy with paperback sales of his past two books, the Hong Kong-born author put his latest novel, *Brownout on Breadfruit Boulevard*, up for bids. But when they were lower than the amount he wanted, Mo determinedly published it himself.

The book, wrote the *Sunday Times*, "brilliantly continues Mo's fictional enterprise of casting a searing light on the darker places of the globe and the dingier niches of the self." An offputting prologue describing a sexual act involving feces was reportedly one reason why British publishers were wary of the novel. The graphic beginning launches a savage satire on the many layers of corruption in a provincial Philippines city he calls Gobernador do Leon. *Brownouts* are the electrical shortages that have been afflicting Filipinos daily; in Mo's dictionary they also mean the slow dimming of moral courage. A harrowing, hilarious setpiece of the book's second part is the international conference orchestrated by Victoria Inti, a Filipino Congressman's ambitious wife who makes Imelda Marcos look like a timid wallflower. Clustering around to discuss the symposium's themes of "Cultural Plurality in a World of Ecological Limits" are a collection of scientific and literary luminaries, second-rate thinkers, celebrity dogooders and high priests of academe. It is, as Victoria sublimely ignores, a spectacle of unbridled venality.

—By Emily Mitchell. With reporting by Scott MacLeod/Johannesburg; and Winston Moore/La Paz

THE NEW YORK TIMES, FRIDAY, APRIL 21, 1995

C3

THEATER REVIEW

In Love, On to AIDS, Out of Love

By VINCENT CANBY

Ming (B. D. Wong) is a young, assimilated Chinese-American. He's hip, outgoing, in tune with the popular culture that bred him. Oscar (Francis Jue), his somewhat older Chinese-born lover, also sounds completely American, but his roots are in the old traditions, not in Boston, where the two have lived together for four years.

Ming is spontaneous, saying whatever comes into his head. Oscar is courteous in the way of people who have difficulty expressing their emotions. "We were polite even when we were breaking up," Ming observes to the audience at the beginning of "A Language of Their Own," Chay Yew's new play, which opened last night in the Susan Stein Shiva Theater at the Joseph Papp Public Theater.

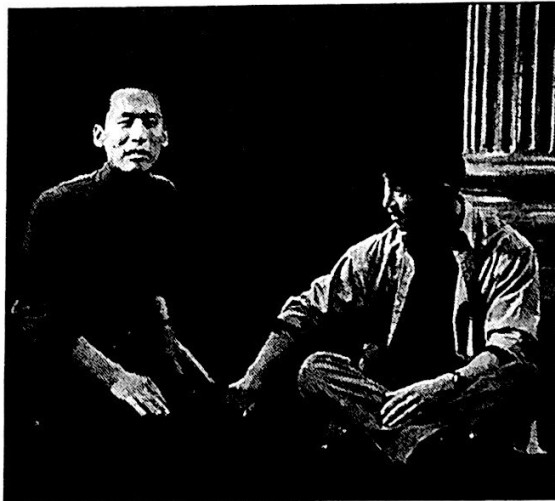
The reason for their break-up: Oscar, who has tested H.I.V.-positive, wants out of their relationship, aware that Ming has lost physical interest in him. Ming's response is to be insulted that Oscar should so casually demand they split. He thinks less about the state of Oscar's mind and body than about his own abandonment.

Or, as he puts it later on, "I wonder if my dream of a perfect relationship is just that: a dream." In the work of a more sophisticated playwright, that might be a funny if cruel line. It's a measure of this play's ambiguity that you're never sure just how skeptical Mr. Yew is of Ming's tendency to romanticize himself at the expense of others.

"A Language of Their Own" is a meditation on love in a chronicle not only of gay love in the age of AIDS, but also of gay love among ethnic outsiders in the age of AIDS. The four-character piece comes out of the Public Theater's LuEsther Lab program for the development of work by new playwrights and directors.

Mr. Yew, who's from Singapore and studied at Boston University, could not be better served than he is at the Public. Making his American directing debut with this production is Keng-Sen Ong, the artistic director of Theaterworks, said to be Singapore's largest theater company.

"A Language of Their Own" is a free-form piece about the subsequent adventures of Ming and Oscar



Michal Daniel/Public Theater

Francis Jue, left, and B. D. Wong in "A Language of Their Own."

