

"Porcelain"

Chay Yew's gay/straight love story at Warehouse Theatre

by Jolene Munch
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It's hard to believe that *Porcelain* is Chay Yew's first play. The 1992 London Fringe Award winner for Best Production, *Porcelain* marks a brave, startling debut that attempts to bridge the divide between men who publicly claim that they are straight and the gay men who know better. Yew's delicately abrasive story is one of extremes: love and hate, want and need, life and death. Under Mike Chamberlin's sleek direction, Tsunami Theatre's reverential production hits some interesting peaks and valleys along the way.

John Lee (Kasima Tharnpipitchai), a young Chinese man who deliberately frequents a public toilet in London's Bethnal Green, ignores the unwritten rule that gay men shouldn't fall in love with straight men. After a chance sexual encounter with one William Hope (David Charles Goyette) in the lavatory, John finds himself hopelessly smitten with Will, an anxious, white "straight" guy who insists that he isn't *one of that kind*. After all, he claims indignantly, "A mouth is a mouth."

It appears that the two men are no strangers to cottaging, and eventually establish a kind of pseudo-relationship, where John willingly gives and Will greedily takes. When Will decides to abruptly end his casual escapades, the vulnerable, self-loathing John fires six shots into his part-time lover, killing him in what is later referenced as a "crime of passion." The two men are found at the very origin of their union, "one dead, and the other living with a gun by his side."

Following a whirlwind of media sensation and public reproach, it is then up to slick-tongued psychologist Dr. Worthing (James L. Beller, Jr.) to determine whether or not John was sane at the time of the murder. Using stock Rorschach ink blot tests to determine John's psychological health while unwittingly exposing his own prejudice and homophobia on air to Channel Four, Worthing must pull a few tricks out of his bag to convince John to trust him and reveal his side of the story. Through incredibly honest acting from Tharnpipitchai and the bold, impassioned language of Yew, *Porcelain* is a delicate work of fine art.

Chamberlin returns to the director's chair with his signature eye for harnessing energies both masculine and feminine. From his noisy opening of a chaotic London to the play's quiet final revelation, the director never cuts corners, taking risks that most directors would never dare leave to chance. Most of the time, his efforts pay off.

Porcelain
By Chay Yew
To 5:15
Warehouse Theatre
1021 7th Street NW
\$20
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Yew's script relies heavily upon the trademark British style of using multiple narrators to lend layers to the story, but the device translates into elaborate, elastic staging that seems particularly demonstrative whenever the four narrators trek through pages of text. While they certainly survive the tediously extended montages, Chamberlin allows his small cast of five men to steamroll over some of Yew's best imagery.

Fortunately, the dialogue in *Porcelain* works best when Yew stops the petty narration and allows his characters to talk to each other directly. The cast shrewdly capitalizes on these infrequent moments, injecting powerful doses of reality that are so truthful, it hurts to watch.

Goyette offers a sober, dramatic interpretation as the cold, sterile lover, and Bob Lavoie is captivating when he channels John's father, Mr. Lee, but the evening clearly belongs to Tharnpipitchai, whose heartbreaking portrayal of John is no less than brilliant.

Set designer Giorgos Tsappas has created a beautiful, peaceful ambience in the bowels of the Warehouse Theatre, where Colin K. Bills casts large, luminous shadows from his unsettling, stark lighting plot. Tsappas' clean, uncluttered stage has a shiny, unaffected surface that seems perfect for the elegant horror that John will meet before his journey's end.

Although there are a few fleeting moments of predictability to Yew's story (Will's favorite opera is, of course, *Madame Butterfly*), the production moves through time and space with effective and harrowing realism. *Porcelain* undoubtedly proves that small theatre companies like Tsunami can produce high-quality, cutting-edge work, regardless of size or budget.