



## Yew, Chay (b. 1965)

by John McFarland

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Chay Yew.  
Courtesy Chay Yew.

Critically acclaimed Asian-American playwright Chay Yew has consistently produced provocative drama addressing issues of racism, homophobia, and censorship. Yew strives, not only in his own plays but also in directing theatrical works of others, to break down stereotypes and stimulate dialogue about the way we live today. As a result, he has come to be regarded by many as an activist as well as a leading theatrical artist.

Of Chinese ancestry, Chay Yew was born in Singapore in late 1965. During his youth he became entranced with the American popular culture that was flooding into Malaysia at the time. He moved to the United States when he was 16 to begin undergraduate work at Pepperdine University in Malibu. Images of California and its beaches from television and movies had filled his head long before he arrived.

At Pepperdine, Yew learned one of his first lessons about casting biases in American theater productions: he auditioned for a role and was summarily rejected because he was Asian. Yew recalls letting the (Caucasian) professor know what he thought of the rejection, exclaiming, "You think I'm going to be playing *The King and I* for the rest of my life? No way."

Yew moved on to Boston University, where he earned an M.F.A. in communications. Even in the presumably more open environment of Boston, Yew was to learn yet another lesson in the realities of American casting practices. He had read a newspaper article about arrests of men having sex in campus rest rooms and decided to develop the events into a television script for his thesis project. This time his professors were not the ones to stymie his plans; Yew found that nobody would audition for the roles: gay themes, especially those involving sex in bathrooms, were too hot to handle for actors beginning their careers.

Returning to Singapore in 1988, Yew wrote his first play for TheatreWorks there. *As If He Hears* revolves around a heterosexual businessman who contracts HIV on a trip to Thailand and the help he receives from a gay Malaysian social worker when he discovers his HIV-status. Since Yew viewed the play as topical and objective, he was surprised when government censors banned it. Presumably its sympathetic and direct portrayal of the gay social worker was not in line with what the government would allow.

Yew eventually revised *As If He Hears* so that it still made its points but slid by the censors. The key was to excise explicit references to the social worker's sexuality and build them in (non-written) stage directions. Yew has said that the experience with homegrown censorship taught him how to write between the lines and when it was wise to do so.

Those vivid early encounters with racism, homophobia, and censorship did not scare Yew away from potentially controversial subject matter. When he was a playwright-in-residence at Mu-Lan Theatre in London in the early 1990s, he rewrote his thesis project as a play, changing the locale from Boston to London.

*Porcelain* (1992) retraces the events leading up to a crime of passion, when John Lee, a 19-year-old

Chinese student, shoots his working-class Caucasian lover in the same lavatory where they first met and began their sexual relationship. Lee is caught in a classic double-bind as a gay Anglo-Asian seeking a sense of belonging in London: he is marginalized or ignored by English gay men and his tradition-bound family would disown him if he came out to them. Desperate for acceptance and love, he clings to the sexual connection with his casual lover as his salvation and tries to force it into something more permanent. When the lover retreats from any real commitment, John Lee's desperation turns to murderous rage.

To tell this story, Yew constructed a collage of spoken tabloid headlines ("Homo Toilet Sex Murder!"), moving soliloquies, and excerpted media interviews. The result is an elegant, spare, and powerful portrait of love and longing, denial and disaster over the course of the doomed relationship.

*Porcelain*, with its hot-button issues of race, transgressive sex, and violence, proved irresistible to audiences in London. It earned Yew his first widespread notice, played to sold-out houses, and won the 1993 London Fringe Award for Best Play. Ironically, however, Yew finds *Porcelain* difficult to watch now. The central character's pain, which he captured so masterfully, still affects him deeply. The play also reminds him of an angrier period in his life, when his father (who apologized years later) refused to discuss his homosexuality and would not attend performances of his plays.

In his next success, *A Language of Their Own* (1995), Yew explores the nature of love, desire, sexuality, and identity in the lives of four men (three Asian-American and one Caucasian), as they meet, partner, split, and reconnect in the age of AIDS. Contemporary, urban, and brimming with snappy dialogue, *A Language of Their Own* is light years away from the hopelessness of *Porcelain*; yet it is also informed by the challenges gay, Asian, and HIV-positive men face in their struggle to be fully acknowledged and included.