A LANGUAGE OF THEIR OWN

By Chay Yew, directed by Keng-Sen Ong; sets by Myung Hee Cho; costumes by Michael Kraas; lighting by Scott Zielinski; music by Liang-Xing Tang; fight direction by J. Steven White. Presented by the New York Shakespeare Festival, George C. Wolfe, producer; Rosemarie Tichler and Kevin Kline, associate producers. At the Joseph Papp Public Theater/Shiva Theater, 425 Lafayette Street, East Village.

WITH: B. D. Wong (Ming), Francis Jue (Oscar), Alec Mapa (Daniel) and David Drake (Robert).

as each enters a new relationship, Ming with a muscular American waiter named Robert (David Drake), and Oscar with Daniel (Alec Mapa), a gabby young Filipino Harvard student who displays his camp mannerisms as if showing off a mar-abou boa.

Mr. Ong has given "A Language of Their Own" a smoothly fluid production within Myung Hee Cho's handsome, uncluttered set, an open playing area defined by a series of low platforms and by Scott Zielinski's lighting design. The only décor as such: a small stand of white birches at stage right. The spare look is absolutely right for the way in which it offsets and sometimes frames Mr.

Yew's ripe language.

The characters confide to the audience in the middle of heated scenes with each other. Sometimes the two sets of lovers share the stage, though not the scene, as they thrash out problems of sexual longings, jealousy and boredom. There are also dreamy monologues and what is, in effect, a spoken love duet.

As a playwright, Mr. Yew is like an overly enthusiastic young lover. He hasn't yet realized that by saying too much, he frequently says very little. Genuine insights get lost in sentimental gush. At this point, Mr. Yew must nurture his enthusiasm for words while learning to differentiate between his own poetic gifts, which are real, and language that sounds like Tin Pan Alley's.

Mr. Wong, the Tony Award winner for his stunning performance in "M. Butterfly," is lively and strong as the self-absorbed Ming. Almost as good are Mr. Mapa as the flamboyant Daniel and Mr. Jue as Oscar, a role that doesn't seem to be as cleanly written. Mr. Drake, who wrote and performed the much praised "The Night Larry Kramer Kissed Me," has the play's toughest assignment. Robert, the waiter with a passion for smallish, soft-skinned young Asian men, is an empty vessel.

MANHATTAN MIRROR

MANHATTAN'S FREE ARTS, ENTERTAINMENT AND FEATURES PAPER

NEW YORK CITY VOL. 1, NO. 5

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theater

A New Play With a New Look at AIDS

By Brad Braulley

A LANGUAGE OF THEIR OWN by Chay Yew, Public Theater/New York Shakespeare Festival, 425 Lafayette St

In "A Language of Their Own," B.D. Wong is back on stage in the key role of Ming which he plays with high charm and captivating, relaxed energy. Wong is probably best known in New York for his Tony-Award performance as a seductive Chinese opera performer in David Henry Hwang's drama "M. Butterfly." He may be most recognized, however, for his continuing appearances as Margaret Cho's wise-cracking cardiologist brother, Stuart, on the ABC series "All American Girl." His portrayal at the Public, where the play has been extended to May 28, is a performance to remember.

While superficial references may call "A Language of Their Own" another AIDS play, this vibrant new work is much more than that. Within its simple physical structure, involving only four actors and spare scenery, it creates an environment at once gentle and sparkling. Chay Yew's lyrical play reaches the heart and soul in its depiction of devoted caring in the face of life and death issues.

At the heart of "A Language of Their Own" is Ming, an American-born Chinese (an

"ABC") described by less assimilated cultural straddlers as a "banana" (yellow on the outside, yet white on the inside). He recognizes he will never be fully accepted as either Asian or American, but is reasonably resigned to that, as he is to his homosexuality, the other minority aspect of his personality.

But his real struggle is to find and maintain a permanent shared life with another person. This seemed to be happening with Oscar, a man of similar origins yet born in China and therefore closer to his ethnic roots. The two, often in a lively combination of dialogue and constant interruption by their narration, play a high-level verbal tennis match.

They have created a kind of private language in which "as if through osmosis, we used each other's words and expressions. Borrowing shamelessly and incorporating them into our language. Speaking as one. Thinking as one. Feeling as one. And in the course, we invented new words, gave existing words new meaning, redefined and polished our language, making it a special one of our own."

In contrast to his fun-loving opposite, Oscar is more ascetic, formal and conservative. Yet, for four years, their lives were richly interwoven. Then, "we got uncomfortable" and agreed to separate. At the heart of the separation is Oscar's fear of becoming depen-

dent and making Ming a drudge, fears borne in his own testing positive for the HIV virus.

