

S'pore too cushy for artists?

Back to stage his latest work, playwright says stories about the heartland not being told

tara tan
arts reporter

He was an angry young artist who left Singapore for the United States in 1989 after his first two plays, which had gay themes, were banned here.

These days, playwright Chay Yew, 43, is less angry but no less determined about tackling issues.

The two plays, *As If He Hears* (1988), about an HIV-stricken businessman who is helped by a gay social worker, and *Porcelain* (1992), about a man who kills his gay lover in a public toilet, were eventually staged here in 1989 and 2005 respectively. *Porcelain* was also staged in London's Royal Court Theatre in 1992.

Now a New York-based freelance writer and director, Chay says: "Previously, I was interested in writing about what it was like to be a small group of people, in terms of the West, like what is it like to be an Asian in America. Now it has become a more philosophical look at the global context of things."

His latest play, *Visible Cities*, a collaboration with Italian director Giorgio Barberio Corsetti, draws on real and imagined worlds revolving around the fashion trade, which connects China and Italy.

"There are no borders left. It's the holes left in the walls which I am interested in. Where does China sit next to



Italy, for instance?" he adds.

In his research for the play, he became intrigued with the stories of explorer Marco Polo's travels to China in the 12th century. There has been extensive debate about whether the Venetian really did visit the Mongol empire then.

Chay says: "But the book had such an impactful reach among the West. My hypothesis is that it gave way to what Orientalism was all about and hugely influenced how the West saw

the East."

He turns this on its head in *Visible Cities* by making China "very real" and Italy a fictitious world ruled by birds. The Chinese immigrants in Italy have heads of animals to emphasise the alienation between the locals and natives. *Visible Cities* will travel to the Napoli Festival in Italy after its premiere here.

"Stories define us," he muses. "What is Singapore's mythology? The

book it

VISIBLE CITIES

Where: Drama Centre Theatre @ National Library Building

When: Friday and Saturday, 8pm

Admission: \$20 to \$50 from Sistic (log on to www.sistic.com.sg or call 6348-5555)



Having relatively few struggles and easy access to resources may be a double-edged sword for artists in Singapore, says New York-based writer and director Chay Yew. ST PHOTO: NURIA LING

fable of Sang Nila Utama? If we're defined by a fable, what kind of people do we become?"

He delves into an impassioned conversation about the local plays which make up the Singapore cannon, citing the plays of the late Kuo Pao Kun, whose *The Coffin Is Too Big For The Hole* and *No Parking On Odd Days* still stand strong and relevant to the Singaporean consciousness.

Chay says: "The arts scene was more complicated in the 1990s. It was fun, almost anarchic, we had something to fight for and fight against."

"That generation of artists, including Kuo, were ostracised and jailed, but still went on and did their work."

His contemporaries include Wild Rice's Ivan Heng, Glen Goei and Theatreworks' Ong Keng Sen.

Artists today enjoy access to plenty of resources and have less of a struggle, which is a double-edged sword in Chay's opinion.

"I'm torn. There used to be an urgency and a responsibility. Without struggle, there are no stakes and the arts becomes like a hobby."

"I'm not saying that we need to suffer but that sometimes a comfortable artist does not an artist make."

A conversation with him is anything but comfortable. He is light-hearted and sometimes makes flippant remarks, but story ideas and ambitions to develop the arts scene here brim and bubble to an intense pitch.

It is "criminal" that stories about the Singaporean heartland are not told, he says. "We need to stop looking outside and start looking inside. We need the next generation of playwrights whose stories will retain a snapshot portrait of Singapore as it is now."

taratan@sph.com.sg