*A Language of Their Own* revolves around the doomed affair of Ming, an assimilated Chinese-American, and his Chinese-born lover Oscar, who is older and HIV-positive. The play explores the difficulties of love between people who are multiply marginalized. In the process, it also criticizes gay male culture's privileging of youth and beauty.

Yew may have dreamed that a play apparently as audience-friendly as *A Language of Their Own* would have a less fraught production history than *Porcelain* and *As If He Hears*. When he was casting the play for its premiere in Los Angeles in 1995, however, actors would enter the room to read only to leave quickly when they realized the play's characters were gay. Seeing his earlier experience with Boston University actors flash before his eyes, Yew finally put up a sign stating, "This play contain gay themes," to avoid further unpleasant surprises during auditions.

At the invitation of George C. Wolfe, the play moved to New York City for a successful run at the Joseph Papp Public Theater later in 1995, where it was directed by Keng-Sen Ong. There, the three actors cast in the Asian-American roles (Francis Jue, Alec Mapa, and B.D. Wong) had one thing in common in addition to their race: they had each played the title role in David Henry Hwang's prize-winning *M. Butterfly* on Broadway.

Reflecting on the fact that these three men had found little work following their star turns as Song Liling until *A Language of Their Own*, Yew said with characteristic candor, "I'm really angry at the entertainment industry that these incredibly talented actors haven't been able to do more since *Butterfly*." In his own play, Yew created strong roles for these Asian-American actors in a new, stereotype-breaking story and was rewarded with both the GLAAD Media Award for Best Play and the George and Elizabeth Marton Playwriting Award.

In 1995, Yew became the Director of the Asian Theatre Workshop at the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles (a position he held until 2005). Soon after, he began working as resident playwright and director with the East

West Players in Los Angeles as well. These institutions have provided Yew the possibility of developing projects that expand opportunities, and new kinds of roles, for Asian-American theatrical artists.

The prolific Yew has continued to write his own plays. Some of his recent works include *Half Lives* (1996), in which an Asian-American goes to Singapore on business, marries his pregnant girlfriend and brings her to America, where their son grows up and eventually comes to terms with his homosexuality; *Red* (1998), which explores the crackdown on artists during China's Cultural Revolution, but which was inspired by the American attempt to censor artists by reducing funding for the National Endowment for the Arts; *A Beautiful Country* (1998), which is narrated by drag queen Miss Visa Denied and explores the experiences of Asian Americans over the last 160 years; *Wonderland* (1999), about an Asian-American family's attempt to capture the American dream; *Here and Now* (2002), about an elderly couple; and *A Distant Shore* (2005), a sprawling history of Asian and Caucasian interaction from the 1920s to the present.

But Yew has also spent enormous time and energy directing and adapting work written by others. The range of his directing assignments has been remarkable.

He has staged many solo performances (including those by Sandra Tsing Loh, Margaret Cho, and Brian Freeman), as well as several larger-cast plays. Especially notable among the large-scale works have been a 2001 staging at East West Players of Philip Kan Gotanda's *Sisters Matsumoto*, about a Japanese-American family trying to restart its life after internment during World War II; a 2001 staging at Seattle's Empty Space Theater of Moisés Kaufman and the Tectonic Theater Projects's *The Laramie Project*, about the vicious murder of Matthew Shepard and its lasting impact on Laramie, Wyoming; and, the 2003 world premiere at the Tanglewood Festival in Massachusetts of Osvaldo Golijov's opera *Ainadamar* (libretto by David Henry Hwang), about the spiritual connection between Federico García Lorca and Margarita Xirgu, a Catalan actress with whom García Lorca often collaborated.

Yew has also adapted García Lorca's *The House of Bernarda Alba* for the National Asian American Theater Company (2000) and Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard*, which he retitled *A Winter People* and set in China (2002).

For the man who has said that he feels at home only in a theater, Yew appears very happy being busy with a rich mix of developing his own plays and adapting and directing those of others. What unifies nearly all his diverse projects is his concern with the experiences of sexual and ethnic outsiders and his commitment to expanding the scope and breadth of Asian-American theater.

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## About the Author

**John McFarland** is a Seattle-based critic, essayist, and short story writer. He is author of the award-winning picture book *The Exploding Frog and Other Fables from Aesop*. He has contributed to such anthologies as

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