While they agree to separate and even put a continent between them, each is never out of the other's consciousness. When they become "just friends," Oscar pleads desperately to Ming like a broken record, "Don't let go!"

As Oscar, Francis Jue gives a quiet, controlled performance, recognizing his balancing role, almost as straight man (no pun, of course) to Ming's more clownish demeanor. Jue lets us laugh at Oscar, pity him, and care for him. Even offstage, his character's passing is one of the play's most moving moments, not only for the clean honesty of the script and staging, but for the careful range of Jue's portrayal.

Ming gravitates to Robert, a waiter who while assertive is demanding and apparently insecure. The play's only character without Asian heritage, Robert is unfortunately the weakest figure in Yew's writing, and shows little depth, particularly lacking in compassion and humor. Actor David Drake fills his thankless role with an often hostile shrillness that fails to rescue Robert from registering as an outsider or even an unwitting villain.

Oscar's replacement companion, Daniel, at first seems a harmless twist. But the character proves himself more than up to the task of comforting Oscar from despair through illness

all the way to the end. As played by Alec Mapa, Daniel becomes even more sympathetic than Ming and Oscar. Interestingly, both Mapa and Jue received their initial New York successes as replacements in the role that earlier brought fame to their current co-star B.D. Wong.

Director Keng-Sen Ong, like writer Yew, is from Singapore. His staging is marked by brisk pacing and high energy supported by a visual sense of "less is more" that conveys the language of the play as the main attraction. A spare set by Myung Hee Cho underscores this concept, using only the theater's two permanent pillars, a cluster of birch trees and atmospheric projections. Scott Zielinski's lighting and occasional music by Tang Liang-Xing give the production its caring yet dynamic enhancement to the text.

While the format of "A Language of Their Own" feels vaguely Brechtian with frequent interruptive asides to the audience breaking involvement in the scene, the naturalness of language and behavior build belief in and concern for the realistic characters. In the second act, however, dreams and reality blur. While this implausible surrealism will disturb some, the play's freshness and honesty regarding love and commitment are so pervasive this weakness should be forgiven. ■

NATIVE NIGHT OUT

Theater Review

BY L. C. COLE

Slowly But Surely

A LANGUAGE OF THEIR OWN

by Chay Yew

New York Shakespeare Festival, Shiva Theater

However unsmoothly runs the course of love, its direction is determined by the people involved, and that necessarily includes the words they use with each other. Chay Yew has written a quasi-poetic drama which investigates this language, formulated out of the needs of two lovers, to show how it can both enhance and foreshorten a relationship. It's a valiant, if sometimes over-literary, exercise whose charms, both in word and action, derive from the fastidiousness with which the author and director Keng-Sen Ong attend to the details of human intimacy.

What must be admitted as part of the draw of the work is its cast of characters. Of the four, three are Asian, and much of the script and some of the direction play upon the knowledge that for many theatergoers, this is not the milieu they are used to visiting. Much of the first-act exposition is taken up with simply laying out the landscape of a gay Chinese relationship in modern-day Boston. Where would they meet, how would they court, what would their expectations be, and how would they get along? In a script that frequently jumps back and forth in time, Yew very elegantly illustrates that in these respects the relationship isn't all that different from those of the non-Asian gays who surround Oscar and Ming. Being alert, being sensitive and open to love, and above all being able to ignore a fair amount of background bullshit (gay and straight, American and Asian), goes far toward turning a chance encounter into a commitment.

Yew has fun with some peculiarities, though he is never dogmatic in divid-

ing between cultural and individual peculiarities. Oscar is more reticent, restrained, and dapper than Ming, who likes to argue things out, dress like any other American male in his twenties, and hold hands in public. The characters explain to us that this is because Oscar is not a US native, while Ming is an "ABC"—American-born Chinese. They joke about their families' habits and even their names (says Ming of his lover's: "The Chinese pick the most discarded names from English novels and movies"). The relative strength of cultural ties no doubt is at work in their behavior, but one can't help noting that the two are also a lot like another couple in a play, one of whom was named Oscar. Had they both been from Hoboken, with ancestors who came over Europe a hundred years ago, they could easily be going through much of the same badinage.

One difference between them, however, defeats all their intelligence and goodwill. After some years together, Oscar is HIV-antibody positive; Ming is not. This has caused Oscar (at the play's start) to decide that Ming should move out and that they should only be friends, not lovers. As we then hop around in time and see the relationship from both before and after their blood tests, we begin to understand Oscar's reasons for wanting this. The news has made Ming both guilt-ridden and cautious around Oscar, and Oscar, with that insider's knowledge that lovers have, was all too well aware of what he was feeling despite his still dutiful behavior. He terminates the marriage rather than watch it slowly become hollowed out.

Though deeply hurt, Ming accepts Oscar's decision. Both now search for new lovers. Ming has many one-night encounters, then settles in with a caucasian waiter named Robert. Oscar flounders for a while, then finds a Filipino boyfriend named Daniel, a college student and devilishly outspoken "radical gay Asian who lives and breathes *Sondheim*." In many ways, these new relationships simply continue the issues between the former couple. Ming becomes emotionally estranged from Robert, but is determined not to simply leave him and move on. Oscar is soon completely dependent on Daniel, yet holds back, as Daniel well knows, from falling in love.

Yew lets us listen to the new languages that Ming and Oscar have to learn in order to keep these largely functional relationships going. They are less perfectly voiced—certainly less open—than the one they had learned with each other, but the men's tragedy is that that language was too revealing: it told one what the other would have preferred to hide, and helped drive a wedge between them.

It's hard not to sense an excessive fatalism (in another era it would have been called romanticism) in Oscar and Ming's relationship, which is addressed only years later when Oscar—taking back what he'd said he wanted—denounces Ming for not refusing to leave. In another scene, relevant to this point, Robert delivers a soliloquy about how couples meet, develop a special way of communicating with each other, then grow bored with their new language, let it slip into disuse, and eventually forget it altogether. It's a fair description of the way of the world, but it clearly is a different kind of dissolution than what befalls Oscar and Ming. They had what was for each of them the perfect relationship. Facing a crisis of having to create another language, one that incorporates caretaking and death, they decided they couldn't do it. Both regretted the decision ever after, but neither, at the time, acted as if there were any other choice.

If one had a few druthers about the script, it is that it moved a bit more, involved the characters in more revealing actions, and didn't strive so hard



(Top to bottom) David Drake and B.D. Wong play lovers in Chay Yew's *A Language of Their Own* at the Public Theater.

sometimes for a poetic musicality—often through the repetition of phrases—to polish up what are admittedly fairly familiar feelings for the audience. Yew is a young writer and there's still a bit of the classroom in the way he puts a play together, but he's keenly interested in his characters—all four speak with distinct voices—which is always the most promising trait in an emerging playwright.

Ong is an old school chum of Yew's—they grew up in Singapore—and his special personal knowledge serves the production well. He directs the cast with a casual naturalness that is all the more remarkable for its crystalline presentation of Yew's stylized, lengthy speeches and frequent cross-

cutting dialog. David Drake's Robert, the least sympathetic role, is suitably shallow for the most part, while Alec Mapa's Daniel, clad in black leather, boots, and Freedom Rings, brings in gusts of campy humor whenever he appears. Francis Jue deserves more exposure after this, for his Oscar undertakes the widest range of emotional changes, and conveys them beautifully. B.D. Wong simply sails through his performance as Ming, radiating charm and warmth and feeling with an effortlessness that many an older actor would envy. I keep hoping some one will someday write him a lead part in a really good musical, because until then I don't think we'll ever see this remarkable young man performing at peak power. ■



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THEATER

by
Marilyn
Abalos

"A Language of Their Own" Opens At the Public Theater

Singaporean-born playwright Chay Yew's "A Language of Their Own" had its New York premiere at the Public Theater on Tuesday, April 4. In the cast is Tony award winner B.D. Wong, with Alec Mapa, Francis Jue and Obie winner David Drake. The play was directed by Singapore-born Keng-Sen Ong, also making his U.S. directorial debut.

In Chay Yew's play, language is the window into the interlocking relationships of four young men, revealing their awkward comic first steps toward love, the strain to achieve friendship and the ultimate rage of loss. We see how lovers create a way of communicating—verbally and physically—and what is unique in their relationships. Their shared language, at first nuanced and textured, brings them together, then later, as it becomes more complex and coded, breaks them apart.

"A Language of Their Own" has been described as "stunning in its simplicity and powerful in its verbal images." Chay Yew uses language to show the troubled relationship between two Asian men, Oscar and Ming. Oscar is the more traditional of the two, while Ming is very Westernized and more volatile. Chinese-born Oscar sees his handsome lover Ming as a banana: yellow on the outside and white on the inside. Ming prefers to confront problems and talk things out, while Oscar avoids discussion and is dis-

creetly silent. Oscar is HIV positive and Ming is not. The lovers separate and become involved with other men. They meet again with these men in their lives and deal with these issues.

Chay Yew explores these themes with a fresh view. The playwright has a light touch, a piercing comic sense and is magical with language. Through his words, the play quickly moves with grace and sophistication.

A native of Singapore, Chay Yew's first work, "As If He Hears" was initially banned by the government because it was the first drama to deal openly with the issue of AIDS and the emerging gay subculture in that country. He later rewrote the play and in 1990 and renamed it "Someone I Used to Know," which was broadcast nationally but later banned by the Singapore Broadcasting Corporation. After moving to the United States, he wrote and produced several television shows for WCVB Boston, including the late night series, "Nightshift," which has gained cult status.

While in London as Playwright-in-Residence at Mu-Lan Theatre Company, Chay Yew won the London Fringe Award, the British equivalent of the Obie for best play for "Porcelain." "Porcelain" not only ran in London, but was also produced to critical acclaim in Los Angeles, San Francisco, Washington D.C., Chicago, Dallas and San Diego.

"M. Butterfly" alumni—B.D. Wong, Alec Mapa, and Francis Jue—will all perform in "A Language of Their Own." All three actors share the distinction of having, at various times, appeared in the Broadway of that show.

In 1988, B.D. Wong made an auspicious Broadway debut as Song LiLing, the seductive Chinese opera performer in David Henry Hwang's

intense drama. He has subsequently returned to the Great White Way in a number of theater productions as well as on the silver screen in "Jurassic Park," and in HBO's powerful "And the Band Played On." B.D. Wong is most familiar to television viewers as Margaret Cho's wisecracking cardiologist brother, Stuart, on the ABC sitcom "All American Girl."

Francis Jue followed Mapa as Song LiLing on Broadway and in the second national tour of M. Butterfly. He was last seen at the Public Theater in Steven Berkoff's highly stylized staging of Sondheim's "Pacific Overtures." He has performed extensively through out the U.S. and in regional theaters.

The combination of Chay Yew's dynamic dialogue and the skill of a highly talented quartet of actors should provide quite a magical evening of theater. For tickets call 212-260-2400. ●



Photo by Lu Chang

Beyond Broadway

TheaterWeek
\$3.00
June 5, 1995



Francis Jue (above) and B.D. Wong in a scene from *A Language of Their Own* at the Public Theater. *Michal Daniel*

A Language of Their Own

Chay Yew accounts for nascent love in painfully simple terms: "As if by osmosis we used each other's words...we refined and polished our language...making it one of our own." And of its decline: "In the end, we spoke different languages."

Yew's *A Language of Their Own* is now being given a very good production at the Public Theater, which has already commissioned another script from the playwright. In *Language*, four good actors depict the decisive moments in a couple's decision to part, attempts at lover-replacement, and the pain of separation, given the language that's been shared. So what's special about *this* love quartet? Familiar as the outline may seem, it has at least two shadings that may be unfamiliar to mainstream audiences: Oscar (Francis Jue), Ming (B.D. Wong), and Daniel (Alec Mapa) are gay in addition to being American-born Chinese. The cast is rounded out by David Drake.

Ming's early comment that "I think *My Fair Lady* was pivotal in my life—it taught me to speak English, love good clothes, and that I was gay" brought a roar of laughter from the mixed subscription house at the Public the day I was there. Many no doubt knew Wong from his good work in *M. Butterfly*; the exquisite Jue may be less known to New York audiences, since his work until now has been largely regional. Here he plays the older lover, a man in his 40s whose days "suddenly have been numbered." It is he who begins the first act with: "I don't think we should see each other anymore. Of course, we can still be friends."

Aided by Tang Liang-Xing's impressively haunting music, the director, Keng-Sen Ong, turns this seemingly mundane situation into stage poetry. The script itself seems that of an astute, witty playwright in his mid-20s whose writing now ranges from the sheer loveliness quoted above to oddly tacky references to Madonna and *Seinfeld*. The cast, however, conspires to mask the weak moments in Yew's work and manages to create a strongly affecting whole.

With its delicate portrayal of the rise and fall of love, *A Language of Their Own* is an oddly tonic immersion in the act of becoming—and the failure to become—a couple. Puccini, move over.—
Joan Ungaro